

Paul McKinley 'Hanuman'

20 November – 19 December, Kevin Kavanagh, Dublin

HANUMAN is the Hindu monkey-god, a follower of Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Shiva, and a warrior credited with the ability to slay thousands of demons. The exploits of Hanuman are told in the epic poem the Ramayana, a 24,000 verse composition regarded as a great work of Indian literature.

The warlike god also lends his name to the latest solo exhibition from British-born artist Paul McKinley. This new body of work draws on the events that took place towards the end of the brutal Sri Lankan civil war, which lasted from 1983 until 2009, and on its folklore of gods and monsters.

Often free from inhabitants, McKinley's work uses landscape and the natural world to explore the nature of mass killing and genocide, attempts to eradicate entire races or tribes of people. Even the works which don't directly reference these themes still radiate an aura of discomfort, a suspicion that there is something dark and unwelcome concealed in the lush vegetation and bucolic landscapes scrutinised in his beautifully rendered drawings and paintings.

In this compendium, the artist once again reflects on a specific tragedy in recent history, exploring the complex legacy of civil war, ethnic cleansing and the advent of 'dark tourism', where such sites become destinations for 'adventurous' tourists seeking an authentic connection with the less palatable aspects of human history.

In his 2013 exhibition at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, titled 'Operation Turquoise', McKinley worked from photographs of Rwandan flora and fauna, taken by Trinity College Dublin ecologist Shane McGuinness. Replicating images of volcanic craters, the indigenous ancient shoebill bird and the country's rust red earth, he captured what writer Gemma Tipton described in the accompanying text as "meditations on never truly knowing a place".

This sense of unknowing and of a vague unspecified threat also permeates the work here. Once again working from photographs, he addresses diverse subjects. The spirit of the monkey god is referenced in the eponymous and finely executed ink drawing *Hanuman*, where a long-tailed primate is captured mid-leap between branches. In the watercolour *Call to Arms*, a bright green meadow hosts a vast troop of monkeys stretching from foreground to background, while a lone deer in a dense forest is picked out in gold leaf in the detailed ink drawing *Deception*.

These relatively small-scale drawings are joined by oil paintings of varying sizes, from the

dazzling vibrance of the painting *Sita's Flowers* (a reference to Rama's wife Sita) to the commanding canvas of *Towards Mullaitivu*, where a beaten earth road takes the eye to the crest of a small hill before it disappears. Subjects are sometimes framed almost as though the image is cropped, zooming in on details like tree branches. As with so much of McKinley's work, there is a pregnant atmosphere, an expectancy that brings the viewer to wonder both what next will happen or what just has happened.

All of the locations in the works have been touched in some way by the Sri Lankan civil war, which ended when the insurgent Tamil population were quelled by government forces. Disturbingly, these sites were witness to terrible events even while tourists enjoyed other 'safe' parts of the country, oblivious to what was happening.

In the small publication produced to accompany the exhibition, former UN spokesman Gordon Weiss describes the "awful irony of of tourists still flocking to Sri Lanka's southern beaches during the final phase of the war ... even as hundreds of Tamil civilians and Tamil Tigers were besieged and bombarded by government forces on a beach on the northern coast". The beach was Mullaitivu, just out of sight in McKinley's gorgeously lush painting.

Elsewhere the artist plays with colour and the kinds of images one might treasure as holiday snaps. A shoal of bright orange fish swim about in *Lolanda Reef*, while the yellow ochre tones of *Mines* evoke a faded Kodachrome photograph, where spindly palm trees fringe an idyllic tropical beach scene. Compelling and enigmatic, each work pulls off this feat of unsettling ambiguity.

McKinley's exceptional skill and his ability to switch between media, whether creating impressionistic vistas or executing detailed drawings, allow him to pose these questions of occluded histories again and again. Operating as emissaries between brutal histories and the present, few of the works are as explicit as the vibrant *Battle*, with its raging jungle flames, or as disturbing as the monochrome oil painting *Burning Books*, with its immediate affront to free speech and liberty.

These are, in a way, exceptions to the rule, while the overall ambiguity only serves to invite us to look, and look again, more closely.

Anne Mullee is a Dublin-based writer and curator.