

mother's annual 2014

## Kevin Cosgrove *Remake*

September - November

To remake is to bear a reference intimately, always acknowledging it in creating. Quite pointedly, it begins from a definite point of reference in an approach towards the new. The remake requires submission to a logic unyoked from newness, whilst at the same time foregrounding the potential in such a move. Kevin Cosgrove's paintings, it might seem, do not admit such a logic: rich and fine paintings, they do of course give rise to something new in the world. And yet his beautifully rendered depictions do in fact achieve something like a remaking. They strive to remake a moment, a sensibility, within a sliding scale of painterly fastidiousness, and casual, but no less accurate, irregularity. Each painting is a kind of remake, existing in a loop from moment to canvas, whilst at the same time remaking the conditions of its own making: that is, the burden of art history. Cosgrove's remake, then, is two-fold.

But first I must backtrack. Cosgrove's exhibition *Remake* consists of seven paintings, each one a depiction of interior space. Specifically, these are the spaces and workshops of manual labour: in one, stone is hewn and chiselled; in another, cars restored and repaired. In others, however, the activity is less clear and they exist simply as the spaces of work, remaining indefinite. What is being staged in each of these paintings, however, is a particular breed of *painterly* work: one that slips in and out of straight figuration in attempting to glean its own particular conception of sense. The parameters for Cosgrove's depictions shift from one case to the next, admitting a sense of fidelity attuned to the fleeting moment.

Consider, for example, the work from which the exhibition takes its name: *Remake* (2014)<sup>i</sup>; the largest painting here, it is a central one - both literally and thematically. In it, a green Austin A35 stands expectant among the cluttered, and yet ordered space of a garage. On first glimpse, its representation appears straightforward. And yet, as we move our eyes from left to right - as we instinctively are wont to do - something breaks down. The detailed, left-hand side of the painting is markedly at odds with the right. On the right-hand side of the painting, the light coming in from the open garage door creates a bleached and saturated effect, admitting little detail. On closer inspection, there appears to be scarcely any visual information: it is an under-painting. Moving even closer, the grid-like plan of the scene, too, becomes visible. The discrepancy of detail within *Remake*'s plane creates a strange effect as the eye moves from left to right: a sense of movement, almost a dragging, emptying the scene of detail. Cosgrove learned previously that the Austin A35 had featured quite heavily in one, and only one, movie: a remake<sup>ii</sup>. Thus, for Cosgrove, the cinematic tone of the painting - its fleeting, ephemeral nature, almost disappearing before your eyes - also articulates a sensibility to interact with the painting as remake. *Remake* signifies, I believe, the attempt to capture something anew: working on a remake of a remake only serving to render the task more difficult, and tantalising.

Each painterly gesture, though, could in a sense be deemed a remake: each work, too, simply the concluded product of a set of combinatory and stylistic divergence. Painting's typical raw material - that is, oil paint atop canvas - remains unchanging: indeed, it has subsisted in much the same way for some six hundred years. Thus, painters operate through the manipulation of quite a limited set of possibilities, which are neither pure nor non-signifying. In such a way, the possibility for originality over and above stylistic tendencies is stymied through an equivalence of medium: each work enters into a space where everything has, in a sense, already been said; each work simply a new combination of well-worn gestures.

To digress, Friedrich Nietzsche, his health failing and the task of writing nigh on impossible, bought a typewriter in 1882. One of the first models, a Malling-Hansen Writing Ball, granted him a renewed sense of energy. More than this, however, he found that his writing became quite different, mechanical almost. His friend, the composer Heinrich Köselitz, wrote to him saying; '*Perhaps you will through this instrument even take to a new idiom...my 'thoughts' in music and language often depend on the quality of pen and paper*'. Indeed Nietzsche agreed with his friend: '*You are right. Our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts*<sup>iii</sup>'. Thus, for Nietzsche, the typewriter assumed a central form in the kind of thoughts he put across, and how he made them. Analogously, the painter is similarly bound to his medium: it opens up a specific means for the representation of thought, and bears down on the means through which that thought is made cogent.

Cosgrove's work appears acutely aware of this thinking. Quite apparent throughout *Remake* is an interest in the opportunity, and also the burden of art history: specifically, the history of representative painting within Western art. Certainly the palette of analytic Cubism abounds in much of the works; warm greys and browns, woven through with sudden flashes of blue. More than this, however, here Cosgrove's work shares with Cubism a certain representative bent. Nowhere is this clearer than in the painting *Stone Workshop*. A small painting, from a distance its effect is almost entirely abstract: up closer, though gaining representational sense, the eye still fails to focus on any one given spot. The upshot of this is a kind of flattening or even an explosion of three-dimensional space, which the painting seemingly purports to create. The eye, ceaselessly tracking the internal parameters of the canvas, becomes almost confused, naturally seeking to create three-dimensional sense, which exists, quite playfully, almost only as semblance.

This appropriative grasp of space recurs throughout *Remake*, bearing with it a deliberate interaction with the legacy of art history. *Workshop with Mirror (you are)*, the second largest painting in the space, is indeed indicative of its co-option: specifically, Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, of 1882. In Cosgrove's work, a chaotic workshop scene is pictured, with cardboard boxes, lengths of wood and bottles of indeterminate function filling the tableau. A mirror, barely outlined, disrupts any normal comprehension of space: again the eye is rendered momentarily confused. Indeed Cosgrove appropriates the device of the mirror quite explicitly, creating a scene of unstable spatial coordinates, much the same way as in *Stone Workshop*. *Workshop with Mirror (you are)*, however, operates simultaneously in quite a different manner; not by *flattening* the spatial terms of the scene, but by disrupting it through the trope of the mirror, which, though only quietly defined, remains apparent. By directly appealing to the capacity of the mirror – and thus to one of Manet's most well-known paintings – Cosgrove uses the legacy of modernism, also, as a disruptive point of departure: the work seeks to remake the break as given by modernism, by using the modernist sensibility, itself, as a break. This point is emphasised by the lack of presence in the mirror: instead of a reflection (of the person who nominally stands before it), as in Manet's work, there is in Cosgrove's work a scrawl atop the mirror's surface, resembling a finger trailed through a thick coating of dust. Certainly, the word 'you' is legible; below it the word 'are' has been rubbed over and reduced to a scrawl. At the Folies-Bergère, the reflected figure in the mirror – us, the customer – renders a formerly confusing depiction, more understandable. By contrast, Cosgrove substitutes the mirror's scrawls for presence: in such a way, he purposefully denies the sense-making capacity, which a figure would grant. Through this, the modernist gesture is made anew.

Cosgrove's preoccupation with the terms of his own discipline is apparent in another work, *Museum Workshop with Coats*. A recognisable space, it is one of the workshops of the Irish Museum of Modern Art. On first glance, *Museum Workshop with Coats* is quite different, tonally, from the other six works of *Remake*. Its palette almost all pale blues, beiges, and a range of whites, this particular workshop seems to substantially diverge from the others, both in atmosphere and in purpose. Arguably, then, the choice to represent this space admits a certain decision regarding the nature of its purpose: somehow it diverges from a traditional space of work. Cosgrove chooses – quite playfully – to use this museum space as an impetus for a painting – not physically utilising it, but instead coopting its parameters to describe a specific kind of practice: that is, art-making. At the same time, however, other kinds of work take place here: specifically, the fabrication of installations and displays for the adjacent museum. Importantly, the museum is also the site of canon-creation. Thus, Cosgrove seems to ask: *What does it mean to create an art history? What would that look like?* Tongue-in-cheek, a large bag of rubbish on the extreme left of the scene admits a certain, undeniable, reality: much is excluded, and thrown out.

An admirable denial of fixity pervades Cosgrove's work. Often, in *Workshop with unlocked door*, for example, or indeed in *Remake*, representation stutters and almost breaks down, albeit tentatively. In the former, this lack of representational fixity takes the form of a general sense of movement across the painting's surface: gestural brush strokes, quite loose, create a sense of slippage towards the left-hand side of the scene. Boundaries, too, appear only nominally defined. An unlocked door at the left of the scene only reiterates this slippage further: unmoored, the scene's representational precision appears to almost empty out through it. Cosgrove's particular sense of remake, then, is wholly productive: seeking to enact a specific vocabulary of representation, it shifts, garnering a new breed of sense.

Here representation, like the spaces he depicts, is never static. Places shift before our eyes, and alter with the passing of days. Cosgrove's remaking of these places, then, foregrounds a particular tendency towards time, not linear, but diachronic. Like the objects made and repaired within Cosgrove's workspaces, his paintings, similarly, do not concede to the logic of pure *result*. Instead, they are

protagonists of a *process* that never quite ends. To remake, then, is to reinsert them into a process that still holds the seeds of possibility. Cosgrove's works seek to *extend* the act of representation, and to redeem some authenticity therein. So too with his knowing allusions to art history: each an attempt to remake a moment or sensibility, and to use this moment as a break. These art historical moments, like the places he paints, are neither static, nor straightforward to reproduce. Instead, Cosgrove enters into a '*work-like*' relationship with his subjects, reconfiguring them not as finalised objects, but as processes that extend through time and thought, at times beguiling even the task of representation<sup>iv</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> All works date from 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> The remake in question is *The 39 Steps* (1959), which was directed by Ralph Thomas. There were four film adaptations of John Buchan's novel, the first by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935.

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Carr (2010) *The Shallows*, New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, pg. 50.

<sup>iv</sup> Dominick LaCapra, in Jennifer Roberts (2004) *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, pg. 5