

Issue 167 November 2014

Kevin Cosgrove

MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, DUBLIN, IRELAND



Kevin Cosgrove, *Remake*, 2014, oil on linen, 1.1 × 1.4 m

In certain quarters, that art world desire for the eternally new seems, thank goodness, to be getting tired and old. In the contemporary Irish context, you can see the hunger for something other than faux innovation in the critical and popular reception of such artists as Mairead O'hEocha and Kevin Cosgrove.

Since his highly acclaimed degree show at Dublin's National College of Art and Design in 2007, Cosgrove has been mining the same realistic seam in his detailed paintings of places of work. These are not offices or grand spaces but the often dirty, though usually highly ordered, workshops where physical labour happens.

Cosgrove is aware of the fluctuating trends around which his work is received, joking that he is 'so old fashioned that he's almost cool'. He's similarly arch about the title of his current exhibition, 'Remake', which alludes both to his love of film and his continuing focus on concerns that on the surface, are all about the grit and reality of making, doing and repairing.

But there is something about these too-painterly-to-be-photorealistic images that allows them to transcend genre painting. First, there's the complete lack of irony, but there are other strands and stories at play that add both intellectually and visually satisfying complexity to Cosgrove's workshop scenes.

The centrepiece of the tightly curated exhibition, just seven works in all, is *Remake* (2014). Here, an old Austin A35 car is parked in a workshop, awaiting repair. The oil-on-linen work contains many of Cosgrove's motifs: the ranks of tools on hooks, the chaos of compressors, sanders and other blue collar paraphernalia, all meticulously worked, and the total absence of people. It also foregrounds his homage to Diego Velázquez and, more particularly, to Johannes Vermeer, in the light that floods in from an open metal door to the right of the car.

Through this doorway, in a less layered, less worked section of the painting, is the outline of a wall and another door, yellow in the sunshine. Seen sideways, it is also a small piece of geometric abstraction, nudging up against Cosgrove's cluttered realism. Two schools of art, side by side, the Modernism possibly fading: Is Cosgrove saying that, ultimately, the older tradition will triumph?

Light spills into all save one of the works on show, *Museum workshop with coats* (2014) being more completely enclosed than its companion pieces. The gridded and barred windows in *Radiator repair workshop* (2014) and the heavy metal door a little ajar in *Workshop with unlocked door* (2014) offer a sense of a wider world, paradoxically intensifying the focus of Cosgrove's little spheres of work. These paintings carry nostalgia for a world fading away. Does anyone really repair radiators any more? It seems particularly pertinent that Cosgrove's work deals with redundancy, given the art world's periodic dismissal of painting as irrelevant.

This is part of Cosgrove's brilliance: he reaches back in subtle ways while also commenting on the here and now. *Stone workshop* (2014) echoes the Dutch Golden Age, its deft use of perspective drawing you in until you're standing exactly where the craftsman would have been standing. A frame above the hanging tools takes the gaze even further down the rabbit hole – to the extent that you feel you could really lose yourself.

Just as the Dutch painters of the 17th century proclaimed the morals and messages of a newly Protestant society and represented subjects from the emerging mercantile classes, Cosgrove's suite of works celebrate the presence and power of craft and labour. In this way, they act as a counterpoint to the glibness of so much contemporary consumerism, and, in the process, produce a powerful thesis for the enduring value of painting itself.

Gemma Tipton