

The Painting Imperative

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Frieze 2012 – Critics Choice

Critic's Choice: Painting Highlights from Frieze Art Fair 2012

By Simon Bayliss

Another cacophony of visual noise was delivered this year. This I had anticipated, but I had not anticipated the feeling of being overwhelmed by the superabundance of jazzy alpha-art wrangling for eye-ball attention.

The problem is, there's often no logical context through which to aid one's appreciation for what one sees. Frieze is visually messy. But I'm glad to have had difficulty with my choices this year because it provoked me after a long day of lapping the marquee with only three contemporary choices to cross Regent's Park over to Frieze Masters; a new venture exhibiting art from the ancient world to the year 2000. A more subdued and sophisticated, but also rather eccentric partner to Frieze London. In this year's choices from both venues I've backed underdogs and outsiders who, for me, floated undigested amongst the deluge of a technicolour yawn.



Kevin Cosgrove: Workshop with Overalls, 2012. Oil on linen.
2 @ 120 x 140 cm (diptych) | 2 @ 47.2 x 55.1 inches (diptych)
Courtesy the artist / mother's tankstation

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Cutting through the over-stimulating uncurated chaos of the fair, Kevin Cosgrove's detailed paintings of uninhabited mechanics' workshops were a beacon of healthy unextraordinariness. As a solo exhibition at this flashy event, it felt like a brave choice for Irish gallery Mother's Tankstation. In a similar vein to contemporary social-realist paintings by George Shaw, Cosgrove illuminates scenes from gritty working-class environments. But unlike Shaw, whose work ethic has the roaming romantic painterly spirit of Casper David Friedrich or Edward Hopper, the steadfast attitude of Cosgrove's paintings feel more connected to the dispassionately domestic probing of some of the School of London Painters. Although carefully composed they seem to arise from a compulsive drive to simply paint an engaging visual environment in a functional way. Benches with power-tools, industrial vacuum cleaners, cans and drums of oil, hubcaps, looping wires and tubing, buckets and detritus are painted in profusion, as they were last placed by their operatives.



Kevin Cosgrove: Workshop with Ladder, 2012. Oil on linen.

40 x 50 cm | 15.7 x 19.7 inches

Courtesy the artist / mother's tankstation

The scenes are bathed or flooded with a crisp cool Northern-European light, providing an air of clarity and pragmatic realism. Cosgrove is from, what he describes as, a working-class family in Navan, Ireland, and his paintings reveal his philosophy on working life and his own relationship to skilled labour. His pictures are intensively and carefully

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crafted; practical with no signs of anxious overwork or pretention. Others have described 'smelling the engine oil' when viewing his pictures, but for me the scenes appear reinvented (some are recreated from the memory of a previous painting), enriched environments as opposed to corresponding representations of the original. I followed the contours of a bench vice, acknowledging the incongruous affability of its soft plasticity. I have always found mechanics workshops intimidating, because of my lack of knowledge about cars (in the same way many untrained people find art institutions threatening). But with a tender empathic touch Cosgrove welcomes us to indulge in these macho milieus.

Of course the clamps of a bench vice are hard, metallic and cold, but Cosgrove's painterly touch is too tender to render it so severe. For me this is a revelation as opposed to a reproach. The paint is seductive, the colours are vivid, and all objects are described as if with a veneer of Plasticine. Cosgrove's paintings partly deliver the temperament of their settings – the sober realism, the close cluttered working environment, the unwavering labour paralleled by his own admirable exertions, all except the deterrent ambiance of the mechanic's workshop. But this I suspect (from observing the way he interprets place through paint) is just my own misconception.



Kevin Cosgrove: Workshop with motor tester, 2012. Oil on linen.

2 @ 40 x 50 cm | 15.7 x 19.7 inches

Courtesy the artist / mother's tankstation