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this is tomorrow

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Nina Canell: O Little Drops



Nina Canell, O Little Drops, installation view, mother's tankstation

Nina Canell: O Little Drops
Mother's Tankstation, Dublin
24 April – 1 June 2013
Review by John Gayer

The title of Nina Canell's 'O Little Drops' proposes something insignificant or peripheral. Reading it at first suggests small amounts of liquid, but then comes the realisation that the word 'drop' has multiple meanings. Moreover, it not only operates as a noun, but also a verb. To leave hints, decrease, droop, fall and pass from one condition to another all operate as synonyms of this term. The works in the exhibition reflect these meanings, or – as nothing happens to be wet, moving or in an obvious state of transition – present traces of their manifestation that, together with the evocative titles, prompt the mind into considering their many nuances.

Entry into the compact front gallery brings viewers into contact with 'Interiors', what I consider to be one of the most conspicuous works in the show. Clustered in a corner, this piece consists of several unfolded dishcloths laid out to soak up a leak or spill, the extent of which is delineated by salty white tide lines that contrast visually with the room's dark red tile floor. But something about the work's location and the deliberateness of the fabric's arrangement subverts the original assumption. This striking piece references the act



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of stain painting, evaporation cycles and the potential damage soluble salts inflict on historic buildings. It is accompanied by 'Strays', a small wall-mounted portable radio whose antenna, unlike that of most receivers, has been sharply bent and points downward, as if to be on the lookout for unexpected sounds.

In the main gallery 'Forgotten Curves' also references painting. This series, comprised of seven framed elements, appears empty from across the space. In actuality, each frame holds a single fragment of hand-dyed thread that has been sandwiched between sizeable plates of glass. While close viewing of these pieces practically demands magnification, from a slightly greater distance the tiny textiles resemble wormy bodies housed in giant microscope slides. Other works highlight Canell's interest in drawing attention to non-visible processes and obsolete materials. This can be seen in 'Another Indian Summer', a form of heat wave represented by a lax and twisty stack of under-floor heating carpet, and the sculpture 'Mississippi River Blues', which was inspired by a recent trip to the American Midwest. The latter, composed of porcelain telephone pole insulators, copper wire, iron bar and cast metal cuckoo clock weights, offers a compendium of industrial processes that evoke the passage of time, economic decline, and outmoded communication technology.

Much like the initial quick skim of the exhibition's title, cursory glances convey little about Canell's work. Its seemingly trite appearance and insubstantial character belies its richly diverse content, which requires protracted scrutiny to divulge. The ideas follow indirect trajectories and analogies abound. Take, for example, her interest in and use of radio antennae, electrical cord, copper tubing, neon lighting, metal wire and thread. Each of them, like water, carries something, whether that something be radio signals, electric current, gas or dye. Subtle, contemplative and imbued with wry humour, Canell's work uses the most ordinary things to elicit momentous experiences.