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Where skeletons rattle the saints and scholars



VISUAL ARTS

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NEVAN LAHART introduces his exhibition, *A Lively Start to a Dead End*, at the RHA with a cautionary note. Most press releases for art events, he suggests, make “references to the references that can be found in the work”. Rather than, that is to say, to the work. So you go to the exhibition and find yourself dealing not with the promised bundle of references but with the

fact of the work itself, “and the rest is up to you”. So Lahart doesn’t give us any references, nor any name-checks of fashionable theorists, just an indication of what we needn’t expect to find: “Understanding, meaning or a new lifestyle choice.”

In a way, and that’s in a good way, *A Lively Start to a Dead End* initially comes across not so much as an exhibition in the conventional sense as a ramshackle shambles of an exhibition, a melange of disparate images and objects flung together without any clear pattern or plan. If you make your way into the RHA’s Gallagher Gallery I, the building’s huge main space, you’ll find yourself wandering through a seemingly random series of pieces and structures, all with a distinctly ad-hoc, improvisational character, and it’s more than likely that you’ll find yourself engaged, entertained, provoked and, depending on your aesthetic, religious and political affli-

ations and convictions, perhaps even grievously offended.

Apart from many individual sculptural works and images on an epic scale, the gallery is occupied by a kind of vast, ruined building, a gallery within a gallery, one that seems to have been taken over by a particularly disgruntled, exceptionally prolific artist. At its heart is a studio with its own heart of darkness. Look at the whole sprawling installation as one continuous work and something interesting emerges: it reads not only as a satirical broadside against art-world pretensions and specific aspects of contemporary Ireland but also, in fact, as an all-in-one allegory of contemporary Ireland.

Lahart gives us an island not so much of saints and scholars as of a busted boom, shambolic mismanagement, moral hypocrisy, an acute identity crisis and considerable cultural confusion. What might be described as the show’s centrepiece is a virtuoso drawing



in which hordes of resurrected skeletons run amok and tear the country apart, just as skeletons secreted in many cupboards have torn the place, and our complacent views about ourselves, apart.

If all this was delivered with bile and bitterness it would count as nothing more than a temper tantrum, and one based on being wise after the event. Lahart’s work, however, is incisive but also incredibly good-natured. As regards the incisiveness, the issues are worth

Good-humoured but incisive: a detail from Nevan Lahart’s installation, *Church of Naivety*, at the RHA Gallagher Gallery.
Photograph: Davey Moor

getting annoyed about because there are better, brighter possibilities. His work embodies not the moralist's smug self-righteousness but the appalled realisation that things don't have to be this way. As regards being good-natured, one feels that as well as being amusing, he's vastly amused by the world.

He is not one of those artists who believes that less is more. In fact, he may well believe that more is not quite enough to count as more. Hence there is a fantastic generosity to his show in terms of its physical substance. He's so prolific that one is slightly worried about his huge expenditure of energy. Everything looks rough-hewn and provisional, as though it's put together in great haste and with whatever is to hand, including enormous amounts of adhesive tape, cardboard and polythene.

You could almost miss the fact that he has tremendous facility and a felicitous touch with materials. Just take one example, his tape-and-cardboard sculpture of a fallen horse, an anti-heroic image that recalls Picasso's *Guernica*. As with much else in this exhibition, it's a truly beautiful piece of work.

IF YOU ARE offended by Lahart's show, feeling, for example, that one or two pieces are blasphemous, you may well have

legal recourse, given that, since January 1st, "blasphemy is a crime in Ireland punishable by a €25,000 fine". Lahart is also represented in a small group exhibition at the Oonagh Young Gallery, appropriately titled *Blasphemy*, which aims to draw our attention to this state of affairs. A catalogue note accompanying the show (curated by Young and Mary Cremin) points to the discrepancy between the extremely loose, general wording of the legislation and Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheál Martin's rationale for voting with other EU states last December against a UN resolution on "combating defamation of religion". Martin argued that the concept of defamation is inconsistent with human rights and freedom of expression. So why, one wonders, did the State vote one way at the UN and legislate the opposite way at home? It's probably unlikely that any of the four participants in the show will find themselves on a blasphemy charge, but it's certainly a theoretical possibility.

Among the participants is a Northern Irish collective, Factotum, formed by Stephen Hackett and Richard West. When the pair published two issues of their journal, the *Vacuum*, with God and Satan as respective themes, they were accused by Belfast City Council of "encouraging devil-worshipping". Although

legal advice was to let things be, the council insisted on an apology. This led to the ironic "Sorry" issue of the *Vacuum* and the institution of a Sorry Day.

Factotum often work in terms of documentation, and their contribution comprises the three issues of the journal in question and fairly extensive press cuttings about the whole affair.

The show also includes a set of David Godbold's drawings reworking versions of the crucifixion, elements of Paul Murnaghan's project involving Europeans nominating the opening line of a universal hymn, and, of course, Lahart's rendering of the Holy See as a piratical Vatican.

It's a considered, thoughtful show, not at all sensational, and it will feature, next Wednesday, February 10th, at 7pm, a showing of Peter Lennon's controversial 1960s documentary, *Rocky Road to Dublin* along with *The Making of Rocky Road to Dublin*.

A Lively Start to a Dead End: New Works by Nevan Lahart, Gallery 1, RHA Gallagher Gallery, 15 Ely Place, Dublin 2, until Feb 27.

Blasphemy: Works by David Godbold, Factotum, Nevan Lahart, Paul Murnaghan, Oonagh Young Gallery, 1 James Joyce Street, Liberty Corner, Dublin 1, Thur-Sat, 12noon-6pm, until Feb 27