

Gritty and mundane visions of a could-be-anywhere world



Small yet compelling: Cinema billboard at Ballyedmond, Co Wexford, left, and Palmtrees and Bungalow, Carlow by Mairead O'hEocha

GEMMA TIPTON

Mairead O'hEocha's work depicts a hidden but unromanticised side of Irish life – homes and trees, humdrum hedges and handball alleys

SMALL IN SCALE yet nonetheless compelling, Mairead O'hEocha's paintings show roadside scenes from the hinterlands that run along the east coast between Dublin and Wexford. The paintings are tantalising glimpses into the parts of other people's

lives that one can imagine and identify from a passing car. Eschewing the region's sea views and rolling hills, and ignoring its rich history, O'hEocha instead shows a side of life that is neither rural nor urban, both gritty and mundane.

One would have no sense that this is a landscape soaked in blood.

Resonances from the Norman invasions to Cromwellian battles to Vinegar Hill in 1798 are shown to have been covered over with tarmac and concrete and peppered with boxy houses, each one, if not someone's ideal home, at least then their castle.

Neither romanticised nor mythologised, O'hEocha's southeast coast is a non-place, a could-be-anywhere world of handball alleys and rubbish

dumps, palm trees and concrete, tacky gestures (horses and eagles on gateposts, fake round towers) and humdrum hedges. These places could be anywhere, and yet they are also distinctly accurate depictions of a certain – and prevalent – kind of modern Irish landscape.

The first flat appearance of O'hEocha's work is deceptive, as clouds, trees and piles of refuse may be rendered in satisfyingly thick swirls of oil paint. She paints wet-on-wet, so there is an immediacy to the work and nothing is overdone. The sense of familiarity to be found in her paintings comes both from a recognition of how well she has captured an Ireland we know all too well, even if it is not one that appears in glossy magazines or

estate agent's brochures; and also from her work's strong associations with that of some other artists.

There's a temptation, when trying to place an artist's work, to put it in context of what you already know. In their scenes of banal and bland domestic exteriors, O'hEocha's small paintings remind strongly of Maureen Gallace, although there is more sunshine in Gallace's world view.

They also share a muted flatness with the work of Luc Tuymans; and if Edward Hopper were to have left the people out of his own scenes, we'd be in familiar territory there too. There's nothing particularly wrong with this, it is a compelling painting style, and one that is easy to like. It

also has a certain intellectual depth, allowing one to feel clever for liking it, while not having to expend too much effort on wondering why.

Nevertheless, the work is eminently likeable. O'hEocha is a strong painter, with an acute eye. There are stories of Ireland in both boom and bust hovering at the edges of her scenes that hint and intrigue. Gallace may paint sunlit elegies to the American dream of an idyllic Cape Cod retreat, but O'hEocha gives us the Irish dream of a home of one's own – warts and all – in all its broken, tarnished glory.

Whisper Concrete, by Mairead O'hEocha, Butler Gallery, Kilkenny. Until May 1st. See butlergallery.com