

INTERVIEW



CONTINENTAL CANVAS

From a working-class background in Navan to a painting-filled studio in Berlin, Kevin Cosgrove is on a swift path to artistic success, writes **Louise East**. Photograph: **Cian Burke**

KEVIN COSGROVE WAS at the Electric Picnic music festival when he got the call. One of the paintings from his NCAD degree show was on the front cover of *Circa* magazine, the Irish art world's quasi-bible.

"I think the Chemical Brothers were on," Cosgrove says, with a quiet smile. "That was good."

Cosgrove is one of those hen's teeth creatures; a young artist who's not struggling. It's barely two years since he left college, yet an almost unseemly amount has happened.

Critics singled his degree show out for particular praise (all but two of his pieces sold) and Cosgrove was commissioned to create two new works for the front cover of *Poetry Now*, the Leaving Cert text book.

Then Finola Jones, director of Mother's Tankstation, the achingly cool gallery on Watling Street in Dublin, rang to ask if she could visit Cosgrove's studio. Luckily Cosgrove had just secured a tiny space in Dublin. "I had to fill it quickly with paintings because I knew she was coming."

Jones liked what she saw and took Cosgrove on, and within the year, Cosgrove opened well-received solo exhibitions in Dublin and at Chicago's NEXT art fair. Last month, he showed his work at the Cologne art fair, which, in terms of footfall and international collectors, provided Cosgrove's biggest exposure to date.

The paintings on the wall of his huge light-filled Berlin studio (left) were destined for the new show. At first glance, they might almost be photos; trawlers, workshops, tractors and scrambler bikes. The realist illusion starts to unravel pretty quickly though; Cosgrove works in oil on linen or canvas, and far from being tied to a pedantic photographic rendering, he preoccupies himself with catching the flare of a fluorescent light or the folds in a plastic tarp, with a wonderfully vivid economy.

"What I want people to look at is the painterly tricks," Cosgrove admits. "I make them very quick, and I'm always looking for a new way to make a painting quicker, but with a readability."

"I try and make as many paintings as I can. I

come in every day and do a seven-day week. I used to make a painting a day, but now it's probably four a week. I wouldn't say that I just come in and paint anything, but if I'm stuck, I'd rather make a painting of anything, than not paint."

Rather satisfyingly, there's a direct link running between the how and the what of Cosgrove's painting. Work – as dedication, as craft, as mind-numbing boredom – is both his subject and his method, and nothing interests him more than the spaces where people ply their craft.

"Workshops are a kind of touchstone for me. They don't lean towards saying a certain thing, they just kind of are and that's why I like them. They say a lot without doing too much."

School was something of a washout for Cosgrove, who is dyslexic, but he persevered, knowing that art school offered something he wanted. He was accepted at the IADT in Dún Laoghaire, only to find himself wondering what he was doing.

"I didn't really know what painting should be. I don't mean to go on about it, but where I come from is a working-class family in Navan. My brother works in Tara Mines and so does my dad. I used to question painting all the time. I'd be thinking, 'Why am I doing this, it's a bit silly.'"

The questions went into the paintings. There are all those workshops and studios (always unpeopled, as though work itself has taken a break); there are images of ice-breakers, recalling his father's boyhood love of *Moby Dick*; and recurringly, there are motorbikes of every shape.

"My brother and his friends all work really hard during the week, go out on the weekends and spend all their money. Then on Sunday, they just drive their bikes around the fields in the rain. That's a really strange thing to do. To me, the bike became this thing that had two sides. It had a freedom side, the *Easy Rider* thing, and then really an oppressive side, too."

Fundamental to the appeal of Cosgrove's work is the enjoyable disconnect between the scrambler bikes and electric guitars he chooses as his subjects, and the traditional oils he uses to paint

them. It's as though Manet had decided to pop an amp into the background of *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*; the "painterly tricks" are much the same.

"Oil painting is a tricky art form to use in a contemporary way. There's probably more terrible oil painting out there, in a contemporary sense, than there is good oil painting. But I don't really get too hung up on that. I just paint."

Cosgrove moved to Berlin last November, just when he could have been forgiven a little laurel-resting. Although there was a personal incentive – his Berlin girlfriend, who's working towards a degree in medicine – he also has a high regard for shaking things up a bit.

"When I was finishing third year in IADT, I was quite happy and productive, but I thought I could stay here, keep going or I could totally change it up, move to NCAD and see if something new comes out, and it really worked."

"I didn't bring anything to Berlin. I brought a small suitcase. There were things I wanted to bring with me, but instead I left a lot of stuff behind; painting stuff, brushes, paints. Artists can sometimes get tied to their practice and they need certain things to be able to make the work, and I just thought, well, the idea is that I have this skill inside me, and if that's true, I should be able to carry it round with me wherever I go."

By the looks of the canvases on his studio walls, it has been a productive experiment, but Cosgrove is not so sure. "I'm a little bit tight for time now, but I'll try and put paint on all of those canvases there," he says, pointing to a stack of primed squares.

With the work for the Cologne show behind him, this is the first time since leaving college that he is not working towards an exhibition, and he wonders what the outcome will be. "I remember thinking, 'God, when I leave college and nobody's asking me to justify this work, I wonder what crazy work I'm going to make'. Now I wonder what it'll be like when I don't have to make work for a show. Will it be totally different? I like to think it will," he says with a shrug and a smile. "But it probably won't."

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