

Finding a way to look anew



AIDAN DUNNE

VISUAL ART

TWO FINE SOLO exhibitions currently running in Dublin are representative of a significant strand of contemporary art and, more specifically, painting. The two artists, both fairly young, are Ciarán Murphy, at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, and Damien Flood, at Green on Red. It's not that their work is of a piece: they are each following distinct, separate lines of enquiry. But both show paintings, mainly quite small in scale and sparing of colour, with an approach to subject matter that is at once allusive and ambiguous. And as images per se, what they do could be described as fragmentary and oblique.

Murphy, we are told, works from photographs. In fact he col-

lects lots of photographs from different sources, images that seem to him to hold out the possibility of a painting. A photographic look comes through in the paintings he makes from them, but often in a very spare, selective way, as though he is leaving much of the information out of the image. He's not just simplifying or streamlining it, that is to say, he's actually making something almost abstract. So there's nothing of the style called photorealist about his approach.

There is clearly an awareness of the history of painting in what he does, though. It's interesting that while he is a felicitous painter, technically, with a nice touch and obvious competence, he steers clear of any kind of polished consistency. He prefers inconsistency, with sometimes a brusque, offhand manner and sometimes a more nuanced, considered approach to brushwork. More often than not the paintings have a slightly pallid, distanced quality, as though referring to something remote, something in the depths of memory.

Hence, perhaps, the melancholic tone to his work mentioned in a brief catalogue note.

If the main unifying factor in Murphy's show is mood, Flood's lays out something like a thesis,



indicated in his title, *Counter Earth*. A catalogue text by Mary Conlon fills in the background to the idea, which derives from the hypothesis by the Greek philosopher Philolaus. His proposal for the make-up of a non-geocentric universe entailed an opposite, shadow-earth, mainly so that his planetary scheme could accord with his own numerical theory. It's an idea with considerable imaginative appeal, and mirror-worlds have appeared in many works of fiction.

For Flood, its appeal seems to lie in the possibility of de-familiarising the process of seeing and recognising. It's a way of making us look anew and not take anything for granted, a bit like the so-called "Martian" poetry of Craig Raine and Christopher Reid. Flood offers us elliptical fragments of landscapes and diagrams. Sometimes they come across as selec-



Left: *Green Vortex* by Damien Flood. Above: *Hare* by Ciarán Murphy

tively edited photographic views, and sometimes they are over-painted photographic prints. Always there's a terse, unresolved quality to the finished pieces, as if Flood doesn't want to slip into pictorial formula.

In withholding so much of conventional pictorial architecture, are both artists simply being perverse, trying to project a sense of profundity that isn't really there? The answer is no, but to understand why we probably have to see their work in the context of certain issues relating to modern and contemporary art. And especially, it could be argued, in relation to the way painting has evolved to deal with two major sets of problems that have undermined previously implicit assumptions about art and artists.

One is the invention of photography in the mid-19th century, the beginning of a process that is still

ongoing – just look at the seemingly unstoppable, exponential development of digital imaging technologies. Painting has fruitfully engaged with photography on many levels, but there's no way around the fact that a mechanical process did muscle in on its territory and pretty much take over a major part of its workaday job, so that painting had to engage in some soul-searching, asking itself what it was really about. It's been doing so ever since.

The second set of problems has to do with Modernism and its aftermath. Leading up to High Modernism, the history of Western painting has been viewed as holding to the dream of achieving one grand, all-encompassing style. That is, a style capable of addressing the complexity of the world in terms of one self-consistent, coherent vision. This concept suits the

heroic idea of the artist, imposing his – it was usually his – will on the perplexing diversity of things.

Think Van Gogh, Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, or Mondrian.

As modernity segued into post-modernity, that idea became untenable. Take the work of the highly influential Belgian painter Luc Tuymans. It sets out to deal with the problem of how to make paintings about a world in which all the old certainties have gone, and one in which painting's representational job has long been filled by photography. The second or third-hand photographic image becomes the painter's pallid source, a slim connection with an uncertain subject of questionable authenticity.

Yet, as with Beckett's "Try again, Fail Again, Fail better", the artist has to keep trying. In a press release, Flood is rightly compared to another artist with a significant international profile, younger than Tuymans, but recognisably trying to deal with some of the same problems. That's the Polish artist Wilhelm Sasnal, who makes paintings, but also films, and who is involved in music as well – this multiplicity of activities is not untypical of the younger generation of artists today (Murphy will actually give a musical performance with Thierry Michel in the Douglas Hyde at 1.15pm on February 26th, for example).

The Douglas Hyde, incidentally, has shown both Sasnal and Tuymans over the years.

Ciarán Murphy, Douglas Hyde
Gallery, Trinity College Dublin
Until March 16th
Counter Earth, Green on Red
Gallery, 26-28 Lombard Street
East Until March 6th



or,
ing
re-

6.

ers
eir
ew
urd
to
es.
nly
eal
nu-

not
- it
nts
ies
ra-
pi-
the
' is
es.
em

tie
get
ws,
ed
ed
ito