

EXHIBITION HOMAGE TO WORK

Homage to work

Light drives the focus and the atmosphere in Kevin Cosgrove's series on unpeopled workspaces, writes **James Hanley** as Cosgrove's solo show continues at the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny

Although now known as a representational painter, interestingly, while still a student at IADT, Kevin Cosgrove painted abstract canvases that looked to the colour field tradition. What he learnt from these works was how to manipulate paint, use the versatility of the brush and tackle the handling and treatment of colour. Finishing his studies at NCAD he was encouraged to investigate more figurative elements and the genesis of his hallmark style was born.

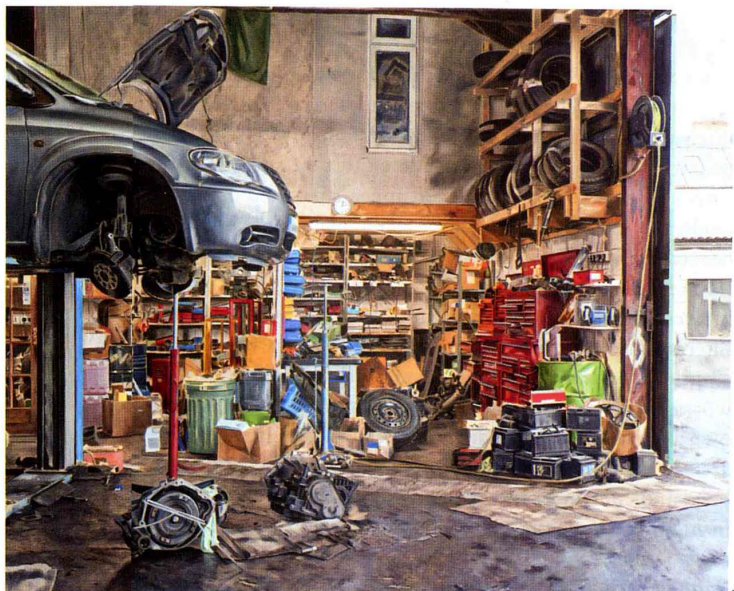
At first he was unsure of how to negotiate a path – as he says himself, the world opened up visually and the danger lurked in being that kid in the sweet shop, unsure what to pick, what direction to take, what to paint.

He happened finally on the idea of painting workspaces. This appealed to him as he always revered manual labour, things built to last and the environments in which they were built. Matching this to his craft was a happy marriage. He could transform these spaces with paint and with an integrity and honesty of purpose make something too. It became a labour of love. The spaces that he paints are places that he

knew or got to know. His father owns a boat so the boat-house was a natural fit, having spent time there as a child. Other workshops (around Navan, Athlone and Stoneybatter in Dublin) were then found and meticulously photographed by the artist. The camera allows him to capture the detail and by varying the exposures he can give himself enough information, particularly in the shadows, to play with later on the canvas in terms of what to emphasize and what to edit.

The spaces he paints are unpeopled. The workers are temporarily absent. In this hiatus the artist becomes present. Objects are left, disused or destined for use again. They are metamorphosed into paint by the close scrutiny of Cosgrove. With a deft hand he transcribes the spaces in the unique language of paint. Brushwork is always evident – shorthand, abstracted or gestural as he articulates both the architecture and the detail under one coherent unified skin of paint.

Initially he painted wet on wet. This served him well on small practical canvases where he could control the application in one session. When the subjects got more complex





he began to employ an underpainting. Once completed in monochrome he could pick a section that was manageable to overpaint in a day and, with dexterous blending, could arrive at a final unified surface.

While sourced from photographs the artist is keen not to mimic that language but let the autonomy of the paint with its distinctive vocabulary shine through. His mark making is economical and he never overcooks a descriptive passage. His tempo is pitch perfect in how much needs to be described and

of the light. Both are high key. Light creates the atmosphere and the descriptions creating narratives from how the space is organized that also shows the trace of the individuals who work here.

In one illuminating instant a scene and a history is projected back to us the spectator. This light is usually cold and white, almost blinding us from its source. It then moves and denotes the forms as it passes through the space, modelling and highlighting until it vanishes into the dark recesses of the composition. Light is everything. It drives the focus and the

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what he can leave to suggestion. This all comes with practice. And a nod too to the old masters. He cites Velasquez and his economy with paint, never doing more than necessary to convey what he was describing. He talks of Manet in the same way, and cites Vermeer's use of light as influential. And yet despite these heavyweights at his back Kevin Cosgrove makes his own distinctly contemporary paintings.

The canvases bound for his latest show 'A Peening Sound' for the Butler Gallery are the largest he has worked on to date. After a decade mining the same motifs he says it was time to up scale. Clutter abounds in these scenes – tools, planks, dismembered machines, tyres, cans, drums, corrugated iron and a gamut of ephemera jostle for our attention. The title refers to the resonant sound of metal hitting metal. This high-pitched sound the artist hopes will find a visual counterpart for the viewer when they initially confront his paintings and in particular the instant effect

atmosphere. To the artist this is more powerful than a human-driven narrative where the space would then play second fiddle as a mere backdrop. Their absence makes the work stronger.

These large paintings are the culmination of many years dealing with similar environments with a singular aesthetic examination. Cosgrove says it was important to him to have had the time for a 'monogamous' relationship with his subject. This investment has won him critical and commercial success both here and abroad. Open to change and evolution, he does not think in terms of years but rather in terms of paintings. The commitment and skill assimilated from his work to date will ensure that whatever direction he pursues in his art will continue to inspire. ■

Kevin Cosgrove 'A Peening Sound' Butler Gallery, Killkenny until 18 December 2016.

All images courtesy of the artist and mothers tankstation

James Hanley RHA is an artist.

1 CABIN 2016
140x160cm
oil on linen

2 CHROME
2016
120x150cm
oil on linen

3 LAKESIDE
2016 oil on
linen
160x200cm