



**KEVIN COSGROVE**  
THE UNTITLED FIRST ALBUM

OCTOBER – NOVEMBER 2008





## UNTITLED ESSAY

What's in a name? Titles for individual works are hard enough, but for entire exhibitions or bodies of work, such blanket naming is a perennial problem for the artist. How then does 'Untitled' function as a title, or as information? Strangely, it reveals more than one would think. It is almost odd that Wikipedia carries an entry for something as abstract and self-reflexive as 'untitled', however the oracle of all contemporary knowledge determines that 'the word *untitled*\* refers to something that has no title. Default-titled computer documents, works of art, musical works and other works can be untitled [the permissive tense?]. Generally, an untitled work is the result of a conscious choice by the artist or creator *not* to apply a title [a-hah!]' The entry continues with a table of contents listing works with the title 'Untitled' and offering the following choices: 'Music, Albums [BINGO!], Songs, Television, Film or Art'. The true complexity of 'Untitled', however, lies in *untitled* being loaded-up with parentheses, particularly inverted commas, indicating employment of the word as an adjective *or* noun, also seemingly denoting intentionality, indifference, or, more specifically, an intentionally affected indifference. The most profound example of this appears to be a band called 'Untitled', who released their first untitled album in 2000. Of the fifteen tracks on their first untitled album, the first thirteen were untitled, leaving tracks fourteen and fifteen bearing the titles of 'Untitled Track 14 and 15'. Intentionality, in this case, is of course the embodiment of willing perversity, the choice of no names as names, nothing as things.

This is effectively the strategy Kevin Cosgrove has adopted for his first untitled [?] solo exhibition of paintings at mother's tankstation. His particular solution of the dilemma of over-arching or thematic titling is pitched right in between the states of information and no-information – perhaps disinformation. Like Cosgrove's paintings, the exhibition title, *The Untitled First Album*, simultaneously reveals as much as it occludes, carefully holding its guard while providing just enough coded information to tease the potential viewer with a clear mental picture of absolutely nothing at all. One thing is evident – the exhibition is, of course, not an album, however, what Cosgrove economically gives us to know is that this is the first of a number of somethings, that there is a clear intention of many more and that although it comprises a number of discrete units, it also functions as a collection, community or hive. (Hives hold an ongoing fascination for Cosgrove, as his early paintings of bee-keeping attest – all that busy independent interaction working toward a united goal.) Cosgrove's untitled first album contains a mere eight tracks, each of which is perfunctorily (or descriptively) titled: *Workshop with Trestles II*, *Workshop with Surfboards*, *Dump Truck on Road*, etc. Here, he again refuses us to give us more than we can physically see, the neutrality of the hardly-descriptors neither supports nor denies and certainly does not extend the meaning of the paintings beyond our capacity to read the works visually. It merely underscores the cruciality of the paintings' unilateral existence in a visual world. Perhaps 'Untitled' in this sense is a refusal to commit and therefore is akin to the contemporary vernacular for not caring one way or another – 'whatever!'. In *The Coming Community*, the theorist Giorgio Agamben illuminatingly addresses both communities and collectives and the carefully selected strategy of apparent not-naming:

'The coming being is [a] *whatever* being. In the scholastic enumeration of transcendentals (the what-ever entity is one, true, good or perfect), the term that, remaining un-thought in each, conditions the meaning of all others, is the adjective "whatever" (*quodlibet* in Latin). The common translation of this term as "whatever" in the sense of "it does not matter" (expressed indifferently) is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite, "being such that it always matters".<sup>2</sup>





**Boats in Workshop** Oil on linen 100 x 120 cm 2008  
**Members' Workshop I + II** Oil on linen each 40 x 50 cm 2008  
**Dump Truck on Road** Oil on linen 100 x 110 cm 2008

Cosgrove, in titling his exhibition an 'untitled album', similarly stresses the individuality of the works and their homogeneity as a collective where they all matter, but they matter more together. Cosgrove's carefully understated paintings are compelling individually, but together they make up an ingeniously coherent body of work. His relatively traditional upbringing in a mining community in the central heartlands of Ireland has instilled a strong sense of survival, craft, industry and the honourability of work into his skilfully austere and muted canvases of under-populated workplaces – factories, workshops, industrial yards and offices. The (perhaps out-moded) notions of 'proper' work and the oral communication of skills, from generation to generation, are fundamental to his paintings, which can be art-historically contextualised by an extensive framework of artists who have explored the social structures and the nobility – or otherwise – of labour, linking Corot, Courbet and Manet to the Euston Road School and extending even as far as the anonymous artists of Soviet and Chinese social realism. Similarly, Cosgrove sees himself as a craftsman, or artisan; accordingly his art is superbly constructed and carefully articulated. Crudely speaking, Cosgrove's practice falls into the categories of realism or representational painting, though these are difficult terms today, as they are by definition relative and constantly re-defined. Ironically, realism is treated by Cosgrove in the abstract, in the sense that his paintings are as much about the process of their own creation as anything exterior to this. This point is made with particular articulacy in the diptych *Member's Workshop I & II*, wherein a pretty ordinary cream-coloured interior in one painting is mirrored by its companion, painted from a memory of the first painting rather than a 'real' memory of site or actual place. The first painting is then subsequently 'corrected' or adjusted by direct eye-ball reference and mimetic learning gleaned from the 'memory painting' of the second canvas. Nor can it be convincingly claimed that Cosgrove's paintings are simply synonymous with naturalism or illusionism, however, in certain senses – as we see above – the paintings in this show can be considered as literal mirrors held up to his particular world of industrial middle Ireland.

Cosgrove's canvases are worked in the technique known as *ala prima*, which means that the whole painting is done in one session. The representation of detail is not as important as the overall 'seeing', giving rise to a very direct feeling of 'being there' with almost the same degree of vividness as the scene appeared to, or rather, was felt by, the artist. This approach to painting is almost akin to drawing, in that the artist, seeing a dark area of tone, translates this quickly and directly to the canvas in dark paint, in preference to the time-consuming establishment of tonal building, glazing or other academically mimetic structures. In contrast to the restraint and control demanded by representational mimetics, *ala prima* is a passionate approach to painting and, as is common with passion, without precision it can veer dangerously towards chaos. Successful *ala prima* rendition requires enormous skill and confidence to produce convincing visual results, beyond its inherent spontaneity. Cosgrove's instinctive shorthand allows for the absolutely convincing representation of even complex visual surfaces, such as folded transparent plastic, glass, metal tubing or even racks of spanners – as in *Workshop with Scooters* – showing him to be a consummately natural painter. He has already been noted as a superb painter of light, though his focus is rather perversely drawn to the buzzing green-white fluorescence of contemporary factory spaces rather than the pathetic sublime of natural light. When we do see natural light in his canvases it appears as a cruel burning-white invasion from a threateningly implied exterior world – exemplified in *Workshop with Trestles II* – eroding its way into the relative safety of the over-familiar interiors through corrugated plastic skylights, distant and high windows or warehouse doors left ajar.

So, should we read Cosgrove's *Untitled First Album* as a metaphor that somehow intends to draw what is essentially an exhibition of relatively academic paintings away from the academic traditions of making and exhibiting such a practice? If Courbet can be seen as an important precursor to Cosgrove, then

the example of Courbet's painting and exhibition of his masterpiece *The Artist's Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven-Year Phase of my Artistic and Moral Life* (1855), may serve as an illuminating example here. This manifesto painting, refused by the Salon jury, was the highlight of the one-man exhibition funded and held by the artist in a shack directly adjacent to the Exposition Universelle of 1855. Its sub-title – *A Real Allegory of a Seven-Year Phase of my Artistic and Moral Life* – gives an idea of the painter's ambitious and somewhat enigmatic aims. 'It's the whole world coming to me to be painted', declared Courbet, 'On the right are all the shareholders, by that I mean friends, fellow workers and art lovers. On the left is the other world of everyday life: the masses, wretchedness, poverty, wealth, the exploited and the exploiters – people who make a living from death.'<sup>3</sup> In the centre, like a mediator, the artist is accompanied by benevolent figures: a female muse, naked like Truth, a child and a cat.

In *The Artist's Studio*, Courbet challenges the hierarchy of artistic genres by giving his personal manifesto the status and the format of the most prestigious history painting. Similarly, Cosgrove elevates a group of the humblest of paintings of depopulated nameless places, simple workshops, to what is tantamount to his own manifesto. In complete antithesis to Courbet's conscious showcase painting, Cosgrove's show of virtuosity and artistic understanding is subtly disguised by not showing it at all. Not showing something is amplified by not naming it. So what stands out, as naked as Courbet's 'Truth', is Cosgrove's honourability, his understanding of the real importance of meaningful work, reflected in his essential painting of real and simple things, ultimately revealing 'proper' work as timeless. Cosgrove occupies the centre of his paintings, unlike Courbet, without physically being there. There is no need: the racks of sash clamps, industrial vacuum cleaners and wood-dust extraction units allegorically stand in for the artist, transforming themselves from humble untitled things into noble, entitled things.

(See also Nameless)

David Godbold

<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled>

<sup>2</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hart (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993), p. 1

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich, E. H., *The Story of Art* (Phaidon Press, London, 1972), p. 404





**Workshop with Surfboards** Oil on linen 80 x 100 cm 2008  
**Workshop with Scooters** Oil on linen 80 x 100 cm 2008





**Workshop with Trestles II** Oil on linen 100 x 110 cm 2008  
**Dump Truck on Road** Oil on linen 100 x 110 cm 2008