

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

DUBLIN

Mairead O'hEocha

TEMPLE BAR GALLERY + STUDIOS

Mairead O'hEocha's most recent paintings are strangely vibrant studies of dead creatures—brightly hued depictions of taxidermied beasts and birds at once gorgeous and ghoulish. Her subjects are the stuffed, posed, and lifeless occupants of antique display cabinets in Dublin's natural-history museum, a Victorian-era institution that is itself, in its impeccably preserved, nineteenth-century style, frozen in time: a museum of a museum. Dubliners call it, with morbid affection, the Dead Zoo.

Such a setting—a place where natural forms are arrested and arrayed, fixed and framed for leisurely contemplation—is an apt inspiration for the orderly intricacies and time-stopping tendencies of O'hEocha's art. Over the past decade and a half she has finessed a wide-ranging aesthetic of complex, bittersweet stillness. Her breakthrough work, from around 2007, introduced her as an amiably wistful way-farer, a painter of miscellaneous, more or less mundane places: garden centers and suburban bungalows, public squares and gas stations. These images are of hushed, unpeopled scenes: small, subdued oil-on-board pictures suggestive of sudden quotidian reverie, moments of estranging dispassionate quietude on uneventful days. O'hEocha's muted, delicate realism begins in the limited light—the overlapping grays and fleeting sunburst glows—of Irish weather. But her paintings have, over time, confected a more exquisite luminosity. However down-beat the scene, urban, rural, and coastal landscapes have become to varying degrees crystalline and kaleidoscopic, composed of squares,



Mairead O'hEocha, *Two Owls*, 2020, oil on board, 24¼ × 33¾".

strips, and shards of beautifully unbelievable, out-of-the-ordinary tones: soft-pink and baby-blue pastels, strong citrusy highlights of orange, peach, lemon, lime.

Though O'hEocha's more recent paintings have retreated from the exotic, varicolored splendor of this transformed outdoor world, they have found similar tonal blooming and formal growth in alternative, indoor subjects. An extraordinary experiment in the minor genre of floral still life—in paintings made between 2015 and 2017—intensified the developing dialectical imperatives of O'hEocha's art: coolheaded painterly calculation set against visual and sensory excess, multidirectional light and abundant color in contest with background darkness and inevitable decline. Death haunts these radiant pictures just as it also bedevils the refined representations of natural diversity in O'hEocha's "Dead Zoo" paintings, gathered in the exhibition "Tale Ends & Eternal Wakes" during this year's long, sad, baleful spring. The show included six paintings—three small (on board) and three large (on canvas)—each eliciting equal degrees delight and dread. In addition, O'hEocha chose, for the first time, to show a group of ink-on-paper drawings: fifteen sketched encounters with the museum's displays, hung salon style across one full gallery wall.

Often, O'hEocha's paintings flaunt self-conscious charm, but their attractions are assertive and unsettling, too. The mauve, pearly purple and pale-lemon plumage of the paired birds in *Two Owls* (all works cited, 2020), for instance, is rendered with resplendent subtlety—in fascinated tribute, perhaps, to the former living dynamism of these now-static predators. But O'hEocha leaves deep, wide hollows where the owls' eyes should be, imagining the animals as figures of zombified horror. She also underscores the specific context of permanent museum display: The owls rest on pink perches; two bats pose on glass shelves; an orangutan stares out from the dark confines of a display case. Within these unchanging microenvironments, the animals seem, in their preserved state, both precious and pitiable. Likewise, *Mountain Goat, Natural History Museum, Dublin* is a melancholy marvel of curious, motley coloring, its fleece glowing—pink, blue, green, a little golden—against the shadowy background of a cabinet interior. *Two Kingfishers* is on the surface sweet and consoling, conjuring a bright, appealing image of natural companionship. And yet this avian couple is forever locked within a tiny fragment of artificial nature. Enclosed in a compact container, the birds coexist bloodlessly within a constructed world. For O'hEocha, perhaps, this restricted existential predicament is not so different from our own. Look at the colored light inside the display case: Isn't it the same as the light beyond?

—Declan Long