



FUTURES DUBLIN

FUTURES draws attention to the work of seven promising young Irish artists in a welcome reprisal of this survey series after a five-year hiatus [Royal Hibernian Academy; September 4—27, 2009]. The exhibition brings together the works of artists thoroughly engaged in the manipulation of material, be it paint, metal, found objects or animated film. Beyond this predominance of studio-based practices, the works prove to be curiously uneven as they tackle themes ranging from modes of picture-making to anti-war protest.

Compact paintings by Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh, Kevin Cosgrove, and Mark Swords dot the walls at the periphery of the voluminous main gallery. Mhaonaigh presents four small series of untitled works. Here, images ranging from landscapes and floral-like patterns to objects reminiscent of pianos and moveable office furniture are set in variable painted borders. As such, the paintings suggest the cinema screen or windows of a storyboard. Cosgrove's work possesses a snapshot quality and leans toward photorealism. He invokes detail with painterly shorthand. Fascinated by industrial settings and mechanical structures, his windowless workshops and scenes of boats, barges, and the bridge of an oil tanker convey the harsh flux of fluorescent lamps and the de-intensified chroma conferred by overcast skies. Swords incorporates geometrical structures, loopy lines, and patterns in a playful approach that explores and extends the idea of painted pictures. In his colorful canvases, we encounter a freestanding kite, a wall-mounted rug, and a wooden gameboard. Despite the strength of each artist's vision and their obvious skill, their work fails to excite. These images affect a sober presence, as if they were merely marking time.

With *Every Action*, 2008, and *Praxis*, 2009, Seamus Nolan turns our attention to the material culture of anti-war protest. *Every Action* features two display cases housing hammers owned by the Catholic Workers Movement, which were used to damage American military equipment in Ireland and the USA. Inscribed with religious slogans, they evince a ritualistic aura. *Praxis* presents a televised news report about the hammers'

controversial appearance at the Project Arts Centre as part of the Dublin Goethe Institute's *If you could change the world 1968-2008* exhibition. While the attack on a US Navy warplane at Shannon Airport called the Irish Constitution into question, the hammers' mode of presentation still raises uncertainties: are these objects crime evidence or tools exemplifying freedom of expression?

The unsettling presence of destruction among Aideen Barry's selections steers our attention in another direction. Her gleaming objects initially convey an unpalatable superficiality appropriate to glitzy new business complexes. But closer examination quickly changes our relationship to these works. The spheroidal stars of the wall sculpture *Zero Gravity Mine Field*, 2009, turn menacing, and the radical elegance of the spray bottle display quickly evaporates when we realize that these hybrids double as grenades.

Maria McKinney's monumental and startling *Well I'll be Damned*, 2009, adds to the current of troubling themes. In this piece, a rare work in the exhibition to manifest a willful use of color, the artist poses a family of unclothed mannequins in a cluster of shopping carts virtually overflowing with paper balloons made of cocktail umbrellas. Select areas of the mannequins' bodies—the lower legs, feet, forearms, and head of the adult male, for example—have been pierced with matchsticks and then lit, creating patches of brittle, burnt quills and dense black smoke. The stains on the figures' faces betray signs of tragedy. A small boy, hovering near eye-level, placidly continues to smile. A ray of light devised out of fishing line beams down from a pinhole in the ceiling, intimating divine intervention, martyrdom, and sanctification. To this, the title of the piece predicts our response.

The gym-like expansiveness of the main gallery disables the impact of the works. Only McKinney's sculpture and Nolan's floor-to-ceiling arrangement of Pitstop Ploughshares posters manage to assert their presence. What's more, the arrangement of the work into a series of small solos also contributes to the woe. They seem to huddle in their respective corners and

persist as nonconversant entities, conveying a muted sectarianism. The videos of Aideen Barry and John O'Connell escape this predicament as each artist has been accorded a separate space more responsive to the scale and subject matter of their work. O'Connell's projection *Oh Black*, 2009, arguably the best work in the show, profits most from this situation. Recalling the stop-motion animation of Jan Švankmajer and the Brothers Quay, the work takes us on a mesmerizing journey across a virtually colorless, but visually rich, tabletop landscape. As the scenes shift from compelling realism to artifice, the accompanying piano score intensifies their effect. Although a contagious sense of tension and expectation suffuses the work, it is its powerful emotional impact and resounding immediacy that make it such a success. If future *FUTURES* can surmount the installation challenges of the looming main space, they will provide more stimulating experiences.

—John Gayer