

CIARAN MURPHY
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AFTER NATURE

The paintings of Ciaran Murphy offer a reconciliation of abstraction and realism. They appear to carry a deceptive casualness, of slapdash improvisation, where paint either drips off the frame or doesn't quite make it to the edge of the canvas; in one work, the grain of the surface breaks through a thin wash of colour; in another, it is buried under layers of dense over-painting. However, the cohesiveness and completion of these paintings, individually and as an interrelated series, belie this knee-jerk reading. In *Minus 16 Degrees Centigrade*, an image of ice floes both hovering towards the surface and receding into an indistinct atmosphere, there is a palpable sense of slowness, of the artist in his studio, looking, looking, looking. Each brushstroke feels considered and deliberate, like the shift of tectonic plates. This reticence is reflected in the position of the viewer, whose initial impression is towards abstraction and obfuscation, before a gradual, growing awareness (in the light of Murphy's other works on show) of the image's likeness to a seascape. A similar experience occurs one painting over, in a small panel of flickering, freehand lines etched into a background of opaque black-blue-black, trembling with energy and anticipation. Here, the title, *Black Lightning*, gives the game away, as does the faintest trace of a city skyline; the works reveal themselves to be nature paintings – parched landscapes, foreboding mountain ranges, flora and fauna – refracted through a variety of painterly techniques.

However, this versatility is never only about the pleasure of pushing paint around. Approaches are clearly aligned with (or a challenge to) their depicted environments. In *Temperature*, the intensity of searing yellow pigment is at once a faithful representation of scorched, sun-baked desert flatlands and strangely reminiscent of monochromatic, non-representational painting. *Brown Cliff*, studded with protrusions and clumps of hardened paint, not only formally resembles its subject matter but also the techniques of layering, of returning to the work and laying down additional coats, recall the gradual, geological processes that shape rock formations in nature. *Scavenger*, a large image of a hyena, is tinted deep-red, lending the composition an unearthly, alien glow which could either be an artistic conceit or the view through the lens of a night-vision camera. In this work, the normally unseen lair of a nocturnal animal is made visible and blown up to large scale, only for the wash of colour to render the creature almost indistinguishable from the background. The mottled pattern of its coat and the sharp muzzle of the nose blend softly into shadow and paint.

At times, the balance favours materiality over accuracy. The translucent glaze that floats over *White-tailed Deer*, an image of a dying faun, is evocative of humidity and heat rays, until one notices the wisp of the animal's breath, captured in a smear of white. Immediately, the location shifts, and what was once perceived as haze becomes frost, or wind, or simply a painted veneer. The reading undercuts the expectation, and brings back the sheer physicality of the medium, as a sort of return of the repressed. Yet this renewed formalism is a humbled, hesitant version of its former, hegemonic self. Rather, it is more like low modernism, the renegotiation of a past moment which now 'appears both serviceable and scattered... While the edifice of modernism has disappeared, its constituent habits remain viable.'¹

In sifting through and re-appraising these fragments, some things are held onto and others discarded. The scale of Murphy's canvases, for instance, demonstrates a conspicuous disregard for historical expectations of abstract painting; in a couple of works, amorphous, indeterminate shapes (which nevertheless refer to real things) are shrunk down to miniature proportions, while, conversely, a larger, figurative painting



Scavenger (detail) Oil on cotton 110 x 150 cm 2009



White-tailed Deer Oil on stretched paper over cotton 50 x 60 cm 2009

Temperature Oil on stretched paper over board 50 x 60 cm 2009



is magnified, the better to peer into banal and overlooked spaces. The experience of the sublime is humanised: rather than portraying an untrammelled, incomprehensible nature as a source of sensations of awe and insignificance, these images show a degraded, diminished environment, one that betrays the effects of mankind's active relationship with nature (as opposed to a typically passive, aesthetic response).² In Murphy's paintings, lone animals forage through unsettled and inhospitable landscapes, cliff faces and plateaux are ravaged by harsh climates and the seashore has been obliterated down to a final, defiant palm tree. The post-apocalyptic settings could suggest an analogy with a purposeless, pluralist view of artistic practice, yet these paintings go further than such a literal equation. They really seem to be about a crisis or a complication of ways of seeing. His views are partial, often only implied; the devastation in *Palm Tree Post-Storm* is not visible, but only alluded to by the singularity of the tree, informed by our own, received memories of the south Asian tsunami, while *Black Form*, an enigmatic composition of an unidentifiable object, wrapped in dark fabric and saturated with green light, recalls the hooded, massed figures of Abu Ghraib. In neither case is the connection made explicit – instead, the ambiguity of the paintings entices the viewer to retreat into their own store of associations.

I'm reminded, throughout the exhibition, of Werner Herzog's 1969 film *Fata Morgana* and the remarkable, repeated sequence of airplanes landing in the desert, their jet-streams melting into the mirage-like horizon. It's as if Herzog doesn't trust the veracity of the situation and, unable to distinguish between the tricks of nature and the technology of the camera, has to re-shoot and re-examine this perceptual anomaly. The reality of the captured image is seemingly distorted by the 'unreality' of natural phenomena.³ For Ciaran Murphy too there is a merging of medium and content, of painterly gesture and painted object. In *Watering Hole*, an image of a blue puddle against a grey background, the ellipse that is at the (off-) centre of the canvas fluctuates between sinking and standing out. The work continually shifts between painting-as-painting (blue shape on grey field) and painting-as-image (a picture of a void, an empty space), two mutually incompatible positions – the painting as hermetic, self-reflexive object with no allusions to external content (except, perhaps, to the dead-end of abstract painting itself) or the image as the site of an unregulated and incoherent circulation of disparate readings and responses. Or does one necessarily have to choose? It is, after all, the play between one and the other that is especially compelling, as the viewer negotiates his way between the real and the represented and, by extension, between the metaphysical and the mnemonic (or mediated). The best decision, then, may be to refuse, or to infinitely defer, a decision – to borrow a line from Herzog (on *Fata Morgana*), the painting "is not there to tell you what to think... [it] needs to be completed by the audience, which means that all feelings, thoughts and interpretations are welcome."⁴

Chris Clarke

¹ David Sweet, *A Future for Modernism? The possibilities of re-inhabiting an abandoned critical position*, (Manchester: MIRIAD / Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007), p 12. Sweet, on this renegotiation, continues: 'Amongst other things, these might be good habits of criticism, a consciousness of the challenge posed by the art of the past, seriousness, an understanding of the parameters of the medium, and an interest in visual experience.' (Perhaps an apt description of Murphy's artistic practice?)

² Again, the subject matter recalls (and revises) formalist, modern painting, where nature was more generally invoked by the unhindered free expressiveness of the painterly gesture (hence Jackson Pollock's alleged remark to Hans Hofmann, as recounted by Lee Krasner, on painting from nature: "I am nature") and the notion of the sublime tended to refer to the expansive, meditative canvases of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

³ 'The first scene of the film is made up of eight shots of eight different airplanes landing one after the other. I had the feeling that audiences who were still watching by the sixth or seventh landing would stay to the end. This opening scene sorts out the audiences; it is a kind of test.' Werner Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog*, edited by Paul Cronin (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 48

⁴ Ibid., p. 46



Scavenger Oil on cotton 120 x 150 cm 2009

Black Form Oil on stretched paper over board 36.5 x 37 cm 2009

