



**Mairead O'hEocha**  
*Workyard, Smithfield, Dublin* 2011 Oil on board 46 x 55 cm

## Mairead O'hEocha

### The Douglas Hyde Gallery *Dublin*

The Douglas Hyde Gallery has a formidable history of exhibiting works of merit, murk and melancholia. '*Via An lár*' (Via the Centre), a survey of recent paintings by Mairead O'hEocha, was no exception. Sixteen small oils-on-board, named after the places they represent, are all composed from a roadside vantage point; these curious, deserted scenes hang at even intervals around the gallery's concrete bunker appearing like film stills from a silent road movie, a travelogue of the unfamiliar set within Brutalist surrounds.

*Palmtree and Bungalow, Co. Carlow* (2010) comprises a roadside view of an archetypal modern Irish bungalow – a design imported in the 1970s and mass-produced for a new generation of homeowners. Rendered in a bleached but expansive palette, its plain gable-end appears to the left of the composition, on the near side of which a palm tree and its shadow direct attention to the centre background where two picnic tables sit vacant. To the right, a gatepost is decorated with an eagle, wings spread as if landing. Here, unlike the 'real' concrete feature it claims to represent – normally uniformly grey – this particular bird has been gently coloured in naturalistic tones, the pinks and yellows of its claws and beak interrupting the black and white of its feathering. This generic ornament, inspired by the eagle's grandiose symbol of Western power (the malleability of which was famously lampooned by conceptual artist, Marcel Broodthaers), is now freshly rejuvenated as the only sign of life in the otherwise empty scene. O'hEocha's sharp-witted alteration evokes the buoyant Americanism and its early, inherent lifestyle aspirations disseminated through this country's vernacular modern architecture, all since abandoned.

*Workyard, Smithfield, Dublin* (2011) depicts an urban workyard enclosed on three sides by industrial buildings, evenly rendered in sombre tones. Two exterior CCTV cameras point to the centre, an area of recent manual labour where piles of building material are rendered by sweeping strokes of impastoed white paint. To the right, a large, incongruous poster of a rural idyll appears to be wallmounted, framing an elevated door. At the centre of this *trompe l'oeil*, cloud-like whirls suggest a Renaissance depiction of the Assumption, the Virgin replaced by this darkened doorway. Through careful manipulation of the oil, laid wet-on-wet, O'hEocha's compositions each contain a point of ambiguity, everyday oddities seen in passing, identified and intensified through paint. At what stage the arrangement is manipulated remains unclear.

Around this square gallery, works appeared to be grouped in subtle narratives. *Fir Tree and Dump* (2010) and *Burnt Tree and House at N11* (2006) both depict neglected domestic dumping grounds. Here, the contrast shows O'hEocha's clear technical improvement in the intervening years, the older work floundering like a loose preparatory sketch for the convincing newer version. Nevertheless, the combination provides good preamble for the shock of *Horse and Gatepost near Unyoke* (2010): behind the rubble of a smashed-up gatepost, a white horse rises on its hind legs as its back catches a shaft of pink light, piercing the darkening sky. From the silence of abandoned spaces to the shrill cry of this animal's distress, O'hEocha's vistas, drained of human life, conjure a menacing terrain of domestic dispossession and recent desertion.

Nowhere is the human form visible but surrogates appear, often reanimated. In *Annamoe Antiques 2, Co. Wicklow* (2009), a mannequin has been left at a roadside, its feet obscured by a number of boxes, its neck concealed by a wooden plank and its body cloaked in the American flag. With a nod to a culture of consumables in an economy saturated and sunk by the clutter, and a wink to the art combines and assemblages that have, historically, greeted its debris with fervor, O'hEocha's painted totem waits patiently at the roadside for its own passage to be determined.

In an essay published in the autumn 2009 issue of *October*, David Joselit championed the 'transitive paintings' of Jutta Koether, Michael Krebber and Merlin Carpenter, works that 'hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it'. By expanding out their compositions to include diagrammatic formalism, experimental display modes or complimentary performative practices, Joselit claimed, these artists' political awareness and critical worth were clear. O'hEocha's paintings are instead implicitly transitive, converging painterly conceits with conceptual deceptions set to task on a landscape itself in a state of flux. Douglas Hyde's exhibition is astute and timely; O'hEocha's is the complex image of an unfamiliar road.

**Isobel Harbison**