

Lordan, Tom, *An Education, Take This Dog For Example* Douglas Hyde Gallery review, **Totally Dublin #213**
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ARTSDESK



AN EDUCATION

Through his work, Uri Aran explores the basics of language, behaviour, perception, and the rules and conditions of social interactions. Why are certain meanings ascribed to certain things?

Uri Aran is an Israeli-born artist based in New York City, where the Douglas Hyde Gallery's curator Georgina Jackson first met him in February 2020. "I was lucky to be in New York to see his hugely ambitious multi-story exhibition HOUSE at Gavin Brown's Enterprise." Jackson had been familiar with his work since 2011, and was eager to work with the artist. Aran is widely known for his multidisciplinary approach to exhibitions, incorporating sculpture, video, installation, and painting. His artworks combine found materials with aesthetic creations, transforming everyday ephemera into playful and enigmatic objects. Aran studied at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem before moving to New York to pursue his career, and his background in graphic design and typography had, he stated in an interview in 2012, "a lot to do with the idea of education, also with being a student and solving a problem." This simple idea reveals a lasting preoccupation, evident throughout Aran's latest exhibition at the Douglas Hyde:

the urge to explore the instruments, methods and aims of education.

Three large blackboards, donated by a local secondary school in Dublin, are perhaps the most obvious vehicles for this preoccupation – they still bear the traces of their previous role, including a full list of homework items, e.g. "English: activity book, page 28, noun sentences." My favourite was the one on the lower ground-floor. It's aestheticisation and adaptation for the gallery space provides it with another layer, in both physical and symbolic senses: the artist has rubbed a thick gel-like chemical substance onto the surface of the board, transforming the object into a sort of mirror that reflects the inhabitants and artworks in the gallery. As I stared at my own reflection in the black surface, it was inevitable that St. Paul's pessimistic analysis of our separation from the divinity of God was brought to mind:

"now we see through a glass, darkly."

Not to indulge in idle speculation about the artist's unconscious or unstated influences, but the relationship between Paul's rumination and the logic of Aran's exhibition bears a striking compatibility. This feeling only grows stronger when I read the preceding line:

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

Education is often associated with childhood and adolescence in our cultural imaginary, and for most people blackboards are synonymous with their early years. Aran's work invokes and ironically plays on the simpleness, wonder and confusion that typify the learning experience of children, nowhere more obviously than in the exhibition title, *Take This Dog For Example*, which has the ring of a phrase uttered during English class at primary school. The title seems to develop from

WORDS Tom Lordan



Opposite: Uri Aran, *Good Route*, 2020. *Take This Dog for Example*, 2023. Installation view, The Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art, Dublin.
Above: Uri Aran, *Take This Dog for Example*, 2023. Installation view, The Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art, Dublin. Photography Louis Haugh.

the video-work beneath the walkway, *Clean*, in which, memorably, a man recites a set of permuting sentences that all refer back to his dog:

He's a miniature dog. He's a big dog. He's a ropey dog. He's the ropiest dog in the world. He's a timid dog. He's a timid fucking dog. He's the timidest dog in the world. He's a charming dog. He's a sinister dog. He's a sinister fucking dog. He's a murderous dog. He's a murderous fucking dog. He's my murderous fucking dog."

Swearing to one side, this repetitious exercise also harkens back to the endless grammar lists of noun and verb constructions that have to be rote-learned by young or non-native speakers, before they can become adept users of language. Later, as the man becomes more emotional, he tells us he loves his dog, and that too reminded me of the simplicity of feeling that characterises a child's experience; on the one hand, an emotion so raw their bearer is saturated, filled with adoration for another living being, and on the other hand, an insufficient degree of experience or cognitive development to allow them to articulate the intensity of that feeling.

"He's my crazy dog and I love him. I love my crazy dog. I love my crazy dog more than anything in the world."

The dominant theme continues in *Untitled (Ernie)*, an image produced by slide projector that displays the eponymous Sesame Street character. There is a hint of unease, however, hovering in the background of this image: Ernie's face is all but erased by a white flash, as though the image is overexposed. His eyes, his nose,

his mouth, are largely unrecognisable – only his hands and hair make him identifiable as the lovable children's character. The unease produced by this artwork is given a particular hue and character by its dated medium, conveying a sense of something on the cusp of being lost, an ephemerality that is quickly passing.

Unease is utterly absent from another piece that evokes Aran's thematic preoccupation and is perhaps the most intriguing of the show; the installation titled *Bread Library*. Aran's artwork is exactly what you are imagining: a long set of shelves filled with freshly baked bread, where each section of the library holds dozens of flat loaves that are baked into the shape of a different letter of the alphabet. The effervescent aroma of the bread is everywhere, providing a sensory undercoat to the exhibition that permeates and lifts your experience: activating the olfactory sense is widely recognised as a uniquely powerful trigger for memory and nostalgia, and Aran employs this under-utilised tool to great effect. Nor will you find that *Bread Library* is the only artwork to feature edible baked snacks. *Untitled* (one of the many unnamed artworks in the show) from 2023 involves a trestle table, some ceramics, and about a dozen small cookies arranged in a haphazard pattern. Aran has a history with cookies – they feature throughout his career. He noted in 2012 their widespread use in classrooms and educational television programmes as a way to teach children how to count, and remarked that this practice doubles up as a way to perpetuate an implicit moral standard: "If a cookie is missing, it means that someone took it. It's a desirable object, and it's being used as a teaching mechanism, both in terms of numeric quantity and also in terms of moral quality."

Of course, as with any good exhibition, not everything falls neatly within the confines of a single thought or principle. I loved Aran's abstract paintings, the *Fastest Boy in the World* series, which tend in the direction of Rauschenbergian combines, featuring several layers and non-painterly items while at the same time conveying a univocal thrust – a single and self-coherent visual language. And the single frame video-works that sit on the upper band of the walls were a personal favourite, not least for the fact that they make wonderful use of the gallery space.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes that one's "maturity consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play." I have the impression that Nietzsche would approve of the exhibition at the DHG. After all, Aran not only plays with seriousness, but he reflects on a whole combination of conceptual analogues and tributaries: what it feels like to learn to play again; how playful learning can be; and of course, most affectingly, how seriously a child looks at the world.

But, whatever you do, don't visit the exhibit on an empty stomach. If you get hungry, the temptation might be too strong...

Uri Aran's *Take This Dog For Example* is at the Douglas Hyde Gallery until Sunday June 25. This exhibition contains large quantities of bread. Visitors with gluten allergies or intolerance may have adverse reactions.

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