

Despite their explanatory notes, Jennifer Trouton's paintings eloquently speak for themselves in the way they juxtapose universal themes with personal family history, writes Cristín Leach Hughes

Georges Braque, a French cubist and pal of Picasso, once said: "In art there is only one thing that counts: the bit that cannot be explained." It's a truism accentuated by the increasingly ubiquitous gallery practice of handing out artists' statements as though they are terrified the art won't make any sense without them. The trouble is, sometimes it doesn't. Which leads to another truism: if a contemporary artwork cannot convey meaning without a sheaf of background notes, it really isn't a great artwork in the first place.

Jennifer Trouton comes with more notes than most, but on the evidence of her latest show, *Post*, at Dublin's Molesworth gallery, she doesn't need them. Her work is layered, and pregnant with research, visual clues and specific meanings, but it is not necessary to know the two collapsing cottages that appear and reappear in these paintings were once the homes of her great-great-grandmothers, or that the repeated broken-brick structure was the location of the family post office in the early 1990s. These facts are useful and curiously compelling, but ultimately they are not what makes *Post* a great show.

Trouton's latest paintings tell a story that is as deeply personal as it is wholly universal. Their success lies in the marriage of several elements, including the artist's research into her own family history. The best of the paintings seamlessly blend skill and concept, but their real coup is to persuade entirely without any explanation of their specific origins.

The passenger lists and maps that appear in the background of the *Grass Is Always Greener* series are a reference to Trouton's ancestors who left Armagh for Springfield, Massachusetts, around the turn of the 20th century. The artist scoured American archives to incorporate era-specific industrial buildings into her wallpaper paintings in which they appear as repeated motifs alongside the cottages. The embroidered silk, which she paints *trompe l'oeil* style, is a present-day American fabric, a counterpoint to the domestic handmade nature of the emigrants' belongings and skills.

Trouton, who turned 40 this year, has slowly built a solid reputation since her first exhibitions in the late 1990s. She was shortlisted for the AIB prize in 2007, the year Diana Copperwhite won. The follow-

ing year she produced *Ellipsis*, a body of work based on documents she found in the attic of her new home in Belfast. In the past she has exhibited paintings alongside their photographic twins, playing with the notion of photorealism, challenging our ideas about contemporary still life, and referring back to her fascination with archive and documentation in all its forms.

Her previous show at the Molesworth, *Still* (2009), also drew on a sense of loss and of place, with paintings of an abandoned building and its contents. That one-word title was as deceptively simple as the word *Post*, which expands Tardis-like to contain a literal connection to the family post office, a reference to the jobs the emigrants sought, and a plethora of possible postmodern, post-colonial and post-feminist readings.

The 20 paintings in the *Grass Is Always Greener* series echo the dimensions of postcards. Archive material acts as a ghostly backdrop to painted ruins transported to parched landscapes. In the background of one, a fragment of original handwriting asks, abruptly and without punctuation: "Would you know this photo this is the blacksmith that I am working".

These paintings are brighter, paler and a good deal less arresting than the pairs of draped fabric and wallpaper works that really steal the show.

Less than half a metre tall, the *No Place Like Home* paintings appear to depict sections of smoke-blackened wallpaper. Their sister images, the *Huddled Masses* paintings, are of draped silk, luxurious and eye-catching, always slipping to barely reveal a section of the corresponding painted wallpaper hidden beneath.

The wallpaper is invented, the fabric is real; and yet the action of draping the fabric over the painting and reproducing both as a slice of still-life composition bestows a new kind of authenticity on the wallpaper. It blurs the lines between truth and perception in more ways than one.

Each pair shares a colour palette: pearlescent, golden or, as in *No Place Like Home VI* and *Huddled Masses VI*, a rusty orange red. In *No Place Like Home I*, a ruined cottage and a low building with a water tower are the wallpaper motifs. In *Huddled Masses II*, the shimmering fabric hangs over wallpaper featuring a factory with a chimney and a spinning wheel.

Here's why we don't need the notes.

BRYAN MEADE



Out of the past: Trouton's the Grass Is Always Greener series; and below, No Place Like Home IV and Huddled Masses III

Although the buildings and references in Trouton's paintings are specific, they are also generic: abandoned Irish cottages, industrial buildings with an Americana feel. Through repetition, she extracts them from her family history and turns them into powerful symbols of a wider phenomenon with a long Irish history: emigration.

The passenger lists replicated in the painting *Over There IV* read like elements of a random family history: "McMullan, David, Croagherty, Ballymoney, Co Antrim, Grocer, 40; Nolan, Mary, Camlagan, Co Donegal, Housewife, 51." As the

word "anchor" floats in a murky green sky over the cottage, the juxtaposition of all of these elements becomes about much more than the Trouton family archive.

Trouton is peddling a kind of multimedia nostalgia that other painters — including Hughie O'Donoghue, who incorporated photographs inherited after his father's death into his canvases — have already made their own. Several elements of the work single her out: a focus on the domestic, her strikingly intelligent use of colour and the realist style of her painting.

She blends elements of an academic

still-life tradition with aspects of photorealism, and she does it all with a thoroughly modern *modus operandi*, taking from various multimedia sources, mining personal fascinations to reveal a bigger truth.

Her attention to detail is striking. The verdigris colour of *No Place Like Home V*, with its Statue of Liberty and ruined cottage motif, subtly echoes the weathered copper surface of America's most famous effigy. The blue-green fabric in the accompanying painting, with its rusty-pink flowers, picks up a barely perceptible tonal echo in the distressed brick walls of the cottage in the wallpaper.

She pays attention to the shadows — not just the real-life shadows between the folds of her painted fabrics, but the shadow cast by the wallpaper *Liberty* as she holds her light aloft, and the long line cast by the sunset on the ruined cottages.

There's a wonderful glow at the centre of her *Huddled Masses* paintings, as though viewers are encountering the wallpaper by candlelight. It's an effect contained in the paint, so smoothly done as to be almost imperceptible. Like 15th-century Italian *chiaroscuro*, it says, "Look at this," but does it without recourse to drama.

The largest canvas here, *Shift*, won the Keating/McLaughlin award for painting at this year's Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) exhibition. It is the best standalone example of what Trouton is trying to accomplish. The wallpaper is less finished than the luxurious glossy drape, a seductive veil to draw over a murky past that dares to peek out again — a past that can't quite be covered.

The point about this work is its subtlety. Those who saw it at the RHA were most likely struck by Trouton's technique, the significance of the glimpse of invented wallpaper lost. Yet this painting had something about it that was much more impressive than painterly skill alone. *Post* reveals what it was by putting *Shift* in context, by revealing the bigger story, and by reaffirming that it is still an impressive painting.

Trouton's success lies in the integrity of her background work, but she also proves that when an artist does their job this well, they don't need to explain themselves. I've already said too much. Just go and look at the paintings. **E**

Jennifer Trouton's *Post* is at the Molesworth gallery, Dublin, until Nov 30

