

For DIY, take some

Swords to the material



AIDAN DUNNE

Mark Swords's latest exhibition is at once rough-hewn and painstakingly crafted, works of art that reflect the energy bound up in their own making

Mosaic

New work by Mark Swords
Wexford Arts Centre, Cornmarket
Until May 12

THERE'S A DIY aesthetic to the work of Mark Swords. It's as if he takes nothing at face value and insists on figuring it all out for himself. Show him a wheel and he'll probably try to reinvent it. He comes across as an autodidact who is curious about everything. $E=MC^2$

In his exhibition *Mosaic* at the Wexford Arts Centre, for example, rather than being satisfied with making a picture of a garden shed, as you might expect an artist to do, he sets about making a garden shed from scratch.

Mind you, it's not really a shed and would hardly withstand the rigours of the Irish weather. Take a closer look and you'll see that it's constructed from sections of discarded paintings – "Most days spent in the studio are fruitless," he wrote once – and some other, found materials including lengths of wood and pieces of polythene.

It is a full-scale, three-dimensional representation or model of a garden shed. While it is relatively rough-hewn, it is also devised and put together with considerable care, precision and a felicitous touch that is characteristic of virtually everything he does.

It's a pleasing, nicely made construction. The abandoned paintings, for example, are cut into uniform triangular shapes so that they become something like colourful mosaic tiles. One senses a mind in love with both order and impulse. Inside the shed we find, as if by chance, a short to-do list relating to some of the other works in the show.

In the world at large, more than being purely functional, the humble shed is a retreat and a refuge. Swords's shed is, or was, a workshop or studio, and not just in a symbolic sense: many of the works we see on the gallery walls were made in this shed-studio, which he built and proceeded to occupy within the space of his own studio. The to-do list is a relic of the process of making the exhibition.

Swords was born in Dublin in 1978. He studied at NCAD and

completed an MA in 2003. He now lives in Co Wicklow. As with several other artists of his generation, his work evidences a return to the hand-made and to a domestic sense of scale.

Not to say that their work is especially similar, but in terms of sensibility he'd have something in common with Paul Doran, Mark Garry, Isabel Nolan, Fergus Feehily, Tadhg McSweeney and, in certain respects, Mark Joyce (that's a group show we've yet to see).

Perhaps with a much-publicised centenary this year in mind, things are arranged so that the first work we encounter in Wexford Arts Centre is *Iceberg*, a beautiful little mosaic sculpture fashioned from shards of mirror and papier-mâché.

Thereafter, the idea of mosaic runs consistently through the exhibition.

Shed has a counterpart in the upstairs gallery, in a huge piece called, equally concisely, *Wall*, appropriately composed of painted tiles. By using a simple spiral motif, Swords makes a representation of a wall that conveys the energy bound up in its making, substance and function. He would have been justified in titling it $E=mc^2$.

He obviously plays a long game. The spiral pattern subtly echoes his previous exhibition at the same venue, *Perennial*, in 2010. Occupying the gallery where we currently find *Wall* was an extraordinary 14-foot-high sculpture of a spiral staircase, titled simply *Stair-*



case. It was made from lollipop sticks, glued together. Swords had in mind something that combined notions of strength, purpose, fragility and pattern. He'd noticed the way perennial plants spring up from the ruins of last year's growth in the garden. His staircase was like the beanstalk in the fairytale.

There's a *Garden* in his current show, a jewel-like painting that

suggests the phosphorescent glow of a garden at night, all brooding energy, its pointillist brushmarks evoking mosaic.

A skilled painter, Swords is against conspicuous displays of virtuosity. His paintings are plain-spoken, although not simple. It's important to him that they involve more than just "optical perception". He once went through a phase of making Plasticine models

Left, *Shed* and, below, *Iceberg* by Mark Swords. Photographs: Peter Rowen.

of his subjects and painting the models, which he thought of as "a stage between a real experience of the world and a painting", a means of relating to the world in terms beyond mere appearances.

In 2007 he made a Plasticine sculpture called *Head*. A spherical object on a wooden plinth, it doesn't so much resemble an external view of a head as one of those schematic diagrams of the areas of the brain, all indicated with cheerfully coloured splodges of Plasticine. It makes thinking look like fun.

He clearly enjoys using a host of materials inventively – usually quite humble, commonplace materials such as those lollipop sticks. *All the Pieces Matter* appears to be a sleek abstract sculpture, fashioned from brass or copper wire, and a very good one.

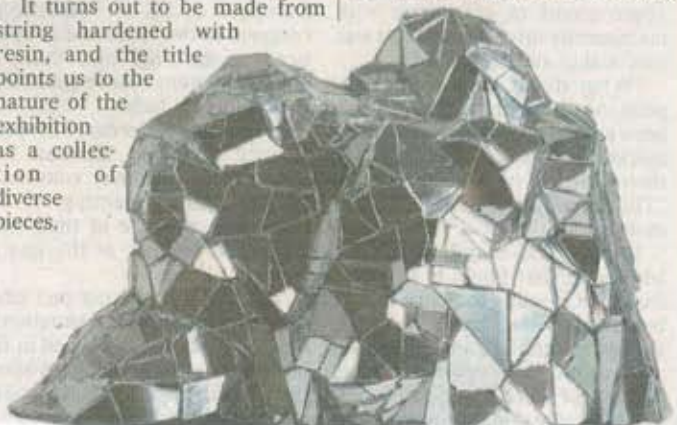
It turns out to be made from string hardened with resin, and the title points us to the nature of the exhibition as a collection of diverse pieces.

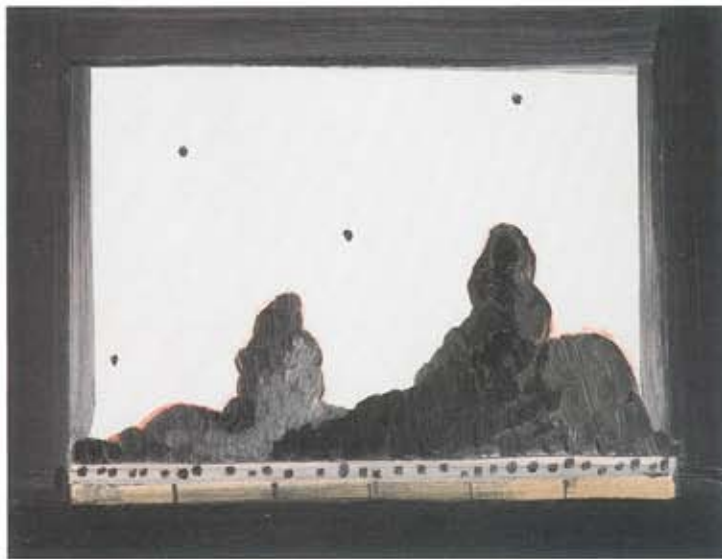
The word "craft" is often used in relation to what he does, and craft is central. Not that he aspires to be a craft maker in any conventional sense, but he does allude to many craft processes and products, including weaving, sewing and woodwork.

In the end, it is the notion of the hand-made that seems to be important, the idea of working things out for oneself and figuring out how to make them with modest means and a measure of understated elegance.

Mosaic is a terrific exhibition, and a relatively low-key one. You need to give the work time, and it will reward you.

It's hard to sum it up, but it would, for example, be the ideal show to visit if, later on, you were going to see the new Whit Stillman film, *Damsels in Distress*.





FUTURES

DUBLIN

FUTURES draws attention to the work of seven promising young Irish artists in a welcome reprisal of this survey series after a five-year hiatus [Royal Hibernian Academy; September 4—27, 2009]. The exhibition brings together the works of artists thoroughly engaged in the manipulation of material, be it paint, metal, found objects or animated film. Beyond this predominance of studio-based practices, the works prove to be curiously uneven as they tackle themes ranging from modes of picture-making to anti-war protest.

Compact paintings by Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh, Kevin Cosgrove, and Mark Swords dot the walls at the periphery of the voluminous main gallery. Mhaonaigh presents four small series of untitled works. Here, images ranging from landscapes and floral-like patterns to objects reminiscent of pianos and moveable office furniture are set in variable painted borders. As such, the paintings suggest the cinema screen or windows of a storyboard. Cosgrove's work possesses a snapshot quality and leans toward photorealism. He invokes detail with painterly shorthand. Fascinated by industrial settings and mechanical structures, his windowless workshops and scenes of boats, barges, and the bridge of an oil tanker convey the harsh flux of fluorescent lamps and the de-intensified chroma conferred by overcast skies. Swords incorporates geometrical structures, loopy lines, and patterns in a playful approach that explores and extends the idea of painted pictures. In his colorful canvases, we encounter a freestanding kite, a wall-mounted rug, and a wooden gameboard. Despite the strength of each artist's vision and their obvious skill, their work fails to excite. These images affect a sober presence, as if they were merely marking time.

With *Every Action*, 2008, and *Praxis*, 2009, Seamus Nolan turns our attention to the material culture of anti-war protest. *Every Action* features two display cases housing hammers owned by the Catholic Workers Movement, which were used to damage American military equipment in Ireland and the USA. Inscribed with religious slogans, they evince a ritualistic aura. *Praxis* presents a televised news report about the hammers'

controversial appearance at the Project Arts Centre as part of the Dublin Goethe Institute's *If you could change the world 1968-2008* exhibition. While the attack on a US Navy warplane at Shannon Airport called the Irish Constitution into question, the hammers' mode of presentation still raises uncertainties: are these objects crime evidence or tools exemplifying freedom of expression?

The unsettling presence of destruction among Aideen Barry's selections steers our attention in another direction. Her gleaming objects initially convey an unpalatable superficiality appropriate to glitzy new business complexes. But closer examination quickly changes our relationship to these works. The spheroidal stars of the wall sculpture *Zero Gravity Mine Field*, 2009, turn menacing, and the radical elegance of the spray bottle display quickly evaporates when we realize that these hybrids double as grenades.

Maria McKinney's monumental and startling *Well I'll be Damned*, 2009, adds to the current of troubling themes. In this piece, a rare work in the exhibition to manifest a wilful use of color, the artist poses a family of unclothed mannequins in a cluster of shopping carts virtually overflowing with paper balloons made of cocktail umbrellas. Select areas of the mannequins' bodies—the lower legs, feet, forearms, and head of the adult male, for example—have been pierced with matchsticks and then lit, creating patches of brittle, burnt quills and dense black smoke. The stains on the figures' faces betray signs of tragedy. A small boy, hovering near eye-level, placidly continues to smile. A ray of light devised out of fishing line beams down from a pinhole in the ceiling, intimating divine intervention, martyrdom, and sanctification. To this, the title of the piece predicts our response.

The gym-like expansiveness of the main gallery disables the impact of the works. Only McKinney's sculpture and Nolan's floor-to-ceiling arrangement of Pitstop Ploughshares posters manage to assert their presence. What's more, the arrangement of the work into a series of small solos also contributes to the woe. They seem to huddle in their respective corners and

persist as nonconversant entities, conveying a muted sectarianism. The videos of Aideen Barry and John O'Connell escape this predicament as each artist has been accorded a separate space more responsive to the scale and subject matter of their work. O'Connell's projection *Oh Black*, 2009, arguably the best work in the show, profits most from this situation. Recalling the stop-motion animation of Jan Švankmajer and the Brothers Quay, the work takes us on a mesmerizing journey across a virtually colorless, but visually rich, tabletop landscape. As the scenes shift from compelling realism to artifice, the accompanying piano score intensifies their effect. Although a contagious sense of tension and expectation suffuses the work, it is its powerful emotional impact and resounding immediacy that make it such a success. If future *FUTURES* can surmount the installation challenges of the looming main space, they will provide more stimulating experiences.

—John Gayer

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Kevin Cosgrove, *Office*, 2008, oil on linen, 50 x 60 cm [courtesy of the artist and Mother's Tankstation, Dublin]; Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh, *Untitled*, 2009, oil on canvas, 35 x 45 cm [courtesy of the artist and Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin]

An intelligence in the hand

ART REVIEW

Mark Swords ★★★★★

Mark Swords' work supports American artist Richard Tuttle's theory when he said that 'there's an intelligence in the hand'. The Wicklow-based artist's latest exhibition plays on the symbiotic relationship between materials and ideas. While it occasionally presents inscrutable abstraction and not much else – the neglected 'Birdcage' being the best example – in the main, Swords's pieces force the viewer to ask questions about his work and the relationship between concept and form.

Untitled, an oil painting consisting of dull grey pointy shapes, like a collision of hexagons, begins the artist's quest to provoke discourse, followed by a second Untitled

oil painting, which in contrast consists of a vivid yellow background, a multi-coloured frame and a series of swirling, unidentified objects. Are we looking at a herd of sheep, a particularly neglected front-garden hedge or is that a pig's snout peering out at the edge?

Part of Swords's approach seems to centre on the notion that his materials can also effect physical change: one of the Untitled oil paintings features brown earth wires affixed to a turquoise-green oil painting. There are also brown squiggles here and there, suggesting that the wires may eventually be subsumed into their background. Similarly, with Head, a human brain made from putty is mounted on a woodwork-class plinth, but is divided into many more sections than usual, denoted by striking reds, blues and

oranges. It suggests that the brain is more complex than we had thought.

All this ruminating clearly takes its toll, and one of the most striking pieces, the violent purples, greens and blues of Collage (pictured), was possibly conceived as the antithesis of theorising. Look at it close enough and the bouquet of fresh paint wafts through your nostrils. However, the final piece, the hexagonal shapes of the papier maché Object, bring the viewer back to where the exhibition started. By repeating himself, one suspects that Swords has succeeded in what he set out to do.

Richard Brophy
Until Aug 11, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, 66 Great Strand Street D1, Mon to Fri 10.30am to 5.30pm, Sat 11am to 5pm, free. Tel: (01) 874 0064. www.kevinkavanaghgallery.ie

