

mother's annual 2018

### **Mairead O'hEocha *Iris*es in the Well**

September – October

A quick look through my hard drive, now magically reduplicated and saved to the cloud, tells me I first wrote about the paintings of Mairead O'hEocha seven years ago. I can't remember much else about that time; now, it seems such a long time ago that I might have been someone else. The exhibition I wrote about was called 'The Sky was Yellow and the Sun was Blue', and ran at mother's tankstation in Dublin over the summer of 2012. Amongst other things, the paintings featured the gardening centres forever inseparable from childhood Sundays when my mother and other female relatives – clueless as to what to do with us – would bring my sister and I to meander around hardy shrubs and bi-annuals. Still, rather than the familiarity of the work's content, it was O'hEocha's painting that really held me. Her paintings had the ability to appear effortless, while also bringing me to wonder how such skill can ever be effortless.

Much has changed since 2012, but O'hEocha's ability to provoke the kind of aforementioned bewilderment has remained constant. For this most recent occasion of writing about her work, I visited mother's tankstation's London gallery one wet morning in early October, my birthday, tramping through the rain without an umbrella. Because GPS does not appear to understand viaducts – or, more likely, I do not understand GPS's understanding of them – I became lost and arrived to the gallery sodden and fairly chilled. This time, I understood the visit as a brief window to not worry about the future, and to remind myself that art – as another, possibly more effective means of transmission – has the ability to offer something when nothing else can. Usually I do not visit exhibitions with such high hopes: 'Iris

es in the Well', the artist's fourth exhibition with the gallery, contains just seven paintings. But just as anticipated, all of them had appeared perfectly come to life. (Sentence needs clarification) O'hEocha's characteristic use of paint – at once exacting and full of movement – still confounds me. Hyperactive, contrasting colours – flashes of magenta, lime green, turquoise and minty blue – take on a naturalness, never seeming showy, faddish or ostentatious, but completely right. Like nothing else would do. I am hit again by the unlikely existence of this work.

Six paintings hung around the gallery's three innermost walls, with another painting to the right of the gallery desk. On first glance, there did not appear to be one single unifying subject matter here, unlike, for example, the startling examination of the still life genre in 'Blackbirds in Garden of Prisms', her 2016 exhibition at mother's tankstation, Dublin. One painting, *Still Life with Skull, Coral and Flowers*, clearly carries through this interest, but elsewhere there are landscapes and paintings detailing urban scenes of Dublin, O'hEocha's home city. Nonetheless, I think each painting in 'Iris

es in the Well' can be understood as still life of a kind. If human figures do appear in her paintings – for example in the 2011 painting *Thinking Statue*, and here, in *Oliver Goldsmith statue at College Green with Snow*, it seems that they are chosen due to their flagrant lifelessness. Artificial, human constructions of life, they appear like attempts to ward off the passing of time. O'hEocha's paintings work to create life through paint itself, while limiting devices are simultaneously put in place to make this all the more difficult. As this is pulled off, it makes these paintings even more miraculous. Despite these parameters, life bristles forth on the level of brushstrokes and colour within a tight depth of field.

Given that some of the paintings here show recognisable Dublin sites covered by a thick blanket of snow, I deduce that these must have been painted since the start of March 2018. At the start of that month, when winter is typically making its retreat, Ireland came to a standstill as ice-cold air from the East encountered Atlantic Storm Emma on its way up from Portugal. The result was an unprecedented amount of snow – an extreme weather event, or so it was called. Over the course of these few strange days, the country simply stopped. Flummoxed radio hosts – because cabin fever meant we all listened to the radio then – urged us to stay indoors, driving was strongly discouraged, while trains and planes went, nowhere. On the day the storm actually hit, I was set to move to Berlin and had to stay put until the following week; a less fortunate friend grounded in Dublin was put up by his airline in a hotel at the Red Cow roundabout for four claustrophobic days; later, he compared his experience to being on a particularly bleak cruise ship. During

this time, presumably O'hEocha left her house to observe a deserted city pared back to bare bones. No traffic, no people: the painter knows colours crackle and come to life when set only against a blanket of white.

Snow is often associated with renewal and rebirth. Bringing one cycle to an end, snow melts to reveal green shoots, and winter is succeeded by spring. Still, such beauty comes with a *but*. Leaving the apocalyptic backbeat to one side for now – something that implies extreme weather events will come to hold less novelty in the future – another way of looking at this snowfall is simply as a deadening effect on the city. Rather than energising our perception of it, it restricts human life entirely. *Oliver Goldsmith statue at College Green with Snow*, for example, places us on Dublin's College Green, just outside the railings of what was originally Ireland's Parliament House. Snow is still falling, and no people are present save for the writer's likeness, which appears full of movement, nearly levitating, just inside the railings. Hues of heavy softened purples and navy are interspersed with jolts of ultramarine and turquoise. Here, depth of field is paper-thin, meaning the snow looks as though smeared across another surface, just in from this one: a lens, a car window, perhaps, but something that further divvies up the already shallow picture plane. *Fire Restaurant in the Snow*, follows a similar track, making the restaurant's idiosyncratic architectural forms even stranger through the addition of a flat driveway of snow. Pushed closest to us, hyperactive snow falls, swirls and rushes as though trapped on a petri dish. Snow, thought in real terms, is a way of constraining life; the temperature drops to such a degree, and things die. In this, it presents an opportunity for O'hEocha to render life, *in painting*, all the more unforeseen. But the rub is, her paintings always exceed such limiting devices.

This idea of deadening, of restriction, and the unpredictability of this state, is something that has been a consistent feature of O'hEocha's work. Her longstanding exploration of the traditional *nature morte* or still life genre can be seen as both another means of limitation, and as a means of grappling with the history of painting itself. Here, *Still Life with Skull, Coral and Flowers*, shows us a complex still life arrangement: a configuration of coral takes central stage, sitting atop a small plinth on a table; a vase of flowers are in the background, while in the left foreground a skull looks out from inside a small transparent receptacle, probably made of glass. Just behind it, more flowers, with what looks like another painting, resting at a diagonal. Each node suggests a particular point of decomposition – from life to death. With the inclusion of another painted surface, though, we are brought back to the finitude of art. The still life genre comes with a shelf life too, and so with it, another limiting device, another thing to surpass in putting life back in. Similarly, in *Cabinet of Herons, Natural History Museum*, the birds are painted head-on, coming to resemble a painting within a painting: one component in a salon-style hanging of paintings, even, a sense further compounded by the clear borders of the enclosing cabinet. They have moved out from the medicinal-display cases actually characteristic of the museum, to the realm of art. As with the snow, this is a curious meeting point, where life needs to be wrested from non-life, if not exactly death.

*Railings and Graffiti at Stephen's Green, Night*, shows us a close-up segment of the much-loved park's perimeters at night. Similar in tone to *Still Life with Skull, Coral and Flowers*, here the palette is dark but full of contrast: in the background, night is a richest black—approaching-purple, while vines slip around the metal railings in licks of turquoise and teal. Such is the verve of O'hEocha's handling of colour, the railings' individual vertices appear almost unstable – as though just on the point of pulling away from each other, dispersing and receding into darkness. With this pregnant sense of movement, we are again drawn to its flatness, which is at once its artificiality and its possibility for coherence. Thought again, indeed, this flatness is precisely what allows its unity, what allows the individual elements to speak to one another – through internal movement – and so to us. And so another question I am left thinking again about O'hEocha's work, is, at what point does a painting *come to life*? What exact process allows paintings like these to become something other than themselves – as another, possibly more effective means of transmission, with the ability to offer something when nothing else can?

The art historian and curator Catherine Grenier has written that the image, 'takes its meaning not from its origin – what we know about it – but from the matter that constitutes it, from the making evident, by means of paint, of its mystery'.<sup>i</sup> But often and erroneously, the phrase 'to paint a picture' is in fact used to describe the necessity of communicating something fully. This, we are told, allows the other party an emotional

grasp or foothold on the thing we are describing. We invite them to imagine the world of this picture, what it looks like but also what it feels to exist within it. Rather than being a purely representational device, this picture-painting needs to summon something that can *affect*, inspiring imagination; speculation, even. This is not what O'hEocha's work does. The invitation is open, but much to our benefit, the imaginative jump stays insurmountable. What they offer, instead, is the impossible illusion of simply arising – life and abundance from non-life, movement from stasis, and something from the familiar, close-to-nothing. Things happen, change is possible, and our perception can be changed too.

I am reminded of the famous quote from Susan Sontag: "An idea which is a distortion may have a greater intellectual thrust than the truth; it may serve the needs of the spirit, which vary. The truth is balance, but the opposite of truth, which is unbalance, may not be a lie".<sup>ii</sup> What Sontag is driving at, I think, is that the sensuousness of art can present its own kind of truth. A lie, in her estimation, is something disingenuous; but what unbalance can do is parrot the lie's method, while circumnavigating its dishonesty. A distorted idea can produce symmetry and balance, while the business of forming that idea can animate it to another kind of life. In effect, art produces wonky variants of truth, its imbalance fallible, and so perfectly human. This is why I look to it, at any case: to grasp the non-reproducibility and impermanence that always besets any working definition of truth. Art's truth cannot be replicated: it is not in the business of scientific experiments. Such as it is with the work of O'hEocha: characterised by longstanding conjunctions of distortion and truth, life and death, and still these paintings always find balance.

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<sup>i</sup> Catherine Grenier, 'Reconquering the World: 100 Years Ago', in *Peter Doig* (London: Phaidon, 2007), pp. 106-7

<sup>ii</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Simone Weil', *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 50.