

COE '12: 8th to 29th September 2012

This was my third visit to COE and, as I expected, the submission was strong. It took two days of hard but enjoyable work to whittle it down to twenty-one artists. In the limited space I have here, I will, wherever possible, allow the artists to describe their work in their own words (with quotes taken from their statements).

It was interesting to see a number of the artists in COE 12 using, or commenting on the use of, new media to question social and political issues. In the HD Digital Film *'Post-Fordlandia'*, artists **Megs Morley and Tom Flanagan** 'explore the mythologies surrounding Henry Ford's failed utopian, puritanical model of capitalism, Fordlandia'. **Jane Queally** manipulates monochrome polaroid 'hybrids' in order to 'question the power and function of the mass media and the photographic image in the reportage of global events' using, in this case, images of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre.' In **John Maguire's** exquisite *'Colour Barcodes'*, the paint is applied very thinly using a small "make-up" pad (sponge). His purpose, he says, is to 'mimic the nature of digital printing through a process of painting ... questioning the role of art and ownership in a mass sales market.'

Issues relating to time and memory featured prominently this year, too: **Margo McNulty's** lithographs, for instance, are 'close-ups, microscopic portals to the past. Abandoned places and objects, frozen in time, exhale again. Tracing and drawing the images' she says 'animates the past'. **Gráine Stack's** small abstract paintings are 'inspired by memory, everyday subject matter and surfaces. A mark on the floor, lichen or a rock face, the distinctive character of stone and organic matter and the microscopic configuration of plants'; and **Eilish McCann's** six screen-prints were made whilst on a printmaking master-class and residency in Flanders, Belgium. On her way there, she says, 'I found myself in Antwerp Station. I suddenly remembered being there sixteen years ago ... with these prints I wanted to realise on paper the significance of this experience in the station; a combination of my personal history and the social, colonial and architectural history of the building'.

The nature of our relationship to the urban (and natural) environment features in the work of some of the selected artists. **Maggie Madden**, for example, says that her 'work is suggestive of architectural structures,' and often refers to the 'communication and transport systems of our networked world; the infrastructures of life in modern cities'. **Amanda Rice's** photographs are 'constructed within the remnants of former villages on the outskirts of Begging, demolished in order to necessitate the rapid progression and urbanisation within the city.' **Ste Murray's** three images (photographed from the same 'spot' captured on images taken over one hundred years ago) 'depict public life on the streets of Tuam, Co. Galway over the course of a day. One photograph was taken every hour in each position with the resulting twelve photographs being collated into one resulting piece.' And **Stephanie Conway** explains that the 'imagery in my paintings is re-invented from part-observation and part memory and is drawn from the labyrinthine spaces (experienced) *between* the urban environment.'

I was struck by how many of the selected works seem to be underpinned by a phenomenological approach to making art. Some of the artists mentioned above could easily fall into this 'category', (**Conway** and **Madden's** engagement with space, or **Stack's** intuitive reworking's of her direct experiences of the world, for instance); others, like **John Ryan**, reference phenomenology directly. His series of small paintings engage with the 'physical qualities of paint whilst also asking questions about the nature of painting.' There is an emphasis on embodied materiality in **Michael FitzGerald's** sculptures. He describes how his work is 'the result of a dialogue with materials,' saying that he 'uses dynamic, bodily processes ... moulding the material, often using all his strength while being aware that if he pushes it (the MDF wood he works with) too far, it will snap.' **Maureen O'Connor** introduces another aspect of phenomenology into her work – that of our relationship to each other in space – the physical entwining of self and other. For COE12, she will 'install one or more paintings in a manner that investigates a collapse of the viewing encounter.' **Anne O'Neill's** mixed media installation also explores the 'relationship between people – and people and landscape; the impact one has on the other.' She is 'concerned with what connects and disconnects us, with ourselves, with each other, and with our environment ... she celebrates clay as material in itself, the memory it holds, its sense of presence, along with its endurance over time.'

There is a broad range of media and work in COE12, from photography and multi-media through to more traditional, but nonetheless startling, forms of painting and sculpture. **Lorraine Neeson's** eerie multi-media work 'creates phantasmagoric environments that disrupt and disorient a conventional sense of spatial and temporal logic.' **Fionna Murray** uses photographs, film stills and remembered things as source material. 'Her work is concerned with a certain dislocation in the midst of the everyday and with slippages between the real and the imaginary'. **Michael Gannon's** series of photographs are a poetic rendering of a local tradition. He explains that 'before sunrise on May 1st 2011, I set out to a number of Mayo towns to document the custom of leaving flowers on doorsteps on May Day morning ... It seems that this tradition is a very West of Ireland thing and carried on mainly in Mayo.' **Deirdree Deegan-McGee** is 'fascinated by *what is left behind*'. Her pinhole images have an 'intangible, dreamlike appearance that cannot be easily defined and are in keeping with the title of the work – *What's left behind?*' **Anthony Collins'** work consists of fourteen small paintings (from a series of over 550 small diary-like images he has recently painted in the open air in Kerry). Eight of these images are painted on paper or acrylic and are securely bonded (ie support and medium will last a lifetime), and six made to slowly disintegrate over the course of the show. **Christopher Banahan** is showing an installation of portraits of children (infants from 'Nurture's best' – a Crèche in Tarmonbarry, Co. Roscommon) 'painted on locally sourced wood (logs), reflecting a 'timeline' of the roots of the community.' The twenty-six drawings of socks by **Damian Magee** (titled an A-Z of Pseudo – Broody Gravity Socks) are 'charged with humour'. Socks are a warm, comfortable protection from the earth, but in this series they are taken out of context and presented in isolation, weightless and in the process 'becoming' *things in themselves*.

I hope that this year's show will prove to be as successful as other past COE exhibitions. Certainly, the standard of work is, as always, very high. But what of

the future? COE is a project that bridges the gap between the artist and the audience in a way that, in my experience, few other art projects (nationally or internationally) is able to do. I gather that the Arts Council of Ireland this year significantly reduced the grant that COE receives. It is vital that COE continues to inspire old and young alike, fostering in them a lifelong interest in contemporary art; it can only do this if it is properly supported and funded.

Mike Collier, August 2012