

## Seeing is Believing

These aren't photos-honest. These uncannily detailed pictures show the lengths to which some contemporary Irish Painters now go to mimic the still-life techniques of the Old Masters. It's a kind of revolutionary act, says Crisitn Leach Hughes

In his lecture at Derry's Guildhall last month, the artist Grayson Perry spoke about the idea of novelty in contemporary art and how the work that gets the most attention is always described as cutting edge and Avant garde. "The artists are radical, the shows are game changing .... We are forever being told a new paradigm is being set " he said

Yet viewers and makers of contemporary art are frequently confronted by the feeling that they've seen it all before. And if the most revolutionary act is not only always hailed as the best but also absorbed into the establishment, none of it can remain rebellious for long. Despite that, newness is a requirement, one that stymies and inspires contemporary artists and occasionally leads them astray

A healthy suspicion of revolution and novelty has led some contemporary artists back to old mediums and skills. Perry's own rebellion was, he explained "a milder rebellion because pottery was seen as something earnest. (It was a) craft" What once made the 2003 Turner Prize winner cutting edge (he is now part of the establishment) was not just that he threw pottery at the contemporary world, but that he did so, mostly, whilst dressed as his female alter ego, Claire

In an environment where any style and medium goes, it's easy to see why the idea that seems most radical to a contemporary artist is to return to the hard won, labour intensive, ability challenging skills and styles of the past.

Into this 21<sup>st</sup> Century art world steps the Irish realist painter Comhgall Casey, whose current show at Solomon Fine Art features classic kids' toys, flowers, jugs, fruit and other food stuffs, all portrayed with great skill in oil on canvas. It's the stuff of traditional still life painting.

One of the challenges for the realist painter is to wow viewers with life-like images. The best not only find subjects that speak to them, but add layers of meaning through symbolism and composition. Sometimes unexciting subjects can make for exciting paintings. Casey's work could hardly be described as exciting, but it has palpable integrity. It is either terribly old fashioned or radically quaint, but nothing if not sincere.

Particular care and attention have gone into the specially designed frames used in this show. The paintings look great on the wall. This tells you two things: that Casey is a consummate craftsman, and that his work is not so attention grabbing you forget the specially designed frames. Yet Casey is not operating in a vacuum-other Irish painters of his generation are also mining the realist, still life tradition, some of them with ore cutting edge potential.

Casey was born in Letterkenny in 1976; Geraldine O'Neil in Dublin in 1971. O'Neil incorporates her children's toys and drawings into still life compositions. Mouse Trap (2010) features a Dora explorer helium balloon, floating above immaculately rendered raw poultry, fish, fruit and vegetables. Among the folds of shiny, draped fabric lies the titular rodent caught in the bottom right hand corner.

Cezanne-like apples surround a bowl containing a raw heart in her painting Wounded Heart (2012). Nestled among the drapery and apples is an American Indian figure on a horse, poised to shoot the piece of meat. Like the Old Master still life painters, O'Neil wears her symbolism on her sleeve. Yet there is something witty, clever and self-referential going on in her rich arrangements, something more than just good painting.

By contrast, there's a deliberate dullness to Casey's works, a grey, almost sepia tone that gives his paintings a muted sophisticated. There is nothing showy and loud here. Even his yellow, red and grey Lego 8845 Model 2 painting has the air of a collector's classic (which it is), a family heirloom, almost an antique.

These days, the act of painting anything realistically is almost political. It says the artist cares about traditional skills and values the laborious, craft element of the job. It also bestows certain significance on the object painted. Casey takes months to finish to finish each image. His paintings of toys are inspired by personal childhood memories, but are about childhood nostalgia in general. A wooden sailboat, an Airfix plane, and a pink teddy bear: these are images trapped in time by the act of pinning them down in paint in this way. Fresh fruit, flowers, bread and meat are traditional memento mori subjects for painters. Because they decay, they serve as a reminder of impermanence, the aging of all things and the fact that we are not immortal.

Casey's grapefruit and Clementine's glow; his Three Bread Rolls look good enough to eat. In Three Lamb Chops, the meat sits fleshy and pink on a slightly reflective surface that is among his trademarks. There are paintings that seem designed for a chef: cherry tomatoes in a square dish, chestnut mushrooms casually clustered on the polished worktop. His simple flower compositions are beautiful, but there is old lady duskiness to their charms, particularly in Pale Pink Roses. He resists the temptation to turn Daffodils into a riot of golden colour. That's a statement of sorts for a painter in his thirties, but a quiet one. This is deliberately muted, traditional stuff without a twist. The problem is that 21<sup>st</sup>-century audiences are frequently only engaged and excited by the twist.

Eoin McHugh, born in Dublin in 1977 shoed some extraordinary, fantastical photorealist paintings in a recent show at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin. Psychologically charged, uncanny, immaculately painted pseudo-realism is cutting edge. Jennifer Trouton (born in Armagh in 1971) and Allyson Keehan (Limerick, 1978) draw on still life tradition by focusing their attention on fabric.

Usually the backdrop, drapery is a favourite method for realist painters to demonstrate their skill. Flowing, folded crumpled fabric is difficult to paint. Keehan twists the convention by making fabric the sole subject of her monochrome paintings, adding blue light to intensify the technical challenge of painting it and producing often remarkable photorealist work. Some of her best paintings reveal the construct, as in Black Satin Light, in which the paint runs out before the bottom of the canvas.

Trouton paints fabric and wallpaper as part of a wider story, incorporating symbolism and narrative into the design of the material itself. Her work is driven, as in O'Neill's, by a specific fascination with the domestic environment.

All of these painters work with an acute awareness of art history, influenced by artist as diverse as the 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Flemish painter Jan Van Eyck and the 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer, O'Neill sites the 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Flemish artist Joachim Beuckelaer as an influence. Keehan influences include contemporary light installation artists such as Olafur Eliasson and James Turrell. They all explore memory, perception and the passing of time in their work.

Modern audiences have come to expect art to reveal something about what makes the artist tick. Contemporary art is nothing if not self-exposing, self-exploring, self-obsessed. Casey is giving little of that away. It's mostly about the painting. He seem less comfortable when the focus is on him, an impression emphasizes by the slightly reticent pose of his recent Self Portrait, which is included in his show. His self portrait as a cyclist was included in this years BP Portrait Award show at the National Portrait gallery in London. In it, the artist is looking back over his shoulder, hiding under his bicycle hat, about to take off.

Sincerity is the quality that Perry has put forward as possibly the most rebellious and certainly the most valuable requirement for an artist operating in a cynical, commercialized 21<sup>st</sup>-century art world. There is nothing radical about Casey's work but perhaps that's the point.