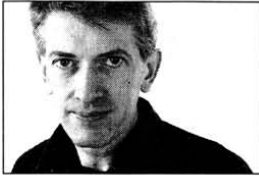


# Messing with the modernist flat-pack



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For his installation at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Brendan Earley acquired a lot of Ikea flat-pack furniture, three kitchens and half a living room's worth. Rather than following the assembly instructions, he's joined it all up any which way to create a kind of generic modernist assemblage, all right angles and melamine-veneered chipboard. There's a certain tackiness to the materials and the way they are exposed. It could be titled something like "Modernism's House of Cards", given the implied view of modernism as a set of conventions tailored to market forces, a fatally compromised utopia. This is a view bolstered by a photograph of retail warehousing hanging on an adjacent wall.

As always with Earley's work, we are presented with a number of ideas relating to architecture and design, and their entanglement with social and economic realities. Where his installation runs into problems, though, is in the area of its own physical fabric. One expects a little more. The mismatched Ikea flat-packs look like mismatched Ikea flat-packs anomalously arranged. If, for example, some ambiguity had been built in, as though it was a semi-kitchen, semi- something else, the effect might have been much greater. As it is, it falls, so to speak, a bit flat.

As part of the second part of *The Curated Visual Arts Award Exhibition*, Earley shares the main gallery space with Bea McMahon and it looks as if she, too, has been fretting about modernity. Her two-part projected film piece, *[in, the] visible state*, takes an iconic site of Irish modernity, the Belfield UCD campus, with its looming water-tower, and juxtaposes it with footage that may depict work on the construction of the super particle accelerator (designed to detect what has been nicknamed "the God particle") at the CERN laboratory in Geneva,

as well as a view of a man in silhouette referring to, or even reading, a papal encyclical. All of this is only murkily apprehended because the sound is muffled and the imagery is projected on to mirrored screens "coated with buttermilk". Whether this is for optical or symbolic reasons is not indicated, but the whole thing is certainly atmospheric and even vaguely apocalyptic.

The piece could be taken to refer obliquely to science's challenge to the authority of revealed religion, and there are further references to what, in the parlance of the late Louis Althusser, would be called the state ideological apparatus, the usually invisible and implicit means by which the nebulous but all-powerful state maintains control over the minds and actions of its notionally autonomous citizens. Which is where, presumably, there is a degree of congruence between the work of the two artists: architectural fabric meets systems of social organisation.

In Gallery Two, Isabel Nolan's paintings and a single sculpture evoke states of fragility and are themselves mostly fragile and perishable. They make for a really good installation. The moments on which her work focuses are precarious and haunted by the threat and, on occasion, the actuality of loss. Powerful, overwhelming emotions wait in the wings. Perhaps that is why she is so drawn to motifs of lightness, optimism and the fugitive possibility of happiness as a kind of transcendence.

Irish Times: March 26th 2008