

Leanne McDonagh

Reminiscence

3 – 20 September

Origin Gallery, Dublin

YOUNG Irish artist Leanne McDonagh (born 1990) used a crowd funding campaign to support the making of her new body of work 'Reminiscence', which also includes a selection of earlier mixed media works. This distinctly modern and entrepreneurial approach illustrates the versatility of her practice. As well as being featured in an upcoming RTÉ series about Traveller women and business, she is a qualified art teacher and is often called on to speak to students about her experiences continuing to third level education and pursuing a career as an artist.

As a member of the Traveller community McDonagh is all too aware of the prejudices and misconceptions that her background invites, and she is astute in realising that her work provides both an insight into her life and an opportunity to tell her own stories. It is not flippant to speculate that current perceptions of Traveller womanhood are influenced by the often unpleasantly ethnographic reality TV vehicles portraying the spectacle of life events such as weddings and communions, which inevitably focus on the bruises gained by wearing a 20 stone wedding gown, or scantily clad teenage wedding guests gyrating on the dance floor. The ostentation of these showy events is completely at odds with the subtle, contemplative work McDonagh makes, though it too explores events and traditions embedded in the Traveller way of life.

The elusive nature of memory, and its unreliable tricks and ruses, is the subject of the principal work in this exhibition, exhibited in the elegant former drawing room of the Origin Gallery's Georgian townhouse. Using manipulated photographs, fragments of distorted and partial images are layered on top of one another, creating a dreamlike, whimsical quality evoking the ghostly pictures created by the double exposure of camera film. Printed as C-type Lambda prints or on rich Hahnemühle paper, these are presented as gleaming objects, slickly mounted in liquid acrylic like memories captured in aspic.

McDonagh creates fleeting glimpses of an event central to her culture, the annual Cahirmee Horse Fair held at Buttevant in County Cork, where generations of Travellers have gathered to buy and sell horses, socialise and reunite with friends and family. But these palimpsests, like recollections, are open to question. McDonagh concedes that the works "suggests a story about a past seen from the perspective of time," and are not actual recollections, but the idea of recollections. Her subject matter is an appropriate vehicle for exploring the fickle nature of memory, with its rich mythology, a largely undocumented history, and its links to famous historical figures including Napoleon and the

Duke of Wellington, both of whom owned famous horses that were bought at the fair as colts.

The series features ghostly images, predominantly in colour, of jockeys, details of extravagantly garbed women and, of course, horses. Occasionally these glimpses are overlaid with simple line drawings in ink, as with *Pride and Joy*, where a stable boy carries buckets, or with the diptych *Trader*, where the sketch of a small caravan is paired with a pastel vision of a small girl. Though indistinct with swirls and dragged lines, there is no ambiguity in the reading of these reveries. Their haziness and the bleached summery light conjures up the staccato slideshow of the mind's eye where decades-old remembrances reside, with locations, people and objects jumbled together. Over and over again, the images restage memory, adding and subtracting the players and backgrounds.

The movement in each work not only plays on the very personal nature of recall, but questions the extent to which we can trust memories. As if to fuel this uncertainty, one image appears in monotone, not unlike our dreams: sometimes in colour, sometimes in black and white. This grey image, *Mischievous Play*, depicts a young woman glancing back over her shoulder, and is sharper than those with washes of pigment. It is literally and figuratively darker in tone.

In the second gallery an earlier body of work, clearly a precursor to the more recent works, feels very much like the preparatory sketchbook. With these smaller, more tentative works McDonagh also employs layers, but these are formless and abstract. Creating texture with impasto and paper collage, they are in their original state or reproduced as a photograph, making yet another layer. They are awash with gothic, muted tones, occasionally stuck with the occasional flare of pale light, like sunbeams breaking through clouds.

If 'Reminiscences' were a mid-career survey or a retrospective the inclusion of this earlier work could be warranted, but in the context of this debut solo exhibition they seem superfluous, a distraction from the delicacy of the more accomplished photographic series. As this is McDonagh's debut solo it may be that this was seen as an opportunity to be exploited to the limit. Yet perhaps a paring back of material would allow the more mature work space to breathe, and added scope for the viewer to reminisce.

Anne Mullee is a Dublin-based writer, curator and filmmaker



Leanne McDonagh, *Trading*, 2014