

Tom Lordan, Blurred Boundaries, *Totally Dublin*, Issue #198, December 2021

ARTSDESK: FROM HERE TO THERE – BLURRED BOUNDARIES



Three artists used the Douglas Hyde Gallery as a studio, in which to consider, build and experiment with ideas, leading to new work which is now on display.

From Here to There involves three artists – David Lunney, Áine McBride, and Katie Watchorn – displaying their work in the final phase of the Douglas Hyde Gallery's intriguing exhibition project. For weeks, these three were working in the gallery, preparing for the show whilst in full view of the public. They were sawing, building, fixing, decorating etc. as passers-by wandered around and watched them from a distance.

According to the curator Georgina Jackson, the lockdown inspired her to try to think of the gallery in a different light. "I thought about this space as a resource for artists, how The Douglas Hyde could be used as a space to think, experiment and make work. This is against the backdrop of the increasing difficulty in getting studio space these days and the exorbitant cost of living in Dublin." But Jackson also had the urge to de-mystify "how art is made. Art is not made in a turret in a far off land; art-making is labour, it's a process of thinking, experimenting, and sometimes failing. I always think about how lucky I am to get invited into artists' studios and get to see the magic that happens there."

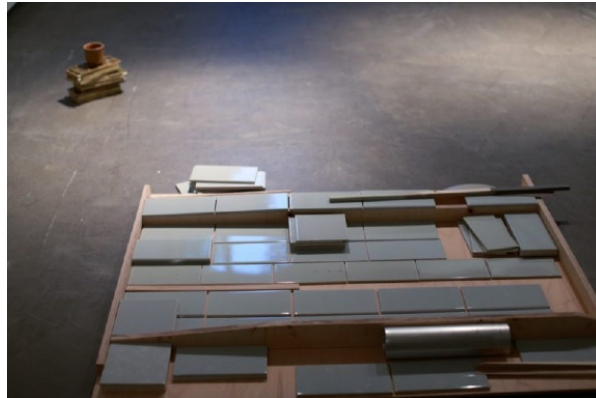
I walked through the gallery one Saturday when Lunney and McBride (I think) were there, and while I found the freedom to watch them at work compelling, I wasn't really thinking about this phase of development when I visited the show later on. My indifference to this feature of the project slowly and fascinatingly dispersed.

The effect is subtle but pervasive. The collection is permeated with a sense of playful contingency, inasmuch as what is, is not the last word on itself, but rather a momentary configuration. Under other circumstances, this sense of playful contingency may come across as thoughtless, but in *From Here to There*, the unfinished quality has a properly aesthetic and conceptual function. The exhibition space feels alive, indeterminate, and in a perpetual state of fluidity.

The artists and curatorial team clearly enjoyed the process of collaboration, as one of the immediate successes of the show is the productiveness of the relationship between the placement of the works and the way we are directed to experience them. Rather than stay in the central area, which is spacious and bright with tall ceilings, we follow the path of the handrails to our right, under the walkway, where Áine McBride and Katie Watchorn's artworks are lurking in an almost subterranean twilight.

McBride's sculptural works, *state of play (driving around late at night to think)*, are a pair of low timber constructions that are vividly illuminated by strong spotlights.

At first glance these rectangular palettes seem neatly arranged. One features blue tiles and the other black, and due to the overhead illumination, the light reflects off a dozen shiny surfaces in various ways, stimulating and arresting the eye.



As your vision settles and you take in the scene more fully, you begin to notice a haphazard quality to the constituent elements. The planes of the timber are fixed at strange angles, some parts are painted, the tiles are asymmetric and sit in loose piles, and pieces of aluminum tubing are scattered throughout the constructions. Next to the blue sculpture there is a single, isolated stack of tiles, with a coffee cup resting on top.

Was this left behind by a member of the staff? Looking more closely I noted more coffee cups, the same style and shape as the one sitting on the stack of tiles; one on the steps, another near the window. The artworks promote an awareness of the space in which they are situated, and what previously seemed part of the background suddenly jumps out. There's a coat stand beside the sculptures, but it is too close to understand why anybody would put it there for the staff to use, which means, of course, that it wasn't put there for that reason. Three identical blazers are hanging from it – they look old, but they also look like they have never been worn. It's as though something that we associate with artworks – the cohesiveness that makes us aware we are not looking at a simple, random object, and which reflects the intentionality of the agent who produced it – has spilled out into the environment, making the bare walls and clutter of the room vibrate and transform.



The liminal strangeness that this strategy produces, the slippery sense of realities in translation, is extended by Katie Watchorn's sculptures. While I enjoyed all of her work, *Old Weekday* is the most memorable, and is an excellent companion to McBride's *state of play*, not least because it is also a series involving two elements; a pair of sculptures contained in one installation. However, while the effect produced by Watchorn is on a continuum with McBride, Watchorn offers a counterpoint to the latter's tactic of infecting the environment with an aesthetic complexity. Watchorn's sculptures are integrated into their surroundings, appearing almost as though they had a functional use in the design of the space. This muted aesthetic, however, belies Watchorn's passion for aberrant materials, and when this aberrancy is acknowledged, it is guaranteed to produce another moment of environmental disquiet in the spectator.

Both sculptures in *Old Weekday* are composites: a slim metal bar runs along the wall and is fitted using clamps, on which several large white panels hang horizontally. These panels are made, fantastically, from blended beef fat. The colour, texture and density of the beef fat panels is reminiscent of both candle wax and thick, industrial plastic. Every panel is moulded according to the same template, as though processed by a

machine. The linear indentations that give the panels their shape further suggest an automated method of production, which in turn creates a vivid contrast with the organic nature of the material. I was immediately reminded of Matthew Barney's vaseline and petroleum jelly sculptures, insofar as those substances are also traditionally associated with their aqueous state, and their use in 'hard' sculptures is similarly uncanny.

McBride and Watchorn have a great dynamic. However, the strength of the show is that, as one enters into the central space, the new addition fits seamlessly with what has gone before. David Lunney has produced what is perhaps the most visually compelling work in the show. His canvasses involve intricate and colourful patterns that are a mixture of acrylic marker, watercolour paint, and colouring pencil. His designs are like Celtic psychedelia, contained by elaborate picture frames. The first several artworks foreground a specific figure, repeating the shape in each instance. This shape finds its origin in Lunney's "portable sculptural frame," titled *Twinkler*, which pairs with Lunney's phone to create a kind of contemporary magic lantern, inasmuch as the digital images that Lunney captures – and which form the basis of his artworks – are heavily mediated and decorated by the sculptural frame. The centrepiece of Lunney's work is *Roundel*, a large mural (3m x 3m) using vinyl matt paint, which incorporates one of Lunney's most distinctive canvases, *Ancient Camera at the Book of Kells Experience*.

McBride and Watchorn's dynamic, to my mind, is dialectical: one aestheticises the environment while the other environmentalises her artworks. Lunney's role in the conversation, if I can put it like that, may not be so direct, but nonetheless his artworks are clearly sensitive to the environment, insofar as the images he produces find their origin in particular landscapes, and the traces of these forests and mountain ranges are scattered throughout the works.

By deprioritising the distinction between its groundwork and the subsequent show, *From Here To There* transforms the way we think of the exhibition as a temporally fixed event. If the boundary between art that is in the making and art that is ready for public viewing is blurred, the assumption that artworks must be 'finished' also comes into question. Excitingly, this change in attitude seems to have been felt by the artists themselves. The gallery space seems to be an ongoing catalyst for the work, as their artworks continuously draw our attention to the physical space they originate in and inhabit. In fact, the never-ending attentiveness that seems to describe the relationship of these artists to their space has an obsessive quality. None of these artists are passive, contemplative consumers of their space. Rather, they are like the protagonists of Witold Gombrowicz's novels: endlessly searching for meaning and symbolic potential in their inanimate surroundings.

From Here to There runs at the Douglas Hyde Gallery until Saturday February 5 with the exhibition installation altering over time.

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Photo: Senija Topcic