

MAIREAD O'HEOCHA
THE SKY WAS YELLOW AND THE SUN WAS BLUE

JUNE – JULY



MRS DALLOWAY'S FLOWERS

"I have that in me, he thought, standing by the pillarbox, which could now dissolve in tears. Why, heaven knows. Beauty of some sort probably, and the weight of the day, which, beginning with that visit to Clarissa, had exhausted him with its heat, its intensity, and the drip, drip of one impression after another down into that cellar where they stood, deep, dark, and no one would ever know. Partly for that reason, its secrecy, complete and inviolable, he had found life like an unknown garden, full of turns and corners"¹

By the presentation of a study, a watercolour sketch, framed in the anteroom of the gallery, O'hEocha's practice is laid open to deep scrutiny: the preparation, the deliberation behind the six new works which make up the exhibition *The Sky was Yellow and the Sun was Blue*. In the soft light of this dark front room, tonal washes of grey subtly shape out the composition of *Garden Pond Centre Study (2012)* – an arrangement of object and shadow, each given equal form. Wavering structural lines arch out a roof, reflected in the foreground by the inverted curve of an arrangement of garden ornaments on planks. Hints of colour suggest almost-recognisable objects, calm grey echoes of blue, green and yellow. In the background, a large board faces out, detailed with unclear markings. Whether display material or signage, with its identifiable content rendered unidentifiable, still it strongly retains its purpose as visual exposition. Together with the group of ornaments in the foreground, the artist takes them from the intentions of those who placed them as marketing strategy, perceiving within them a different set of values and appropriating them within a deeply personal impression.² They become the focal point of this study of form and colour – the hypothesis initiating the viewer into the theories that will be knowingly demonstrated throughout the exhibition.

"And the sky. It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was – ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her."³

The contrast on entering the main gallery is pupil-dilating and immediate. The most startling comparison, naturally, is the finished painting *Garden Pond Centre 2*. Thick layers of oil, applied wet on wet onto panel (typical of O'hEocha's past work and continued in all the paintings here) depict the same scene in very different tones. The sky is arched by broad brushstrokes of beige and cream with streaks of yellow, blue and red peeping through. The inverse of this rainbow plastic roof is again the staged area, shifted off-centre at the front, coloured like a slice of melon, citrus greens around the edge and honeydew on top. The ornaments are coaxed from differing sizes and directions of brushstrokes, and are an assortment of fruity colours. Shadows of yellow, mauve and grey fall across the sand-coloured ground, filling the space between the contained areas of intense colour and focused arrangements. The curve of depth around pots is delineated by gradations of blue, red and green; on a larger scale the depth of the whole space is created through blocks of colour changing into the distance down the right hand side. Colour shapes the direction of the gaze around the composition; the palette seems to dictate form. Under the influence of new developments in colour

theory, O'hEocha plays with the distortions possible as the brain tries to catch up with the eye in comprehension of form, colour and movement. The artist draws on neurobiologist Semir Zeki's recent findings of distinct pathways in the brain differentiating between colour and form, which strongly suggest a biological explanation for an emotional response of confusion, or an even more curious natural acceptance of 'miscoloured' objects.⁴ In this painting, shadows may be lipstick pink and plants rise like hallucinogenic smoke from their pots. Details are highlighted with colour, but yet their representation is left unclear, blanked by strong brushstrokes. Within the distorting bubble of the plastic-skied garden centre, anything seems possible, or, at least, acceptable.

"Did they know, she asked, that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden? Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and the sky. Just a few fairy lamps, Clarissa had said, in the back garden! But she was a magician!"⁵

In *Preformed Ponds and Water Barrel, Co. Dublin (2012)* the distortion is manifested in the abstract geometric forms that, with the assistance of the prosaic title, resolve themselves into molded plastic pond bases, displayed sideways. O'hEocha exploits their unnatural cubist shapes, with internal shadows rendered in sticky strokes of blue, green, brown and purple. The empty architectural space surrounding them recalls metaphysical painting, although the application of paint is itself much more impassioned here, particularly in the frantically swirling clouds beyond the confines of the garden centre wall. *Freezing Fountain, Lusk, Co. Dublin (2012)* employs the same emotional brush, from the thickly-applied clouds to the exuberant wisps of pastel that constitute the frozen water in the fountain. The fountain epitomises the tension explored in the artist's choice of subject matter throughout: the manmade direction of nature, forcing the water to behave in a certain way, is confounded by the very essence of nature itself – resisting control, suspended freezing in cold temperatures. The garden centre as subject is then a natural progression from her previous works with their suburban roadside settings. This is new ground, but it similarly shows the impact of human intervention, while all human presence is removed. A Hopper landscape, evocatively devoid of its characters.

"...her five sons; and what was the other thing – plants, hydrangeas, syringas, very very rare hibiscus lilies that never grow north of the Suez Canal, but she, with one gardener in a suburb near Manchester, had beds of them, positively beds! Now all that Clarissa had escaped, unmaternal as she was."⁶

The titles of these works reinforce their domestic Irishness: the mundane locations situate them in the definitively un-exotic; bluntly confronting the falsity of the garden centre's constructed naturalness. In that sense, the most ridiculous of these is *Gorilla Ornament, Arboretum, Co. Carlow*. Through vivid colour, the proud stance of the gorilla is shown to be laughably out of place. Further, it is presented as an object to be bought, to be transferred from this market place and repositioned equally innocuously into the customer's own garden. As the artist deliberates over the compositions, each object is potentially removed from its



Mairead O'hEocha Gorilla Ornament, Arboretum, Co. Carlow Oil on board 38 x 53 cm 2012



Mairead O'hEocha *Plant and Frogs* Oil on board 46 x 55 cm 2012

original situation. This objectification of nature, transformed into commodity, sweeps across the garden centres: the tonal unity between all of the paintings reflecting the sameness of their motives. The animal ornaments in *Plant and Frogs* (2012) are more commonplace as garden ornaments, and at least vaguely more indigenous to a European garden setting, but the focus is again on the hyper-reality of their existence as objects to be placed within nature, rather than as an organic part of it. The colourfully fragmented plant at the centre of this composition shows the desirability and seductiveness of the exotic in any form: its gaudy beauty exposed, with its pink-tinged leaves splaying open, while its roots lie in a dark plastic tub.

“She had read a wonderful play about a man who scratched on the wall of his cell, and she had felt that was true of life – one scratched on the wall. Despairing of human relationships (people were so difficult), she often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her.”⁷

The upper portion of *Plant and Frogs* suggests the feathery forms of trees, growing beyond the plastic covering of the greenhouse setting. Several of the paintings share this suggestion of nature blooming wild, while an alternative reality is carefully cultivated within. The world beyond seems to lead out from *Bird Feeders and Saplings, Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow* (2012). Composed with the same pride as elegantly sweeping surveys of demesnes in the 18th century, columns of trees and bird feeders flank an archway framing green fields and distant blue hills. Firework branches spurt gleefully up from neat box bases, and the sky is once again whipped up in a rebellious frenzy of clouds. This sense of looseness belies the overall deliberation: every aspect of composition from form, to brush-stroked movement and colour has a planned balance. The garden centre endeavours to invite this imitation of the arrangements they have made. Yet, by reimagining the management’s visual merchandising, the artist casts a light upon the tensions teeming below the surface: uncovering the hidden narratives of those who want to buy into the illusion.

Mai Blount

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Books, 1996 (1925)) p. 167

² The artist took photographs of the locations used for this series of paintings, but relied more heavily on her preparatory sketches, finding the sketches “less misleading than the photographs, which never showed the impression [she] had at the time” – In conversation with the artist, May 2012

³ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 204

⁴ Most clear in outlining this aspect of neuroaestheticism is his paper with Ludovica Marini: “Three cortical stages of colour processing in the human brain” in *Brain* (1998), 121, pp. 1669-1685. Taking Land’s retinex theory of colour vision as a starting point, he studied reactions to Fauvist works, where recognisable objects are ‘abnormally coloured’ rather than focusing on abstract compositions (i.e. Mondrian) as Land did. His findings reaffirm ideas conjectured by Matisse about the instinctive, emotionally evocative response to colour, via Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*. This in turn brings distorted perceptions neatly back to the psychedelic origins of the exhibition’s title, derived from the Grateful Dead track *Scarlet Begonias*: “Yellow is a light which has been dampened by darkness. Blue is a darkness weakened by light.”

J.W. Goethe (transl. C. L. Eastlake), *Theory of Colours* (Mineola New York: Dover Publications, 2006 (1810)) p. 206

⁵ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 209-210

⁶ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 209

⁷ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 211



