

Meteoric rise of an artist who's cool with hard labour

Painter Kevin Cosgrove is a rising star but as **Hilary A White** discovers he does not see himself as a commercial artist

WHILE casting his mind back to his childhood in Navan, Kevin Cosgrove is cradling his chin in his palm and examining the ceiling. The painter has been asked about where his insight and affinity for the visual realm germinated from. As with most of the questions he encounters on this overcast afternoon, he takes time to think before answering.

"I'm not sure if it started from not being that good in school," he begins carefully. "Because I'm dyslexic, I leaned more towards the visual as a kid. I have a brother who's pretty close in age and we used to draw together — my dad was originally a draftsman by trade and he would have given us paper early on. Art was always a nice thing to do in school and much more interesting than anything else going on."

We are in the friendly 26-year-old's top-floor Temple Bar studio where he is showing me various pieces, the best of which will form a body of work for a June exhibition in Mother's Tankstation gallery. Cosgrove is calm and pleasant but becomes knotted occasionally when verbalising the inner workings of his artistry.

This is something the painter will have to overcome. With this second Irish solo exhibition approaching, along with a collection that was hung at the Art Los Angeles Contemporary last month, Cosgrove's star is ascending in a steady curve that most of his peers could only dream of. His meditative, sombre depictions of mechanics' workshops and boat-builders' sheds have quietly been reaching out to viewers in Berlin, London, Chicago and at home. Discussing his work is something he will be increasingly faced with.

He is taking me through images of oil paintings which were bound for LA, when I ask him to tell me about the themes. "The source material comes from stuff that I get from home. And the work... I don't know how to start explaining it... they're generally interiors, workshops and workspaces, cabinet-making, motorbikes and boats, things like that."

Although a question that irks most artists, I ask what his work seeks to communicate. Smiling, he takes a deep breath. "Em... yeah... I'll name them quickly, otherwise I'll start rambling and they'll get lost. There's ideas about labour, about someone who does a job and they stick with it. In this painting, there's a tractor in a workshop, and the tractor's going to be fixed and the next day there'll be something else there. It's about starting again in a duty, a dedication to task. Another thing would be ideas about technique and craft, learning from doing — that's how painters operate anyway, so a lot of the themes are to do with me working on it, the things I think about as I apply paint, as I try and form a light falling on a curved object. In the end, it's about the emotional and logical being intertwined."

Cosgrove is remarkably synchronised with this subject matter. He works using the alla prima technique, whereby canvases are worked and completed in one sitting. "On the hard days when you come in and you don't know what to do, it's OK to make something really awful because you know it might bring you somewhere. When it's going well it's the simplest thing in the world, but it's highly elusive. It just keeps disappearing — you get a little bit too comfortable and then you're back to square

one."

After a BA in Fine Art from Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Cosgrove went on to do a year in National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in 2007. His work was beginning to sell when he relocated to Berlin to be with his German girlfriend.

After a year there, he felt anonymous in a "swamp" of artists. Since 2009, he has been based back in the more close-knit Dublin art community, while making regular trips to the German capital and his fraulein.

He lights up when talking about his fondness for the NCAD, the Chester Beatty libraries, the Iveagh Gardens and Dublin's pubs and the people. "Dublin's a cool city and it's kind of exciting in its own way — it's a sort of underdog city or something, do you think? I'm not really articulating that properly." Does he mean we punch above our weight? "Yeah we do, but then there's a sort of underbelly of people and cool things to do and see."

"Cool" and "uncool" are words he uses regularly. I ask if these terms exist in the visu-

al arts. "It's dangerous to get into ideas about 'cool', but to me someone like Rembrandt is just gorgeous," he says, showing me images in a book. "Alex Katz is surface-y; it's about slickness and technique where Rembrandt's crusty and psychological and emotional. You're always going to have painters who were a little bit off. Maybe that's what 'cool' is."

"I wouldn't consider myself a commercial artist," he surmises. "I would do it even if I didn't sell. It's a difficult place between being able to sell and being satisfied with your work. I can't really say anything that would apply across the board because everyone is different. It wouldn't be cool," he says, releasing a valve of laughter into the studio.

Kevin Cosgrove's new exhibition runs from June 1 to July 9 in Mother's Tankstation gallery, 41-43 Watling St, Dublin. motherstankstation.com



THE BIG PICTURE: Kevin's work has been gaining attention in Berlin, London, Chicago and at home. Photo: Tom Gavin