



Mairead O'hEocha, *Statue at Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow*, 2011, oil on board, 49 x 63 cm [private collection; courtesy of the artist and mother's tankstation, Dublin]

## MAIREAD O'HEOCHA DUBLIN

It has been said that Mairead O'hEocha's paintings frequently focus on edgelands, those unremarkable places bordering cities and towns. In *via An Lár*, a survey of new and recent work, empty roadways figure prominently alongside deserted gardens, unoccupied parking spaces, and a vacant work yard [Douglas Hyde Gallery; June 10 – July 13, 2011]. Rendered in an abrupt kind of realism, each of these scenes has an enticing glow that invariably surprises viewers. From a sunny day's cool tones to the sense of shelter and warmth conveyed by a greeny-grey overcast sky, each panel is an insular outpost distinguished by its own unpredictable environment.

O'hEocha achieves these effects through a limited color vocabulary and succinct brushwork. Her palette, which consists of rich mixtures of yellows, greens, blues, and greys, not only evokes the protean Irish climate, but also forges visual links between atmospheric phenomena and earthbound elements. This becomes evident in the very first picture. In *Castle Ruin at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly*, 2011, rock, sea, hill, and ruin present an intriguing concurrence of chroma. The cloud's irregular shape and muscular impasto reflect the mass and texture of the fragmented edifice. The ravages of time and weather also affect modern structures. Encroaching vegetation and atmospheric turbulence appear to threaten the recreational site depicted in *Sports Alley, Curraghloe, Co. Wexford*, 2011. The bleak *Caravan at Castlebridge, Co. Wexford*, 2007, and wintry *Fir Tree and Dump*, 2010, offer an alternate perspective: the nondescript roadside excavation and impromptu, seemingly illegal waste disposal site provides two examples of man's impact on the environment.

Kitschy white plaster gatepost embellishments and patches of vivid hues do mitigate the proceedings. In *Halls Playhouses, Monamolín, Co. Wexford*, 2008, the candy-colored features and multi-spire castle lend an air of playful absurdity. Other scenes bear

sinister nuances. For instance, the overcast sky, row of identical houses, and isolated figure in *Statue at Leighlinbridge, Co. Carlow*, 2011, recall de Chirico's haunting tableaux. O'hEocha also takes us "through the city," which is, in fact, a short translation of the exhibition's title. Scenes from Dublin and the town of Gorey encapsulate her manner of reducing buildings and other manmade structures to rectilinear volumes and flat zones of color. Her brooding *Thinking Statue, Stephen's Green*, 2011, which pictures a slightly reconfigured Dublin landmark, stands out as it appears less true to life than other works in the exhibition.

O'hEocha's depictions speak back to a number of artistic antecedents, from Morandi's astute compositions to Constable's cloud studies and the prosaic settings favored by certain photorealists. Yet, her roadside views neither evoke sentimentality nor feel lodged in the past. Her representations, which contain such accoutrements as contemporary yard furniture and wall mounted CCTV cameras, firmly denote the present. These images also infer car culture, for they remind us of the peculiar sites glimpsed through the window on cross-country drives. Compared to the ravages dotting the peripheries of large American cities, these juxtapositions intone a quaintness bordering on insignificance. But O'hEocha's resolute panels solicit attention. Subtle contrasts and contradictions create unsettling relationships that intensify the impact of her robustly painted surfaces, complicate their reading, and linger in the memory. Moreover, her detached perspective—through which the artist renders climate shifts, growth and decay, suburban signifiers of social status, urban concavities, and man's varied incursions into the landscape—imparts scientific overtones. The visual data awaits our examination. It's up to each of us to draw our own conclusions.

—John Gayer