

'Re-Framing the Domestic in Irish Art'

Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, Co Louth

29 April – August 2014



Janet Mullarney, *Domestic Gods II*, 1998, wood, plaster, wallpaper, mixed media

PAINTINGS from Drogheda's Municipal Art Collection provide a starting point for this ambitious exhibition, co-curated by Highlanes director Aoife Ruane, artist Amanda Coogan and art historian and writer Jane Humphries. Drawing on the respective interests of the curators, the show's premise is an attempt to address a movement in Irish art that has been, if not ignored, then perhaps passed by. Humphries has written eloquently on what she has termed the "domestic avant-garde",¹ examining the work of Irish women artists in a feminist / home context in order to explore how these artists have subverted tropes of 'home' as part of their work.²

Coogan meanwhile often employs performative gestures in her work which can be interpreted as alluding to the domestic, such as sitting on top of a bucket while scrubbing fabric in *Yellow* (2008), or with the project 'Labour' (2012), a touring exhibition of live art where each of the participating Irish female artists worked with their own bodies.³

The curatorial trio has assembled an array of work that includes video installation, sculpture and painting, dating from the mid nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Though too numerous to discuss individually here, the works suggest a survey of the domestic in Irish art, a subject that in any culture creates a predictable gender imbalance.

The earlier works, principally painting, address the notion of the domestic in a literal way, capturing informal moments of everyday life as seen through the eyes of the person – the woman – caring for the house. The illustrative quality of Bea Orpen's gouache painting *Back Yard, Bettystown* (1945) captures the view of a modest back garden complete with shed and laundry drying on the line, the kind of private machinations traditionally kept hidden from public life.

Figurative works such as Orpen's are in the minority however, as the lion's share of the space belongs to the generation of artists who have risen to prominence since the mid 1980s, including such luminaries as Alice Maher. Her scrutiny of the idea of home has drawn on ideas espoused by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard and his *Poetics of Space*, and the work here, a thorn piece called *Soap Dish For L.B.*, calls to mind another aspect of the Irish home, the holy water font present in practically every Catholic home in years gone by.⁴

Maher is not so much subverting the idea of the domestic as destabilising it to offer a discomfiting invitation to re-examine this highly personal space. Aileen Barry's *Possession* (2011), a video work now in the Arts Council's collection, also plays with the



Foreground: Sinead McCann *Run Fast, Glass*, 1.5metres, frame of table, 2 chairs, 1 light fitting, 4 bulbs, 1 electronic number counter and 1 cup. Courtesy of the artist. Background.: Hilda Roberts HRHA *Little Bridget*, oil on canvas, 54 x 44cm

minutiae of domestic tasks and the weight of anxiety prompted by a lonely suburban existence. Her protagonist obsessively washes her hands while around her the house makes ceaseless demands. She is also instrumentalised, becoming the devices (lawn mower, vacuum cleaner) required to maintain a perfect home.

Locky Morris, making work prompted by the "daily epiphanies" he experiences, offers a more familiar image.⁵ *Stair Pile*, a photograph of a pile of clean washing awaiting transport to its next destination of hot press or bedroom drawer is a banal domestic scene, the kind more typical of the way we live now than the fantasies presented in aspirational home magazines.

The demands of family life and the toll it can take is also the focus of Anthony Haughey's *Safe As Houses* (1994), depicting a tableaux of model 'jails' occupied by the detritus of marriage and family. In the Rev P Hanlon's *The Golden Cage* (1969), taken from the Drogheda Municipal Art Collection, the idea of entrapment is unambiguous.

Though the above is just a snapshot of the diverse and wonderful works here, the common thread of the domestic as oppressive and crushing is striking. The literature supplied with the exhibition explains its mission to "ask what facts and fictions the domestic suggests to the artist today" and there is ample evidence to support the view that the domestic induces a deep-seated unease with both male and female artists.⁶

While it would be easy to assign this to the usual gender archetypes, the questions and lines of enquiry this exhibition raises are far more varied and more complex. A house, described 90 years ago by Le Corbusier as "a machine for living in", offers a contract to live a certain life. Its terms are open to interpretation.

Anne Mullee is a curator, writer, filmmaker and arts administrator based in Dublin. She is currently working on a collaborative documentary about artist-led spaces in Ireland, and curated the recent Hannah Mooney exhibition at The LAB gallery.

Notes

1. J. Humphries, *The Emergence of a Domestic Avant-Garde in Contemporary Irish Art: The Paradoxical House/Home*. Journal of Post Graduate Research, University of Dublin, Trinity College, 7, 36 – 54, 2008
2. The show featured work by: Lucy Andrews, Aileen Barry, Diana Copperwhite, Maud Cotter, Dorothy Cross, Pauline Cummins, Gerard Dillon, Laura Fitzgerald, Jessica Foley, Fr Jack Hanlon, Siobhan Hapaska, Anthony Haughey, Brian Hegarty, Grace Henry, Patrick Jolley, Rebecca Trost, Inger Lise Hansen, Mary A. Kelly, John Kindness, Danny Lartigue, Vanessa Donoso Lopez, Maggie Madden, Alice Maher, Locky Morris, Janet Mullarney, William Mulready, Sinead McCann, William McKeown, Isabel Nolan, Abigail O'Brien, Margaret O'Brien, Bea Orpen, William Orpen, Kathy Prendergast, Hilda Roberts, Declan Rooney, Mary Swanzy, Dominic Thorpe, and Jennifer Trouton.
3. S Barrett and A Coogan, (eds), *Labour: A Live Exhibition – Performances by Irish Female Artists*, Dublin City Arts Office/The LAB, 2012
4. G Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, 1994
5. Press release from Locky Morris, 'From day one', mother's tankstation, Dublin, April – May 2010
6. Press release from 'Re-Framing the Domestic in Irish Art', Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, 29 April – August 2014