

Don't Shoot The Painter, Dipinti dalla UBS Art Collection, 2015

*Talk with Kevin Cosgrove*

**DIPINTI DALLA UBS ART COLLECTION**

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Emanuela Mazzonis - *You graduated from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin (2007), and then spent a year in Berlin before going back to Ireland. Why did you decide to move back to Dublin?*

Kevin Cosgrove - Berlin has a reputation for being a good city for art makers and that association and experience is valuable when you are starting out. My plan was to establish a studio and make some work for about a year. In the building where I worked there were a few well-known international painters and it was motivating to see the dedication they had to their studio practices. That may have been the most valuable experience from my time there. As I was considering the prospect of a second Berlin winter, I was awarded a spacious studio in Dublin so it was an easy decision to go back to a familiar city and seriously attack making a body of work. You can't compare Berlin and Dublin as art cities, but Dublin is a good place to live and work.

EM - *I've read that you started drawing together with your brother when you were a kid. Has art always been a passion of yours?*

KC - I would say so, we were both makers, rather than readers or writers. As children we didn't really have a huge exposure to artists and museums; however, our grandparents were "Sunday painters" and that filtered down through our parents to us. Picture making was a sort-of separate wing of knowledge that was definitely appreciated in our house. When I took art in secondary school I became more focused and first thought of being an artist. Then during art college I discovered what being an artist really looked like and began seeing art-making as a potential, what should we call it? A job might seem appropriate.

EM - *You come from a working-class background in Navan, Ireland, and your canvases are all about the philosophy of a working life and your own relationship to skilled labour. What is the link between your art and your life?*

KC - Both of my grandparents were what I would describe as solidly working class. I think from my father's involvement in the workers' unions there was already a sort of divergence for him from a purely working-class mentality. Growing up, I was aware of an inevitable evolution from particular values, but at home there was certainly a strong sense of the dignity of the worker: putting your hand to the plough and having practical ability was important. On a personal level my paintings might try to bridge a gap in practical experience with skilled labour. When I went to study art I felt a bit of a break from my background. So it made perfect sense to me to attempt to figure out, to investigate, how to become a good technical painter. I wanted to construct a comparison with logic, manual know-how and methodologies as a universal quality common to many jobs. In this respect, I sometimes think of my studio as a form of "workshop" and I try not to be sentimental about the work I produce.

EM - *Places of production, workshops and small family factories are at the heart of your paintings, which explore the traditional depiction of the nobility of labour. Cars, tractors, small dumper trucks, warehouses are all painted in an air of clarity and pragmatic realism. What are your sources of inspiration? Why did you decide to focus on this kind of "landscape"?*

KC - In a general sense I am interested in a figurative or representational style of painting because of the inherent response of an audience to depictive canvases. There is a rooted understanding that a representational painting is automatically linked to ideas around skill, value, or narrative etc. These responses can be limiting (or at least culturally specific, considering the expanding geographic and social distances in which images now circulate) but

you can work with them too. It's a direct understanding and connection that can be subtly directed and constructively built upon. The crucial point is that any idea of skill or proficiency in painting is hopefully mirrored in the intent of the subject matter; the content of the workspace and the person who labours there and the integrity, honesty with which it is rendered. Skill and purpose are hopefully in balance.

When painting, I tend to refer backwards to old master painters, as both a guide and resource. So there is a process of historical linearity, in terms of a practical transference of knowledge and skills. This is also a useful association to help the viewer navigate the "content" of a work. These intertextual links keep the work in a crucial form-content dialogue, but it would be untrue to say that one dictates the other. I'm not certain why, but I am drawn to the clutter and activity characteristic of these spaces. The range of prospects for composition and subject is attractive to me as an observer and painter. In the end it might be one simple detail that makes a painting; something insignificant, like an old biscuit tin or a dropped glove.

EM - *How much time do you spend working on a painting?*

KC - It can vary. Sometimes I get stuck in slow gear, particularly if I have had a little time off after an intensely productive period. When restarting, a medium format canvas might take a month or more to complete. But as a project intensifies I find that my efficiency and confidence – my shorthand – increase accordingly and I can complete a similar size work in virtually half the time.

EM - *Like a craftsman, you construct your space on the canvas. You represent ordinary reality from the industrial heart of Ireland. Do you aim to highlight the silent life hidden under an external surface?*

KC - When I choose a subject to paint I look for a number of things. One of those things might be, as you say, the quiet dignity of an anonymous workspace. When you take the time to translate something into paint you are kind of saying, look at this, this is important or it deserves more than a passing glance. As a painter making work all the time you can tend to forget that painting makes this statement to the wider audience and likewise it can be an unwanted side effect. The interpretation of a painting as a valorising process is particularly interesting in the context of contemporary practice. This discussion often focuses on the commodification of painting and the painter's labour capacity. I think there is far more that underlies our response to what the painter chooses to present to the viewer. Sometimes the painter's intention gets lost in the process – in a positive sense – creating an enigmatic work that will occupy us all the more.

EM - *Your objects are at the same time created by someone or something, by people or other machines, and are themselves forces of creation; they are created for the purpose of further creation. Once they are painted on your canvases, these objects take on a different look, they are no longer active, but dormant. What is the aim of these "new" objects?*

KC - I think the "dormant" objects really indicate the disparity between the painting in comparison to an actual "thing". Painting involves many variables and approximations, mannerisms and shorthand, and this is set against a tangible or knowable mass-produced object.

The precise industrial objects become amorphous when painted. It is a foolhardy pursuit to try to paint these with oil paint on linen. It's like one old technology trying to ennoble or subsume a newer technology. Painting can't really match the rigorous nature of mechanical production or indeed re-production but the effort to try provokes a certain response. The suspension of

disbelief is crucial to the life of imperfect, painted versions of the real and the mimetic game of recognising. You might say that the painted objects and their “actual” counterparts have their own, distinctive philosophical “thingness”.

Some of these objects are tools we first noticed as children and have used or just observed through life. I try to capture the arcs and curves in the time-honoured utilitarian designs, likewise the symmetrical and hard-edged form of mass-produced tools, machines and plastics. They don't always look exactly like they should but they work when they serve the paintings' internal narrative, moving light or the viewer's eye around a composition.

EM - *Your paintings appear almost as portraits of these objects, as if you were studying them in the unproductive stage of their life cycle. There is a depopulated workspace, a lack of activity in your paintings. I dare say that they recall the traditional concept of still life. Would you say that this is true?*

KC - Yes, I was paying more and more attention to objects that were arranged on workshop tables, floors and benches and I was looking at lots of traditional still life painting. I wasn't conscious about it until one day I stood back and realised the painting I was working on was a still life composition. It was exciting because I could use that to jump from an open workshop scene to a more formal and abstract arrangement of the picture space.

The worker or workspace owner, although absent, becomes a greater presence in the still life focused works. Theoretically it is they who arrange the objects in the painting. In that sense there is a link to portraiture, through the depiction of a person's ergonomic, interior and personal space, their choices and taxonomies.

EM - *Your paintings are carefully composed, seductive, colours are vivid, light is brilliant. Benches with power tools, industrial vacuum cleaners, cans and drums of oil, wires and tubing: all these objects are described in such detail that they almost seem sculpted. How would you describe your own style?*

KC - I started out making wet on wet or alla prima paintings. This process is quick and intuitive, where you build the painting all at once. It's a direct and exciting way to work because a painting has to be finished within a day or two, before the paint ceases to move. It lends itself to the creation of interesting atmospheres, but it can be hard to have sufficient time to work on details. For this reason I started to use a more traditional method of under-painting to get really well defined objects and colour colours?. This is a slower and more methodical way of working that can be frustrating when you are used to working quickly. However, in the end, this fragmentary and labour-intensive approach opens up an important vocabulary of painting possibilities. I still find it difficult to keep focused when making the slower under-painted works. In this case I regularly return to the wet on wet style to keep things going in the studio. The ideal situation would be to have these two approaches interacting seamlessly on the one canvas, but that's approaching an almost unattainable, Rembrandt territory.

EM - *Light is very important in your paintings, even if the source it comes from is not always obvious. It could either be natural light coming from the windows or the fluorescent tonality of electrical bulbs. Still, it is a constant recurring feature. What is the value of light in a painting?*

KC - When I find a workshop with good directional light it makes a painterly representation of that scene much more seductive. Although I regularly mix natural and artificial light sources, on their own, they create different atmospheres. I think a workspace lit with fluorescent bulbs has a slightly ethereal feeling, suggestive, perhaps, of the worker's interior thought processes. Natural light has a more open, laid back and sentimental feel, which can be manipulated or

wilfully “narratized”. As I tend not to include people, the light drives the sensations of narrative: this can be subtle and has a slowness of pace, well-suited to what I think painting potentially conveys.

EM - *All your shows bear interesting titles, such as The Untitled First Album (2008), Menschheit (2008), Just the Usual (2011), Nor for Nought (2012). Where do these titles come from?*

KC - The last three solo shows were titled: *The Untitled First Album, Just the Usual* and *Remake*. The other titles you mention were curated group shows so I can't speak for them.

I have a difficult relationship with the titles of my shows. The main problem is that I can never think of them. The gallery that I work with have a great ear for an off-beat title. All of the titles were isolated out of conversations we had in the studio about the work: for example, I might be describing a particular work and an incidental comment could arise that, in a curious way, might sum up the intentions of a show. The last solo exhibition at mother's tankstation, *Remake*, referred to a filmic allusion in a painting of a vintage Austin, awaiting restoration. We were discussing the fact that I had researched the number of films in which the particular model had featured, to find, a little disappointingly, that it had only appeared in the non-Hitchcock remake of *Thirty-Nine Steps*... I do like titles that sort of underplay the content or underline what's already there, it kind of says to the viewer don't look here, look at the work.