

mother's annual 2016

Mairead O'hEocha *Blackbirds in the Garden of Prisms*

September - October

HyperNormalisation is a recent film by the British documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis. Utilising extensive BBC archival footage, it proposes that the world as we now experience it constitutes a fake reality, constructed and perpetuated by the corporate and political structures in power. The film presents a complex, multi-faceted explanatory framework that traces connections across time and space. It suggests that in contemporary society nothing is what it seems to be; we can no longer differentiate the truth from fictionalised accounts; we are spun stories and continually distracted and diverged from having any grasp on a stable sense of reality. Contemporary life has effectively become a hall of mirrors, so the argument goes.

Similarly collapsing time and re-evaluating empirical narrative, *HyperNormalisation* was released at the midway point of *Blackbirds in the Garden of Prisms*, the third solo exhibition by Mairead O'hEocha at mother's tankstation limited. In contrast to the eclectic content of the film, *Blackbirds in the Garden of Prisms* consists of seven paintings of a single subject matter – flowers – that form a visually cohesive body of work. This exhibition marks the most recent step in a discernible movement inwards in O'hEocha's work; a retreat from the defined enclosures of garden centres, the environs of her commute through semi-rural/urban Ireland, and the walks from home to studio, now to the sheltered interiors of table-top displays. But in contrast, with this increased shearing of external contextualization, this body of work arguably reaches beyond itself more than any body of work before. It functions not only as an enclosed system whereby we can consider each work in terms of its relationship to the others, and also as part of O'hEocha's existing oeuvre, but also more readily and explicitly in relation to other visual histories and counterparts.

This exhibition constitutes the outcome of a refined and circumscribed set of decisions, a narrowing of focus and a deliberate directing of attention by the artist. But from this seemingly limited perspective one can cast lines out in various directions, across time and through (the) space, that offer myriad frameworks for consideration. The paintings are nodes in a network of inputs and outputs, influences and associations, and they form a latticed collection of visual stimuli with multiple points of entry and departure.

One such point of entry is *Tulips Reinagle, large* (all works 2016). Stalks of various lengths and colours extend in various curvatures from the base of the image and the oval petals of seven tulips, largely Titanium White but also striped in yellow, burgundy, pistachio, black and blue, open out on a monochromatic background of charcoal grey brushstrokes. For anyone unversed in the scientific nomenclature of flowers, the title here could be assumed to refer to the botanical term of this particular strain of tulip, named for the orchestrator of its breeding. *Tulips Reinagle, large* is in fact a partial reproduction (the composition remains but O'hEocha omits – or obscures – the arboreal landscape and cloudy sky of the original's background) of a painting made by the accomplished late eighteenth century Hungarian/Scottish painter Philip Reinagle, date unknown, that survives only through a coloured engraving of it published in 1798.

Vallayer-Coster Rose similarly constitutes more than another iteration of the subject matter at hand. It is unmistakably based upon a pre-existing painting by another late eighteenth century painter, in this case the French artist Anne Vallayer-Coster. Again, O'hEocha is largely faithful to the compositional coordinates of the original, although she exercises her particular loosely realist style in lieu of the mimetic precision that Vallayer-Coster exercised throughout her successful career.ⁱ

As well as relating to former flower painters, this engagement with extant works positions O'hEocha within the territory of another significant set of antecedents in twentieth century art. In the 1980s, when postmodernist thinking – which rejected grand theories, considered the fragmented nature of contemporary existence and queried the notion of "art" itself – was rife throughout cultural discourse, a number of artists made work that engaged with issues of originality, authenticity and our relationship to images in a rapidly globalizing, consumer-oriented world, often captured by the designation of "appropriation art".ⁱⁱ

A pertinent reference here is the American artist (Elaine) Sturtevant, who in the 1950s and 60s – prefiguring the appropriation art that would flourish in the 1980s – became known (and eventually

acclaimed) as a persistent replicator of other artists' work.ⁱⁱⁱ Sturtevant preferred the term "repetition", and always veered slightly from producing an exact replica, forging alternative re-engagements, and re-examining the products and structures of contemporaneous image making, circulation and reception, and art history itself.

O'hEocha's recent body of work similarly makes use of pre-existing images; it bears the hallmarks of a particular genre, a historical time period and canonical predilections, yet resists simplistic categorisation as such. The imagery is familiar but it chimes with the contents of a collective visual memory rather than merely copies that which already exists. This familiarity breeds an inviting tension in the work between that which we know and that which we (suspect) we do not, which pushes us tentatively into the nebulous arena of that which we are unaware we don't know, impelling varied levels of interaction.

The conceptual undercurrents and consequences of Sturtevant and O'hEocha's work both feed into considerations around how we engage with contemporary visual culture and how we make sense of and situate an artist's output within this. The Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges' short story, *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, published in 1939, offers applicable insight here. In the story, a twentieth century fictional writer, Menard, takes upon himself the task of translating Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Menard ends up literally re-writing the original word for word. It is suggested, however, that Menard's twentieth century rewriting is infinitely richer than the original, as it can now be considered in the context of the various cultural references that have occurred since the original was produced. Beyond this, with Sturtevant and now O'hEocha, there is deliberate mismatching with the source material so that the relationship between the two becomes even more mired, and the complexity of these newer versions more elaborate.

In addition to these more cerebral concerns, to (re)produce with paint also has its own implications. When we look at a painting we encounter something inherently tangible, made manifest from the vision (as eyes and mind) of another. O'hEocha does not work directly from the paintings she paints, nor from staged compositions. Most of the imagery is taken from reference books and screen grabs: images of images, cut up and re-coalesced. Paintings are the result of protracted action and attention and the painter works *with* the paint, necessarily ceding a certain amount of control, such that a painting is invariably wedded to, and evidences the marks of, its human making, constituting a unique entity in the world. *Blackbirds in the Garden of Prisms* presents a capsule of these entities to consider, to look within and spring forth, back and out from. It provides a fulcrum around which various ideas and perspectives can pivot.

February Ivy Burial and *Plant Dressage with escaped Cobra* find the most direct kinship with the still lifes of the Dutch and Flemish masters of the 17th century. Both are dominated by an absorbent ebony background, diverging from the other works and from the tonal homogeneity of silvery pastel palettes we have become acquainted with in O'hEocha's earlier works. The morbidity, or *vanitas*, associated with this era of the genre is particularly palpable in *February Ivy Burial*. A black and maroon set scene exudes the macabre nature of the still life as *nature morte*. The inevitability of death and decay implicit in life seeps out from the scratchier grey-on-black marks of the gnarly barren branch at its centre, and the broken stems of wilting flowers collapsed over the shallow bowl. The clue is in the title. One can envision the drapes, the coffin, the sombre gaits, the grave despair.

Plant Dressage with escaped Cobra, on the other hand, depicts an exuberant panoply, a fecund wildness counter to this lifelessness and the manicured flowers of *Tulips Reinagle, large* alongside it, evoking the symbolic role flowers came to play when painters were freed from the shackles of religious and royal mandates. A black, vaguely patterned bowl is filled with a luscious assortment of blooming flowers and bursting tendrils; crimson florets and curling, creature-like cyan petals pierce the inky-black background, almost seething with a sinister venomousness like that of the cobra in the title, which is perhaps suggested by the red-eyed, tear shaped form on the right, but is not made explicit.

Ring Flash Bouquet is hued by a plane of azure blue on which slim strokes and decisive squiggles form the harlequin flowers of the rendered bouquet. It too depicts a teeming assortment of flowers in a similarly shaped, patterned vessel. *Ring Flash Bouquet*, however, is the only painting in which a visible scene is depicted on the flowers' container, acting as a bridge to another set of paintings O'hEocha has produced during her two-year engagement with this subject matter, in which all of the receptacles presented images of combat. This is a feature typical of ancient Chinese or Greek vases, where the vase is as much a conduit for history as a container for display, situating O'hEocha's work within yet another lineage.

Ring Flash Bouquet is the first artwork encountered in the exhibition, but its closest visual counterpart is arguably *Omnivorousaur*, the final painting in the sequence of works, closing the loop, digesting and regurgitating elements within the exhibition in the way the body of work does as a whole through its absorption and assimilation – or eating as is alluded to in this title – of art history. In each, the patterning and choice of colour reminds of the Fauvist inclinations apparent in previous works, such as *Gorilla Ornament, Arboretum, Co. Carlow* (2012), manifesting the particular inflections of O'hEocha's stylistic language. Blue-tinged planes offset the litany of colours deployed by the artist; in the former, daubed dots of paint cluster; in the latter, bigger blocks of colour sit side-by-side, prismatically tinting the white assumed-to-be lilies. Dimensionality and texture is minimal in both, but the materiality of the paint and deftness of its skilled manipulation is evident in the larger flower blossoms, where the energy of O'hEocha's masterful execution of wet-on-wet, oil on board is especially palpable.

Mirror Lilies exudes the predominance of blue tones of some of the other works, all of which are cohered by O'hEocha's use of a palette of only five colours throughout the exhibition, but here a more capricious array of brushstrokes and textured application combine to form the varicoloured, more impressionistic lilies of the title. The mirror reflects the earthy hues and jumble of forms and colours that fill the unseen surroundings of the vase-kept flowers.

Mirror Lilies finds its closest counterpart in *Artichoke and Incense*, forming the final pair in one method of ordering the works; the last piece of one puzzle. Both seem set in a similar domestic interior with a vase of flowers placed in front of a coloured background – a mirror and a painting respectively, both reflections of the world – such that the flower forms meld with the shapes and shades therein and the materiality of the paint gains most prominence. These constitute the only two instances of a more explicit abstraction throughout the exhibition, tying the works to another significant period of art history and image production. The looser style of painting here punctuates the more depictive nature of the other works that more readily align themselves with the characteristics of a definable genre. But with this comes a more potent sense of the imbrication of the visual histories and influences that we suspect has – in fact, must have – borne the work in the first place, and that we attempt to fathom in its encounter.

A welcome and generative puzzlement emerges from *Blackbirds in the Garden of Prisms*, despite the seeming straightforwardness of the content therein. We are kept perpetually at the brink of correlating sufficiently the concomitant yet juxtaposing sense of freshness and familiarity that permeates the work. This discordance arises also from the fact that there are no blackbirds, nor gardens, nor prisms in the paintings that are on view. The title then becomes more of a proposition: what of a blackbird – the singular noun that severed in two becomes a catch-all term – by nature devoid of colour in a place filled with the scattering of multi-coloured light?

An exhibition text begins with an excerpt from American poet Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird". The poem comprises thirteen stanzas that each consider the place or perspective of a blackbird; across a variety of scenes, Stevens always goes back to the blackbird; it acts as a central node in a network of potential interpretations. Here too, the idea of the blackbird offers a conceptual proxy in which to take root, adopt a stance, to make sense of it all and perceive the underlying, often-unseen, manifold elements of that which we perpetually encounter, just like the prism reveals the constituents of the light that abundantly surrounds us.

As Adam Curtis asserts in *HyperNormalisation*, the world today often feels increasingly ambivalent and disordered. But within and despite this, Mairead O'hEocha has hunkered down and narrowed her focus to a more precise set of parameters to create a framework of her own; something tangible and specific to work from and work with; that delves into the past and lets us consider the future in an uncertain present. Let us take hold of this, find a way out of the hall of mirrors and perhaps – even if only temporarily – inhabit the "garden of prisms" instead.

Sara O'Brien

ⁱ Despite the gender-based, prohibitive conventions of her era, which led her to confine her talents to painting within the "lowest" genre of painting, the still life, Anne Vallayer-Coster achieved significant success and acclaim as a talented painter, reflected at the time through her patronage by Marie Antoinette and more recently by a retrospective of her work at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2002.

ⁱⁱ Sherrie Levine's exhibition in 1981, *After Walker Evans*, in which she presented re-photographed photographs by the early twentieth century photographer Walker Evans as her own work, is an archetypal example of such "appropriation art".

ⁱⁱⁱ Especially germane to this context would be Sturtevant's recreation of Andy Warhol's "Flowers" series, which appeared in her first solo exhibition at Bianchini Gallery, New York, in 1965.