

Exceptional Ways of Looking at the Usual



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

Just four paintings and one charcoal drawing make up Kevin Cosgrove's current exhibition, *Just the Usual*, at Mother's Tankstation (MTS), but if you take the time to get to Usher's Island to see it you certainly won't feel short-changed. As the gallery's Finola Jones notes, visitors tend to spend more time with the paintings once they get there. So much so that the idea of putting chairs in the gallery was only rejected because seating that looked right in the space couldn't be found.

In the centre of town, at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, there's a similar response to Mairead O'hEocha's exhibition, *Via An Lár*, with visitors returning again and again to savour the work.

As it happens, O'hEocha also shows at MTS. Both she and Cosgrove are exceptionally skilled representational painters whose work addresses ordinary everyday subjects. Not the height of artistic fashion then, you'd be inclined to think. In fact, both are relatively young: O'hEocha completed an MA at Goldsmiths, London in 2004 and Cosgrove graduated from the National College of Art & Design in 2007. Neither show feels in the slightest bit behind the times or retrospective, while MTS ranks as the most cutting-edge gallery in the country, with an exceptionally good international profile.

Via An Lár continues in the vein of O'hEocha's *Whisper Concrete* at the Butler Gallery earlier this year, though it extends the geographical reach a little, with locations in Dublin, Wicklow and Offaly as well as her familiar stamping ground along the route of the N11, the main Dublin-Wexford road. Her low-key landscapes are mostly of anonymous-looking, in-between locations, accurately reflecting the curious blending of urban, suburban and rural in the contemporary Irish landscape, but she also tackles more conventional landscape subjects, such as the castle ruin at Clonmacnoise.

The exhibition notes align her with Camille Corot and the American painter Maureen Gallace. The creamy serenity of her pale-toned, muted colours does recall Corot, and a certain idyllic quality has much in common with the atmosphere of Gallace's summery little landscapes. But where Corot is a realist, O'hEocha noticeably stylises her subject matter, with lots of neatened crisp edges and little flourishes. Rather than aiming for an even paint surface she very effectively uses quite dramatic bursts of impasto, often to indicate clouds rolling across the sky.

Via an Lár is an excellent show, which moves O'hEocha's work along a little and consolidates her position.

DESPITE THE TITLE, there isn't much of the usual in Cosgrove's *Just the Usual*. It was clear from his sell-out graduate show

that he was an exceptionally good painter. His contributions to group shows and his first solo show in 2008 confirmed as much. But the work in *Just the Usual* suggests he's even better than that.

Not least, technically the paintings are simply superb. Cosgrove paints in his own version of an understated, deadpan realism that is currently quite popular internationally. As a style, this way of working favours fairly small-scale, informal pictures, and that is what he has exhibited prior to this. Now he has upped the scale significantly, which calls for a weightier, more considered approach, and he's made the transition brilliantly. These are substantial works by any standard. He is not a showy artist. Everything we see on the surface does a job, which is what's said of Velázquez. Look closely at any portion of his paint surface and it's as if there's almost nothing there: just a smear of greyish colour, a few minimal, random looking marks. But the colour smears and marks are applied with amazing offhand dexterity and a sure grasp of their role in the overall scheme. It's like listening to a performance by a gifted musician: it all just seems uncannily right. Let your eyes pull back a bit and everything slots into place so that the overall picture is like an ingeniously elaborate mechanism, magically more than the sum of its parts.

From the beginning Cosgrove marked out a distinctive subject matter: the mostly masculine preserve of the workshop, inhabited by, say, car or motorcycle mechanics, or boat-builders, or cabinetmakers, professional or amateur. We don't see much of the people, mind you, just the spaces they work in, and occasionally the things they work on or make. In the paintings these well-worn places, with their impossibly intricate accumulations of tools, machinery, benches, containers, materials and myriad of other stuff, are charged with the intoxicating promise of creating or mending something, which gives them a compelling metaphorical quality.

The German artist Thomas Demand makes three-dimensional models of carefully documented interiors from coloured card and paper, then photographs the models and exhibits the photographs. Cosgrove's paintings are spine-tingling in a way similar to Demand's photographs. What we see looks real: in fact, it looks more than real. It's familiar but oddly heightened and reinvented, as if we are only now seeing it for the first time, no longer just taking it for granted. Yet just as we know that Demand's images are arrangements of coloured paper, we quickly realise that Cosgrove's extraordinarily real images are brisk, virtuoso arrangements of pigment. As with Demand, each single image is like a novel version of the world in its entirety.



Kevin Cosgrove 'Workshop with blue bench' oil on linen, 120 x 140 cm 2011