

Flashes of quality O'hEocha's Hoarding, Lights and Rain, 2014, at the Douglas Hyde

Catch these shooting stars

Mairéad O'hEocha is a painter of place who is on the up and up, says **Cristín Leach Hughes**

Four paintings from private collections in Dublin, Italy and America are the sum total of Mairéad O'hEocha's show at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin. That they are already in private hands, though painted in 2014, is an indicator of a rising star. It's also a subliminal marketing tool: now's the time to catch these works before they disappear into someone's living room. They're certainly worth seeing.

O'hEocha was born in Dublin in 1962, but didn't graduate from art college (BA

from the National College of Art and Design, Dublin; master's from Goldsmiths, London) until the early 2000s. She emerged with a distinctively mature style and approach to painting. Her first solo show, in Los Angeles in 2008, sold out.

This exhibition opens with a painting of a carousel at night. The composition is marked by candy-coloured flashes, the horses' heads illuminated by hidden lights, tucked into the eaves of the fairground ride. Trees hang dark, leafy branches overhead in army-camouflage-coloured patches of paint.

This is something new for those who remember O'hEocha's work from two solo Irish shows in 2011, when the paintings were predominantly grey-hued scenes featuring wheelie bins and blank gable ends. Those shows marked O'hEocha out as a painter of skill and intelligence, one perhaps good enough to emulate Martin Gale as a nuanced chronicler of the Irish landscape just beyond the motorway.

Stylistic differences aside, both Gale and O'hEocha paint ordinary, oft-ignored

places heavy with potential narrative; places that hold clues to our collective identity, if such a thing exists. They share an understanding of the value of restraint. Yet while Gale paints scenes like short stories, O'hEocha appears to be working on a sprawling, unfinished visual novel.

Her earlier paintings softly transformed the mundane into something almost epic. Her show at Kilkenny's Butler Gallery in 2011 featured works from the previous five years and was named after a building material that absorbs traffic sounds: Whisper Concrete. They were paintings of ordinary corners from ordinary lives – garden ornaments and rubbish bags in muted greys, flesh tones and olive greens – yet they felt heroic, reflecting how it felt to be in rural Ireland between 2006 and 2011. Those paintings were also reunited from collections worldwide, in New York, California, Brussels and the Netherlands.

O'hEocha is a landscape painter of a certain ilk. She has spoken about "how painting and drawing allow unconscious and imaginary material to emerge". In

other words, her painted world is as much an inner, fictional one as it is a depiction of aspects of real life.

She demonstrates a clear ambition to produce a body of work of international standing and significance and she has a conscious awareness of its potential place in – not just Irish – art history. She's forging a place for her work in that context, despite the historical insularity of the Irish painting scene and its limited international reach. She has been influenced by Pierre Bonnard, Vincent Van Gogh and Josef Albers. Her style has progressed, but what has not changed is her peculiarly unsettling but resonant take on the otherness of everyday life.

There could be figures in her carousel painting: a pair of pink shoulders perched behind a grimacing horse's head, a queenly stoic form erect near the rump of a rearing mare. But it's all very still, despite the colour and movement of the paint; despite the centrifugal force at the core of its subject, the implied rotation captured in oil on board.

There are wonderfully blocky forms here that recall some of the abstracted structures in the Irish painter Tom Climent's work, and an echo of Diana Copperwhite's use of pastel colours. There's a memory, too, of Jack B Yeats and his fascination with chairplanes and other fairground attractions, but the sentiment is all O'hEocha's own.


The small accompanying catalogue includes images from her *Via An Lár* exhibition in the Douglas Hyde in 2011. It's a useful reminder that O'hEocha is a painter of places without people. Contemporary Irish artists, such as Eithne Jordan, paint urban and suburban street-lit compositions. Oliver Comerford paints urban, suburban and rural roadside scenes in which human absence is a feature. But O'hEocha's works don't feel like they're missing the people, being more paintings of the places themselves.

In the final image in this show, *Hoarding, Lights and Rain*, lines of wetness fall almost diagonally across the board like falling stars. This sheet of movement, captured in a flash, falls between the viewer and the sight: a rectangular box lit by three bars of outdoor

artificial light. The hoarding sits in a chalk-blue pool, the hedgerow huddled either side is a green-brown thicket, the trees behind are ghostly spindles of greyish black. Abstract colours adorn the hoarding's sides in waterfall sheets of blue, yellow, green and orange. Many landscape painters are concerned with painting light, but O'hEocha is not doing that. She's painting places, lit. There's a subtle difference.

She's not even necessarily painting these places to tell us something about the people who might occupy them, as Gale is. She's working in a similar vein to Jordan, in seeking to express some kind of personal inner life through her depiction of the outer world. That said, O'hEocha is a more exciting painter, not least because her work demonstrates a palpable ambition, and is getting better all the time.

Sunset Please is a layered vista that begins at the top with scoops of pink, blue and green and ends at the bottom with a tan-coloured grey-brown beach. Or, depending on how you look, it begins with the wet sand at your feet and ends with a yellow horizon buzzing with strata



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of air, light and land. *Tree for Missing People* is a multi-coloured sapling, spotlight stark against a black sky. It feels like a tribute piece, evocative and elegiac, but it's less engaging than the others.

This is, of course, a slightly flimsy exhibition. The purpose of Gallery 2 in the Douglas Hyde is to offer a worthy side show to the main event, in this case an exhibition of cool glass, charcoal and lens-based work by Niamh O'Malley. Sometimes the works in this windowless, domestic-garage-sized room offer the more intense experience.

O'hEocha uses colour to draw viewers in, then darkens the view with a suggested

narrative left unexplained. It's in the arrows at the top of the carousel which imply a movement to the left. It's in the gaping mouth of the horse, and the empty shelter for the missing carousel operator. It's in the squiggle of a wave (maybe a boat?) that makes her sunset painting zing.

Here, the horses are multicoloured, shrouded mechanical beasts; the sunset sky is mulberry-pink and yellow with flecks of zooming light. A blank hoarding under lights in the rain is home to a sunshine cascade of colour behind a curtain of darting wet spears, sent from space.

There is a pent-up energy in O'hEocha's work, a controlled passion; she's not giving it all away. Her compositions work like a coiled-up spring, set to burst into life in response to your viewing presence. O'hEocha's paintings are restless, despite their stillness. If Gale paints calm conclusions, O'hEocha paints the beginning of the story and leaves you hanging, in a good way. **■**

Mairead O'hEocha is at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, until February 25