



CIARAN MURPHY  
15 SINGLE WORD TITLED PAINTINGS

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2006

## BATHOS BOUNDED

I am somewhere else. The sun has set some time ago but there is a strange orange glow on the hillside. Silhouetted against this ambient darkness are several palm trees, poking their spiky fronds into the night. It's all very moody and atmospheric. There should be loud unfamiliar insects croaking. There should be some odd exotic smell hanging in the humidity soaked air. There should be danger about but there is nothing of the sort. It's actually cold, damp and mid-September in a holiday home on the south west coast of Ireland. But something about this scene triggers a memory, despite the familiar suburban cordyline or the orange glow of a sodium streetlight. What takes me elsewhere are memories of other places I have not been to, places only experienced through someone else, someone else's make-believe, someone else's vision.

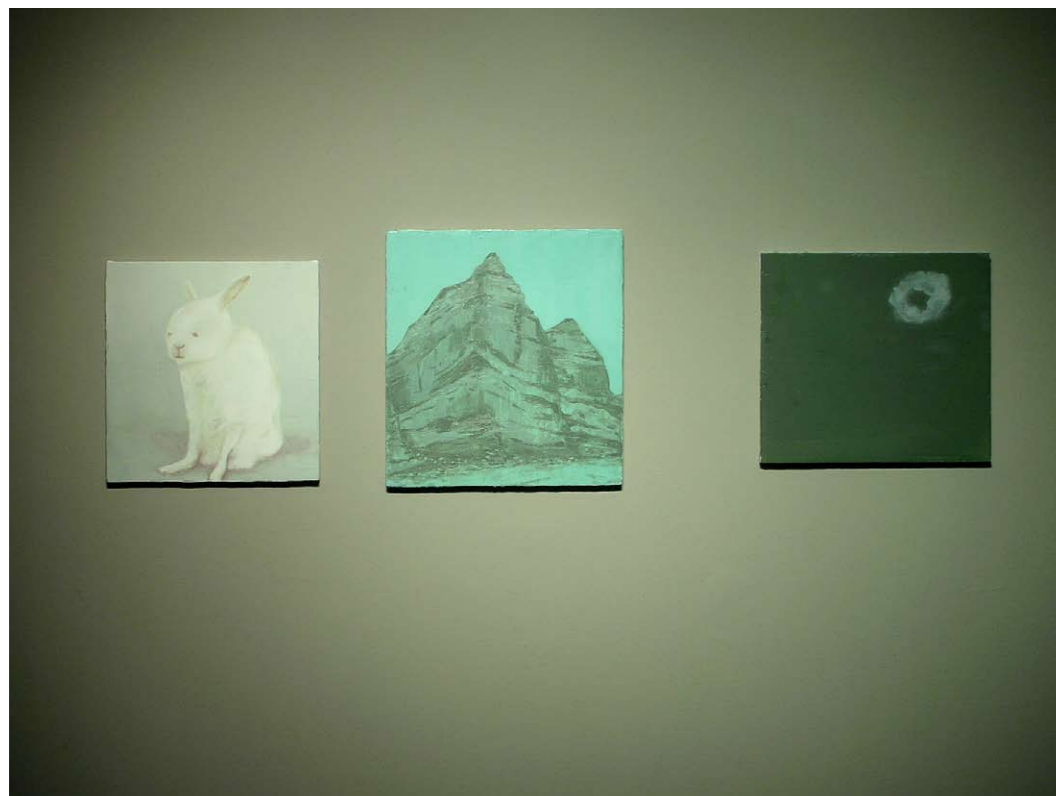
Ciarán Murphy's paintings evoke a sense of the familiar; there is a moment of déjà vu that places you elsewhere, into some other undetermined narrative. Between the series of groups of what the show title refers to as 'single-word titled paintings' multiple stories or possible narratives emerge. The economy of language in the titles does not limit the ideas associated; or the places, scenes and things presented as the work. The loose narratives that develop create ephemeral associations across the image groupings, revealing instead a world where the experience of memory and language are contested. These fugitive relationships create the illusion of familiarity, yet trapped in the illusion of immediacy. This immediacy comes from many points of reference, not just the photographic starting point in many of the paintings. It is this kind of mnemonic play, a play of memory that involves recognition and perception where history is normatively bunk but still overflowing with cultural quotations.

Not all the works originate from a 'readymade' cache of images, but instead as a juncture of different languages which display a conceptual elasticity and creative openness. Any narratives that emerge do not need or follow a linear path. Instead a total immersion is required between the possible relationships of a tropical storm, an awesome mountain cliff, a green night-vision scene or a dense flock of geese. If the paintings celebrate a saturation of images, they do so creating sensations that are in constant flux, languishing in the conversion of languages and multiple significations. The artist describes this flux as a kind of 'white noise', one where perception shifts between the detail and the bigger picture, the particular and the larger unknown.

Murphy uses the full range of photographic sources available across many media, mainly electronic. These include images grabbed from the DVD films, television, and the Internet. The resulting paintings, however, are neither 'decisive moments' as pronounced by photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, or evidence of the 'society of the spectacle' as theorised by Guy Debord. These essential elements of any discussion on representation are employed and subverted, playing on their now 'emptied' semiotic status. The technological reversal, of rendering electronic visual imagery in paint, playfully reflects an unapologetic embrace of the tradition of painting as a present and living form. This total emersion in the present defies the more



**Installation views: Lynx** 2006. 21 x 28cm. **Volcano 2.** 2006. 34.8 x 28.3cm **Pile.** 2006. 30 x 32cm  
**Bunny.** 2006. 28.5 x 27cm. **Cliff** 2006. 33 x 30.4cm. **Cloud** 2006. 27.5 x 30cm. Oil on stretched canvas or paper



traditionally modernist need to re-invent the representational language of painting in relation to history and memory. It also pushes beyond the early postmodern re-enactment or hyper-collage strategies, which presupposed an internalised critique. It is far more fruitful to recycle the unknown, which eventually proves that there are plenty of reference points already without having to resort to specific histories. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his discussion of 'the visible and invisible', of vision and language, points to the "message at the same time [being] indecipherable and evident, which one has or has not received, but of which, if one has received it, one knows all there is to know, and of which in the end there is nothing to say." I

This kind of contradictory conundrum follows though in a painting like *Bush*. In this work a craggy background references a typical Giotto medieval two-dimensional plane. In the mid-ground a tangle of thorny vine curls into a bundle between some craggy rock formations. The mix of early efforts at perspective or spatial awareness with a cartoon-like creeper, contrast starkly yet also cohabit quite comfortably as both share a certain unease or awkward presence. This occurs in other works, especially in sequences like *Bunny*, *Cliff I* and *Cloud* where a hunched, gawky rabbit sits beside an epic mountain face and a small circular cloud shape. The relationships between these divergent images draw on iconic sensations that jar or wrangle meaning as they jostle for attention. These isolated moments quietly shatter references to their original content, stripping away context, placing them in a new unstable lair of interpretation. If the paintings function like a visual poem, then they must remain open-ended however. The works have to exist as multiple, problematised fractures, where the one possible outcome is the play on content itself. Such visual riddles do not consist of fixed consequences but rather language games as means and not meanings. In the realm of shifting contexts the relational concepts are set against and around each other. The titles then as single words offer the last trace of any linguistic scaffolding used in the process of pictorial construction and troubled interpretation.

This comes without a trace of spectacle or indeed pathos despite the challenges inherent to rhetorical or more didactic painting. Maybe it is better to describe what happens as bathos, which is the excessive use of pathos, in an extraordinary descent from the exalted to the ordinary. Removed and repositioned into new settings and sequences, the imagery in the paintings becomes extraordinary merely by selection. This illusion helps subordinate the real into a new fluidity that perforates representation. The seepage between the visual languages employed destabilises their relational possibilities. Can something be made of the linkage of road-kill lynx, an erupting volcano and some pile of partially covered unidentified slabs? The direct and isolated elements in many of the paintings lead to a vagueness, as there is just not enough information to provide clarity. This introduces a multiplicity of sensations, not just emotions, but also an intertwining or inbetweenness. Semiotic liminality thus provides an opportunity for signs to co-exist in different realms, to cross boundaries.

There is a taxonomy that begins to emerge through these paintings indicating the beginning of a long term project to find a personal and particular order of classification. The repetition of particular imagery, especially the animals acquired from various natural history or veterinary

sources, provide the beginnings of not just a visual vocabulary but of a catalogue and codex of images to come. This classification would be too simplistic to order by similarity; instead it needs to be filled with contradiction and contrast. A slow process of distillation is required where imagery undergoes a kind of naturalisation, adapting to a new environment and also acquiring a kind of new citizenship, existence and place. The images that travel this distance and end up on canvas or paper provide evidence of not just a journey but are deeply embedded in the very nature of representation.

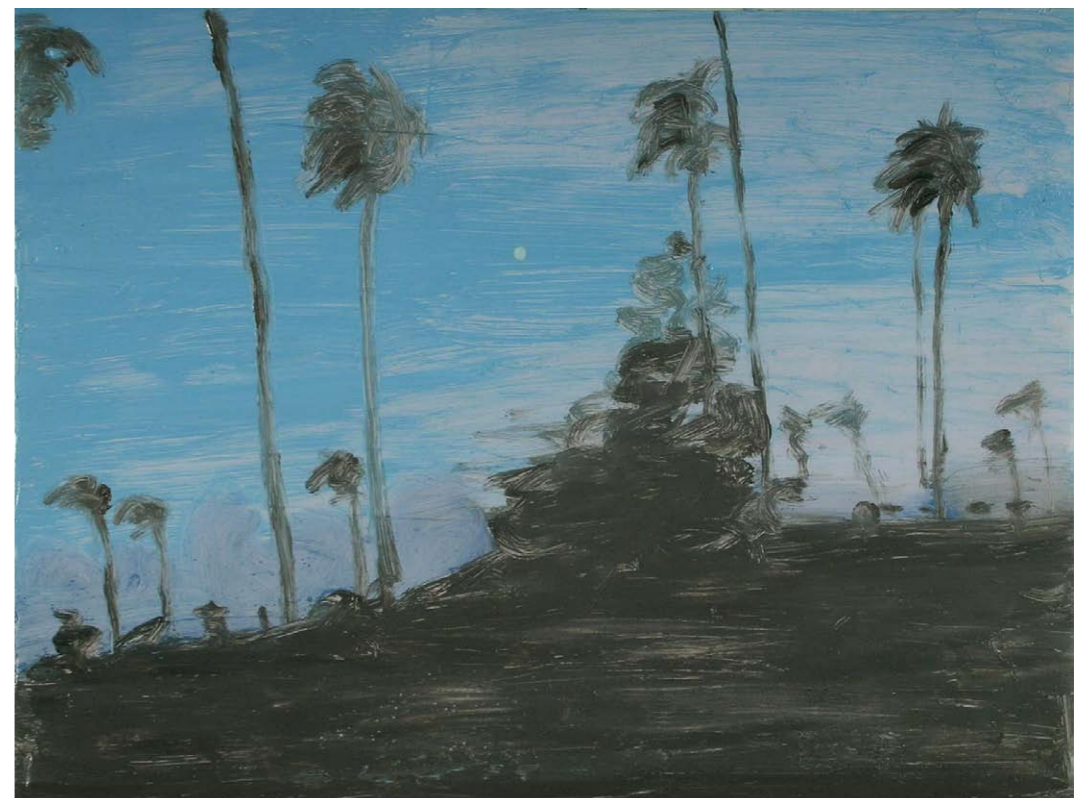
Alan Phelan



**Bunny.** 2006. Oil on stretched paper. 28.5 x 27cm.



Installation views: **Rabbit 2** 2006. 23 x 27.5cm. **Palm Tress.** 2006. 30 x 32cm **Plain cliff.** 2006. 24 x 25 cm  
**Dusk.** 2006. 26.5 x 34cm. Oil on stretched paper





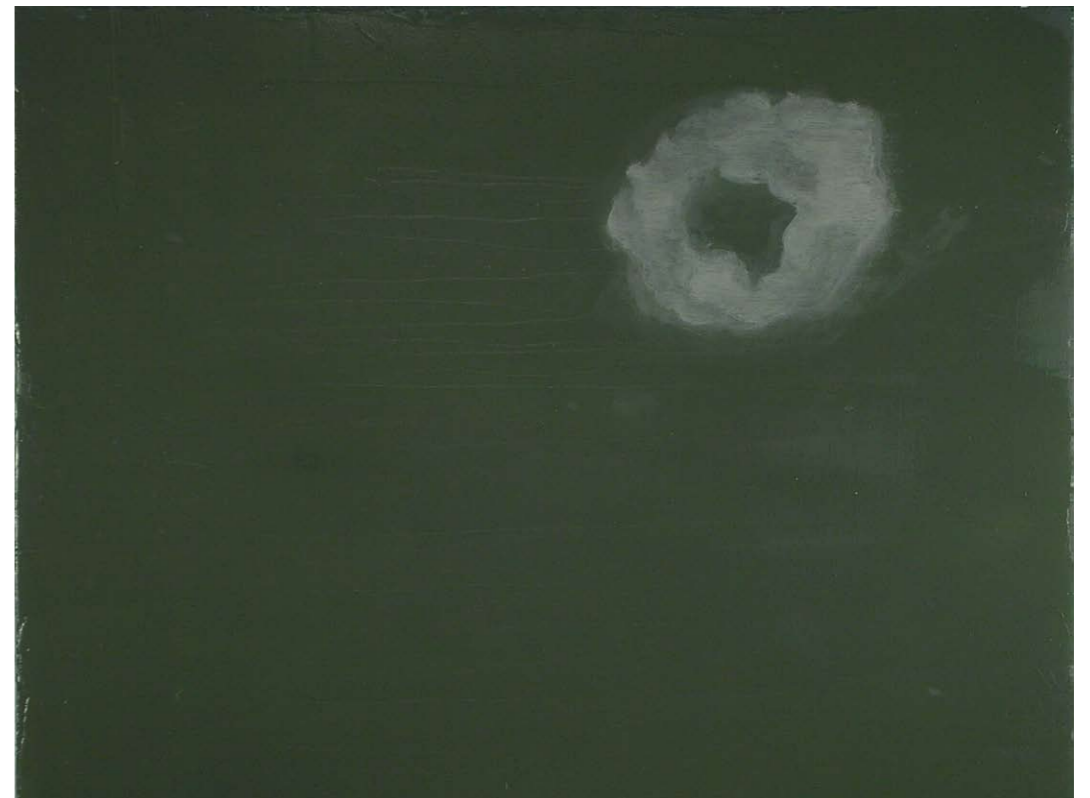
Installation views: **Bush.** 2006. Oil on stretched paper 27 x 30cm

**Pile.** 2006. Oil on stretched paper 30 x 32cm



**Four Mammoths.** 2006. Oil on stretched paper. 24.5 x 28cm

**Cloud** 2006. Oil on stretched canvas or paper. 27.5 x 30cm





**Palm Trees.** 2006. Oil on canvas. 30 x 32cm

**Plain Cliff** 2006. Oil on stretched canvas or paper. 24 x 25cm.



**Rabbit 2.** 2006. Oil on stretched paper. 23 x 27.5cm

**Nightvision.** 2006. Oil on stretched canvas or paper. 26.5 x 31 cm

