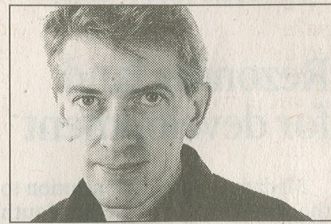


Faint lights in the darkness



AIDAN DUNNE

VISUAL ARTS

SOLO SURVEY SHOWS, sometimes called mid-career retrospectives, are important landmarks for artists, standing apart from the razzmatazz of group exhibitions and the periodic solo outing in commercial galleries. They offer a chance to assess an artist's development over time, usually at least a decade or more, and an opportunity to get an in-depth sense of what they're about. This is true of Oliver Comerford's show currently sharing the top floor of the RHA Gallagher Gallery with Gary Coyle's *At Sea*. It consists of some 30 paintings selected from his output of the last 15 years.

Comerford is Dublin-born and Dublin-based, though as well as attending art college in Ireland he also studied in the United States,

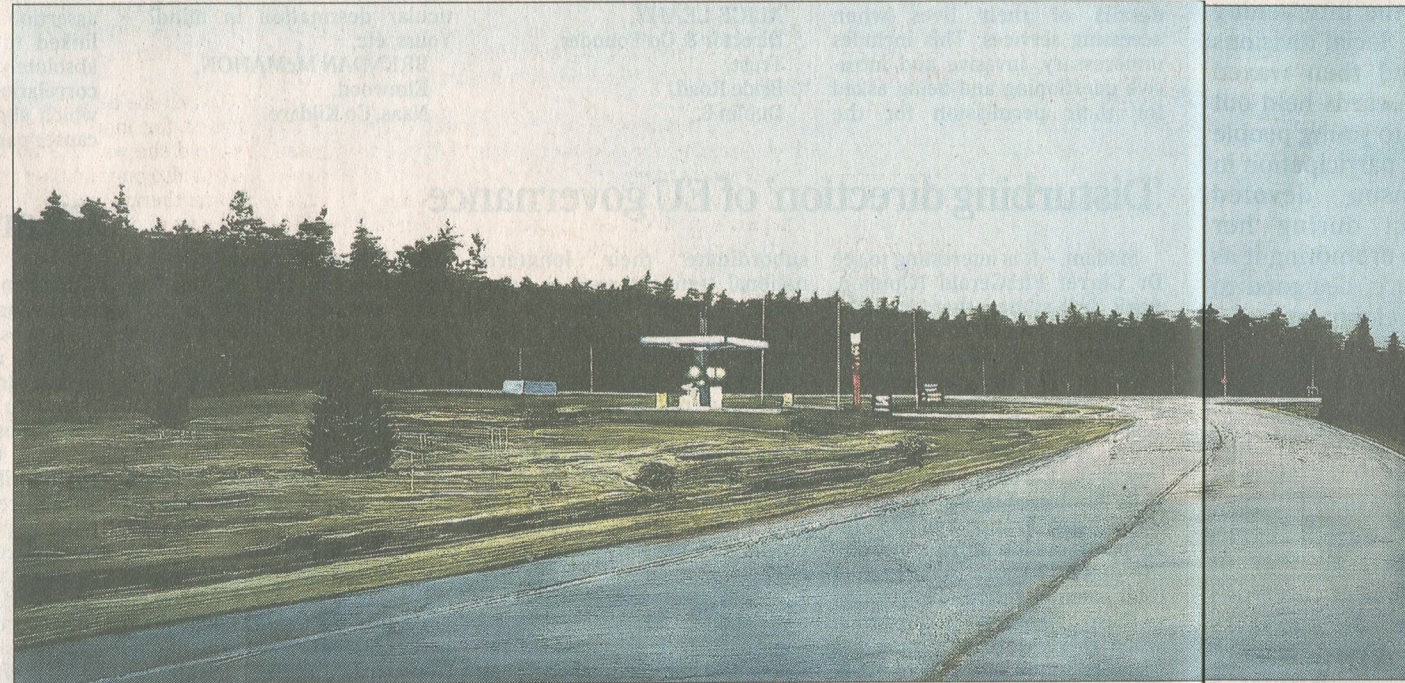
living there for several years, and London, where he completed an MA.

It's the US, though, that seems to have had a decisive impact on his vision. The work he made in London for his MA is steeped in the imagery of a quintessentially American cultural form, the road movie.

It's as though he sees everything at a slight remove, through the camera lens and the car windscreen, glimpsing a passing scene, alighting on such icons of night-time transit as the illuminated petrol station, the darkened storefront or the blur of nondescript vegetation.

Yet in an interview included in the catalogue, Comerford notes that his interest, in going to the US, was in social realism, in Ben Shahn, for example, who saw art as being necessarily embedded in the daily social reality of work and life, with a role in shaping the political and economic framework. Comerford, as Pat Murphy implies in his foreword, has consistently made work that, while it may have its head in social realism, has its heart very much in romantic realism.

Within the span of the work in this exhibition, his work has progressed technically, becoming noticeably freer and more assured, especially on a large scale. And technically, it should be said, he skates on thin ice: one slip and he'd be gone. He works from photographs and optically his paintings are very photographic in their visual effects. Although he did collect second-hand photographic imagery he finds it best to work



Refuge of the road: *True Romance II*, by Oliver Comerford, at the RHA Gallagher Gallery

from his own images and has built up an extensive archive of printed photographs which he draws on continually. As with many artists now, photography is like drawing for him. His photographs are not intended as complete, finished works in themselves but as sources to be selectively employed.

He doesn't build up pigment at all, aiming for a slick surface with little physical substance. Often he achieves the tone and texture he's after by removing the paint he's already applied. You might have a problem with all this if you feel strongly that painting should be something different and apart from photography and that his work is inherently photographic. Well, it is both inherently

photographic and it's also thoroughly painterly. He just takes the view, as do numerous other contemporary artists, that you can make a representation of a photographic image in exactly the way you can of anything else. Our view of the world is so filtered through the mechanical lens that it would be rash to ignore it.

Typically Comerford's paintings will map out a vast expanse of landscape traversed by roadway and usually marked by other signs of human activity. Often the city is there in the distance, perhaps as a remote destination. Houses, singular and isolated, or dotted haphazardly in rural terrain, are a more specific symbol of refuge and domesticity.

Cold and desolate places recur, dusted with snow, dense with coniferous plantations or empty and suggestive of uninhabitable bogland. The light can be wintry or, more often, we are put in the position of the traveller, driving through the hours of darkness.

Sometimes, when the headlight beams reflect from a pick-up truck in woodland at night, or a dark cabin is glimpsed in the woods or, in one painting, we see a tiny caravan enveloped in woodland shadows or, in another, the roadway abruptly disappearing into a curtain of mist, we get the uneasy feeling that something is not quite right or that something ominous lurks just out

of sight. We instinctively feel this because we're likely to have read the books and seen the television programmes and the films with precisely the same iconographic clues.

And because, as the photographic artist Paul Seawright said of his exploration of anomalous, edge-of-town, edge-of-motorway spaces, they are where bad things happen and where the evidence of the bad things that happened is likely to turn up.

Yet, for all that, one doesn't get the feeling that Comerford has anything really bad in mind, at least in the sense that Peter Doig did in his painting *Canoe Lake*, which explicitly evoked a scene from the chiller movie *Friday the 13th*, or indeed as Gary Coyle does in his excursions into the contemporary gothic. What Comerford does offer is a contrast between the implied warmth and security of the dwelling place and the spare comforts and loneliness of the open road. Seeing his work en masse it becomes clear that there is no longing for the cosiness of those houses and cabins in the distance.

In fact, by contrast with the openness of the landscape, they seem positively tight and claustrophobic, while the transient, open space of the road becomes a limitless mental space through which our imagination can roam. Comerford keeps the settings of his paintings abstract by declining to identify them. If he did, they would presumably become paintings of those specific places with their own meanings and histories when, consciously or instinctively, he wants to preserve them as sites of general metaphysical contemplation. In casting him as a latter-day Romantic, Murphy refers to the "blue note of melancholy" that pervades his vision of nature without the reassurance of a transcendent divinity. Bereft of such an all-powerful authority, we are left with the scant consolation of faint lights in the encompassing darkness but, Comerford seems to feel, that's not a bad place to be.

Oliver Comerford Galleries II & III, Royal Hibernian Academy Gallagher Gallery, 15 Ely Place, Dublin Until May 2