

MAIREAD O'HEOCHA
HOME RULES

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During the 1982 Cannes Film Festival, Wim Wenders asked a number of his contemporaries, 'What Is the Future of Cinema?'¹ In the filmed reply, seated conspicuously between a film camera and a television, each film director responds differently: Antonioni is pragmatic, Spielberg business-minded, Herzog poetic. Mike de Leon finds this mode of speculation 'absurd'. Comparing questions of the future of cinema in the wake of television's arrival to the future of his native Philippines, then in political crisis, De Leon refuses to provide an answer. To ask an artist who creates paintings about the future of their medium, despite post-modern leanings toward the fragmented form, might provoke a similar response. However, Mairead O'hEocha's quietly dynamic new body of work investigates just this question, speaking about painting's present in the present, and of its future resting only on shaking states of now.

O'hEocha's first solo exhibition at mother's tankstation comprises seven paintings: exteriors of houses, out-houses and mobile homes viewed from the side and the rear. Dwellings, however, do not take central position, as they might if configured with the unashamed pride of a small child, or gold-tinted determination of a thirsty salesperson. The painted features might ordinarily be recognisable to anyone familiar with Irish bungalows or mobile homes; here, however, they are partially obscured, muted and dispersed, until the viewer might experience an odd sense of dislocation.

In *Houses at Camolin, Co. Wexford* (2007) the outhouse of a bungalow is painted in the middle ground. It is day-lit and the door is open but our view inside is blocked by a peripheral wall that runs through the centre of the composition. This wall conceals the centre, continually diverting our attention away, and this is a method that is repeated throughout O'hEocha's body of work. *Houses at Camolin* does not provide a primary focal point; one's attention moves instead from one point to the next without hierarchy or distinction, from the bungalow's distant eave to the well-tended lawn, along the long wall, to the shadows falling from the frail tree.

The practice of the artist, evident in the works' subject matter, composition and treatment, might be further understood in relation to the social and economic context in which these paintings are being produced. In his 1987 essay, Tom Duddy questioned the tendency amongst Irish critics to ignore the context in which artworks were produced, focusing instead upon the mystical qualities of the Irish landscape and the artworks that represented it. This tendency, he maintained, would ultimately undermine the quality and value of the artwork.² Twenty years on, one might argue that though Ireland's position both socially and economically has radically changed Duddy's concerns still seem pertinent, and a broader evaluation of the work might be based on more than its purely formal qualities. Understood as existing amid a thriving contemporary art community and supported by a gallery that is in every sense international, O'hEocha's work, both dynamic and unresolved, might bear closer relation to the continuously changing textures of Ireland's society and its infamous economy, than to the mystic landscape of Irish art history. These paintings depict neither barren landscape nor thatched cottage, instead favouring late twentieth-century dwellings: bungalows and mobile homes. The title of each work reveals that they are at different locations in close proximity to one another, yet no interconnecting features or shared communities are revealed (there are no people anywhere in the works). Not only are the homes shown side-on or in fragments, but their relationship to one another is also unresolved, fractured. Without dogma or resolution, O'hEocha's partially represented exteriors accommodate a larger set of questions from the personal to the social, economic and ultimately political.

The masterful treatment of paint also contributes to a sense of flux within the work, the wet-on-wet application requiring a delicate balance of speed and measure. Then, as if wishing to remedy the delicacy of this process with something less fragile, O'hEocha prescribes it to common roadsides, gutters, rubbish bins or distant factory units. From the building surplus dumped outside, it is clear that a domestic upgrade is going on in *Refurbishment, Ferns, Co. Wexford* (2007). Here, the painter is obviously an outside observer of the scene, rather than the decorator himself, as, if this were the case, the decorations would surely have been depicted, rather than their remnants. Like the artist, we too are outsiders, unable to imagine the past and future of the home's interior; certain only of its change and the imminent removal of that which sits in front of us. The colours of O'hEocha's palette also shift throughout: grey-green, grey-whitewash, grey-sky-blue. The common pigment, like smoke, seems always ready to disappear.

Added to this painted sense of flux, the absence of human figures throughout the works refuses us simple points to which we might relate or react. This absence raises questions about the role of the viewer in relation to the painting. In 2004, the politically motivated philosopher Jacques Rancière delivered his paper, 'The Emancipated Spectator'. Here, he claimed that for the viewer and, analogously, the citizen, to become activated, 'he must become more distant, on the other hand he must lose any distance...he must change the way he looks for a better way of looking... he must be pressed to abandon the very position of the viewer.'³ Perhaps the dynamic within O'hEocha's work might be interesting to consider within Rancière's framework. Ordinarily, presenting a painting might be interpreted as the presentation of a unique or final frame, be it figurative or abstract. From this frame, the viewer might assert and appropriate the artist's position, intuitively or passively. The passive audience, Rancière might argue, would prove the artwork less provocative and, in his terms, less politically effective. Only by 'reconfiguring' or changing this relationship might the artwork provoke active spectatorship, and consequently active citizenship.⁴ O'hEocha's works, with their fragmented places, diverting compositions and the unusual relationship between her subject and its treatment through paint, force the viewer's oscillation between captivity in and exclusion from the work. By reconfiguring the viewer's relationship to the painted frame, the works successfully activate their viewers as spectators or citizens.

Each painting was begun at a different location along the artist's Wexford to Dublin commute. A stationary blue car appears in several of the works, as if ready to leave. In *Garden at Inch, Co. Wexford* (2007) it is parked in the distance between a coast wall and a white camper van. A road separates it from us, as we peer towards it from the backyard of a house. An empty picnic bench to our right is an unconvincing reprieve. Amid the muted colours, this blue car becomes our focus and any obligation to stay is counteracted by the means to depart. Referring to a newly developed motorway skirting Dublin's periphery, the journalist Ann Marie Hourihane once quipped, 'History is finished here. Now we are going to live like everybody else',⁵ to which the historian Roy Foster responded, 'Things are not that simple.' Similarly, O'hEocha's works remain generously unresolved, and a sense of caution is masterfully presented through her meticulously negotiated compositions.

Unstable conditions are revealed not only through mobile objects but also through stationary ones. O'hEocha's *Mobile Home, Ferns, Co. Wexford* (2007) is positioned to the left of the canvas' centre, running at similar tilt to the wall of *Houses at Camolin*... Here the mobile home obscures a small church in the background, identifiable by its cross and steeple. No car is visible and the foreground is empty aside from a child's pram. It is now clear that it is not the home is that is mobile, but rather the people living in it, and that not only is this settlement one through which they might pass, but so too (by extension)



Entrance at Ballylough, Co. Wexford Oil on board 48 x 37 cm 2007

House and Skip near Clough, Co. Wexford Oil on board 49 x 63 cm 2007





is the church behind. Ireland's increasing secularisation has taken a long time to come, but is now happening at high speed. Particular physical and ideological changes seem, however, less pressing within O'hEocha's new work than the task of painting change itself.

Rancière's ideal spectator is one that is active and ready to negotiate each situation as it arises; his ideal artist (or 'performer') one who is willing to learn, or at least to withhold judgment. Similarly, post-modern discourse asked artworks to exist in fragmented forms, to embody ongoing states of change, to inspire incredulity rather than belief, and to provide a plethora of open ends. O'hEocha's new body of work, with its diverting and carefully balanced compositions, its elusive and playfully contradictory treatment of paint, and its demands for active spectatorship does just that and more, presenting paintings filled with questions, choices and decisions, in all their shaking states. Progress has been made.

Isobel Harbison

¹ *Room 666*, dir. Wim Wenders, 1982

² 'In attempting to fix a particular identity for Irish art, this visual ideology [provincialism] suggests, in an almost racialistic sense, that the sensibility of Irish people, artists and public alike, is not disposed to express itself in conceptual, formal or abstract modes, and that Irish art specifically does not lend itself to interpretation in such modes.' Tom Duddy, 'Irish Art Criticism – A Provincialism on the Right?' 1987, first published *Circa*, issue 35, 1987, reprinted in *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, ed. Fintan Cullen (Cork University Press, 2000)

³ Jaques Rancière, 'The Emancipated Spectator', *Artforum*, March 2005, p. 272

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277 – '[Emancipation] starts when we realize that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution [of the sensible], and that "interpreting the world" is already a means of transforming and reconfiguring it.'

⁵ Ann Marie Hourihan, *The Irish Times*, 23 December 2003, quoted in R. R. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, 1970–2000* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 181



Home Rules installation view, mother's tankstation