

## PAINTERS' PAINTERS

20 Paintings

8 February – 30 March 2014

**20 Painters** showcases an exuberant collection of work that the painter/curator collaboration of June Frickleton and Patrick O'Donnell has judiciously mined from the open submission. By widening the geographical spectrum, they have tapped into a seam of work that blows away any notion of painting's demise and it is certainly not more of the same. This show offers an opportunity to explore the diverse range of paintings that are currently being produced in the region and gain insights into what constitutes painting now.

The exhibition is refreshing on many levels, not least of all in terms of the gender mix. Of the twenty artists chosen, twelve are female. This is not something that can be said of all current exhibitions. Indeed, the preponderance of male artists was a criticism which was levelled at the previous painting exhibition, *'32 Paintings'*. Although gender was not an overt consideration, a democratic presentation of the work submitted is definitely one of the curators' stated goals.

This artist-centred approach is embedded within the curatorial style, from the selection process to the final hang. Unlike many open exhibitions, no fee was demanded nor was there any requirement for the artists to deliver the work for judging. Frickleton and O'Donnell based their initial choices on jpeg images, followed by a Thelma and Louise-like art odyssey of the three counties of Sussex, Surrey and Kent. They made a conscious decision to base their choices not just on a single reproduced image but by visiting the artists in their studios and seeing the paintings in the context of their practice as a whole. In this way, O'Donnell feels they were "...getting a real feel for their practice, what they're about" rather than running the risk of picking one hit wonders. Their position as fellow painters very much informs the selection. As Frickleton observes: "*Being a painter, you get it quite quickly...you can tell the quality.*" This conscientious and very human way of working has paid dividends in the paintings they have managed to secure. One gets a sense of their genuine excitement with what they have discovered and their enthusiasm for sharing it with the gallery audience.

The exhibition is a combination of painters that were both known and unknown to Frickleton and O'Donnell, ranging from recent graduates to established artists. As painters themselves, they naturally have an awareness of their peers but this exercise has deepened their understanding and revealed some extraordinary painters that they had not encountered before. One such artist is Tom Banks, whose work emits a strange film noir quality as he juxtaposes the natural and manmade. In *Canopy*, we see a glowing tent, flimsy and vulnerable in relation to the encroaching woods. Is it being watched? If so, are we the observers or the oblivious inhabitants? There is a sense of impending threat, but from what source? In *Tower Road West 1* his ghostlike petrified tree illuminated against a backdrop of faceless suburbia is again unnerving. Anxiety permeates his work – or is it paranoia in the face of images of such conflicted beauty?

In contrast, Paula MacArthur presents us with work that, at first sight, literally dazzles. MacArthur has based her paintings on photographs of gemstones from the Natural History Museum that have been enlarged a thousand times. These are serious rocks, recalling the oft married Zsa Zsa Gabor's famous line: "*Dahling, if you break up with your fiancé, always send back the ring ...but keep the stone.*" Employing the technique of optical mixing beloved of such artists as the Pointillists, from a distance we see the jewels appear with almost photographic clarity but as we draw nearer they morph into paintings more akin to the gestural mark making and drips of the Abstract Expressionists. The scale and intensity of colour of *Promise me one thing* exercises a virtually magnetic force, attracting the viewer with a moth-like helplessness. Despite her representations of ultimate bling, MacArthur is operating on another, more profound level whereby such symbols of ostentation/tokens of love raise questions of both a personal and political nature. Her clever balance of painterly and conceptual elements makes for a heady mix which has the ability to both seduce and provoke.

Another artist who luxuriates in the physical process of painting with her sensual use of colour is Julia Burns. Her thoughtfully orchestrated layering of colour creates a delicate crescendo. This, combined with the mixed tempo of her mark making, is compelling. *Old house series – room 7*, pulsates between the subtle ghostly shadows of the various strata of pigment and the vibrant turquoises and golds of the final brush strokes. It is no surprise to discover Burns talks about: "...*creating paintings which act like soundtracks to a particular time*" as her work has a definite musical quality. It creates a compulsion to pore over the entire surface of the painting. Nothing is spare. Every millimetre counts.

For Jake Wood-Evans, having become inspired by a painting stint in Madrid, he returned fascinated by Baroque painting. *Francis Bacon Study one*, 2013 bears witness to this influence with its use of tenebroso, depicting a disembodied Bacon emerging from a murky and ambiguous background. In this audacious rendering, he conjures up Bacon, not as he scrutinised himself in paint but how we know him from photographs. Perhaps Wood-Evans also references Bacon's practice of working from photographs rather than directly from life. In this instance, Wood-Evans appears to have used a photograph taken in 1979 by the photographer, Dmitri Kasterine. However, this painting shakes off the formality of the original studio shot and evokes the arch persona that looks out of photos taken in Bacon's natural habitat of the Colony Room. Consciously or unconsciously, Wood-Evans delivers something of the man rather than the artist.

These individual painters all hold their own in what has proved to be a very strong cohort. Frickleton and O'Donnell have managed to identify and bring to a new arena a group of artists who demonstrate exciting and meaningful ways of working. If these artists represent current practice in the region, then the self-assurance and ability evident in the work on show should inspire confidence in the relevance of painting in contemporary art.

**Maria Bonner**