

In imaginary artistic spaces



Visual Art Aidan Dunne

Reviewed
LCGA Summer 2007: *Blind Spot*, Diana Copperwhite. *The Family Man*, Joe Duggan. *The Colour of Surprise*, works by Jeanette Hillig, Michele Horrigan and Melanie O'Rourke. Limerick City Gallery of Art, Carnegie Building, Pery Sq

Throughout the summer, the Limerick City Gallery of Art hosted an outstanding trio of shows. Diana Copperwhite's *Blind Spot* highlighted one of Ireland's leading younger painters; Joe Duggan's *Family Man* offered a witty though also fairly dark exploration of social conformity; and *The Colour of Surprise*, curated by Pippa Little, featured the diverse work of three younger artists, Jeanette Hillig, Michele Horrigan and Melanie O'Rourke.

Copperwhite, the winner of this year's AIB Art Prize, who was born and raised in Co Limerick, although she is now based in Dublin, is a brilliant gestural painter, though not in the tradition that

the term suggests. From her student work onwards she has employed a distinctive, high-keyed palette, favouring pinks, greens and pale blues. She has also shown a penchant for generating architectonic spaces in her compositions, recalling Frank Stella's argument that much of the history of Western painting represented a long battle to establish a kind of workable, imaginative space on the part of artists.

That description certainly applies to Copperwhite's paintings.

Their spatial fabric is distinctive, and it is invariably tenuous, as though the energies that have generated it may pull it apart at any moment. This gives her work a nervous vitality. Progressively, in recent years, she has introduced more and more figurative imagery into previously uninhabited spaces. It is difficult to do, given her fast, instinctive method of painting, but she has managed it with great bravura.

Ephemeral sources fit into the logic of her way of working: she snatches images from the television screen, from snapshots, memories.

It's interesting that CDs turn up as images in some of the work shown in Limerick, in *Perpetual Motion* for example. She clearly likes the virtual space of the spinning discs encoded with information, and the activity of her paintings takes place in something like that virtual space, continually forming and reforming, never fully, physically present, as in classical painting, with its sculptural sense of form.

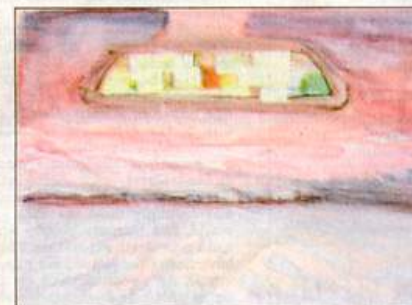
Copperwhite draws on family snapshots on occasion. Duggan takes them as his subject in *Family Man*, a series of



staged photographic tableaux. These family snapshots on a large scale feature a number of stock subjects: a picnic, playing in the garden and even posing for a photograph. But there is something strange about them. It doesn't take long to figure out what. All the participants, mother, children and pets, are mannequins. Only the figure of the father is a real person - presumably Duggan himself.

There is an uncanny air to the images because of this. They just seem wrong, in an unsettling way. In an accompanying essay, Colin Graham notes the disturbing effect but argues that the work is, all the

Creepy and wryly funny; clockwise from above, details from Family Man No 1 by Joe Duggan; Plan C by Diana Copperwhite, (photograph courtesy of the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery); and **Cotorra by Michele Horrigan**



pretty loose affiliation, though it was a good show. Michele Horrigan evokes the sublime in her multi-stranded treatment of the Aughinish controversy. Would-be pastoral landscapes are revealed as the setting for the disputed impact of the factory on its surroundings. Nature obscured by factory is mirrored by factory obscured by fog. The dominant metaphor is fog. Horrigan implies that the truth is lost in a fog of obstruction and uncertainty.

By contrast, her video *Cotorra* is cheerfully upbeat. In a lush green setting - in Argentina, as it happens - parrots feast on ripe figs, jostling each other, though none too seriously. It's an hypnotic and visually beautiful sequence, the luxuriant greens of both vegetation and birds enlivened by the pink flesh of the figs, suggestive of the endlessly repetitive nature of life's struggle.

O'Rourke's paintings present us with densely packed accumulations of various consumer objects, such as clothes and toys, garden furniture and ornaments. Often there is the feeling that what we see is on the cusp between desirability and disposability, like stuff at a car-boot sale. As Little points out, this ambivalence is underlined by O'Rourke's way of making her images. They are painted on aluminium and within single compositions, which alternate between flat, linear representations and fully modelled, photographic-style depictions, so that we are never sure where we are in relation to the picture plane.

Hillig is a Danish artist who displays a surreal flair for juxtaposing ready-made objects. Where the surrealists went for the bizarre, however, she lulls us with an air of plausibility that dissipates on closer inspection. She co-opts a range of everyday, functional objects and knits them together in vaguely utilitarian-looking assemblages, often involving the forceful application of paint on both the object and the wall behind. If we are persuaded by the overall tenor of a piece, it works, and most of the time this happens. These read as slapstick parodies of utility and purpose.

he does not really inhabit. Or, again, he might exemplify the way we are groomed to become part of the social fabric in a gently coercive way. In the end, though, there is something positively creepy, as well as wryly funny, about the images. As a body of work is it very promising, though the technical quality of the photographs could be better: they look over-extended on this scale of enlargement.

THE THREE ARTISTS in *The Colour of Surprise*, Little says, "share a sureness and confidence in using their chosen materials", a "delight in making", which is a

