

SHOWER OFKUNST

Arts Festival 2011 - Visual Arts Programme: 5th - 14th August 2011
David Beattie, Ann Craven, Maria McKinney, Nick Miller, Michael Thomas
Murphy, Liam O'Callaghan and Jacco Olivier. Curated by Josephine Kelliher

http://www.showerofkunst.com/2011_09_01_archive.html

By Darren Caffrey

Despite not having had the opportunity to view all of the works in this year's Kilkenny Arts Festival, there is still much to say and there is good reason to share. The short-term life span of festivals like this one creates two very explicit contexts into which art must ultimately fit. Both may in their own way serve to create problems which in turn bear solutions, and the first is perhaps the most obvious in that the festival runs for ten days, closing to the fine weather of mid August. And within this, art is only one of the draws. With each exhibition housed within fair walking distance of the next, the buzzing town itself serves as a place where context can be found for the second of the festival's required strategies. It is this very seeking of 'opening up' art to new publics, (while retaining a sense of edge, which might prove suitably solicitous so as to bring another and perhaps more affluent art viewer into the town) that is carrier and weight of all things on view. There is, without doubt, little that can be done in such a short time to address the gap between the appreciation of the visual arts and the desired communication of a valid expression which itself points to the value of shared truth. However, the curator, Josephine Kelliher of the Rubicon Gallery, does well to populate a provincial town with universality and a sense of local charm.



Painting Patrick, Nick Miller

Perhaps it is simply the art itself which adds a distinction or definition to the overall promotion of this year's chosen works. Amongst the names was Nick Miller, whose painting of journalist John Waters was post prime-time viewing on RTE some months back. As it happens, the main work on show 'Painting Patrick..' was by far a better example of the process of the artist's life-study; intriguing and not whatsoever intrusive, it says more about the relationship of artist and sitter than the painting which accompanied the twenty something minute video document. That said, it was the playful and yet measured actions of Miller which articulated not only what *is*, but also what *is not* and perhaps *never could* have been. By taking the act of painting into an arena which resonates as more of a free movement or dance, he has managed to retain the energy of the act. At the same time, he has also highlighted its possibility.

Within Miller's video the object is clear, yet by not focusing solely on the painting (at times only cursory glances are drawn) the artist becomes a point in the work which exists beyond the paint, much the same way as the sitter. As a nice but somewhat inconsequential touch, the couch, where the naked sitter waits to be discovered has been re-situated to accommodate the varied posteriors of many a viewer and... it was not an uncomfortable seat. In terms of warmth, both in art and life, the invitation has been opened to all, and the weary may even have found some peace as they watched the two forces of act and product interact in an experience of unmet or perhaps simply incommensurable proportions. Either way it was good viewing, although the painting was bathed by spot-light at the far end of the room, it was not in any way beautiful and was in parts overly contrived. It was the freedom of the video-work which made this exhibit maybe the most successful and surprising of the festival's visual arts programme.

Naturally there was a sprinkling of exhibits which offered a window into the practices of Ireland's younger artists, and this year, exhibits from David Beattie, Maria McKinney, Michael Thomas Murphy and Liam O'Callaghan can be seen as guidelines for where Irish art stands in the wider context of international art. Each of these exhibits was located at a site which, if not specifically responding to the individual expression of the works at least served as a decorative backdrop, helping to assert an overall identity and place.



Horny Grids, Maria McKinney

In a small room of what must be one of the oldest buildings in the town, a shopping trolley stood face-up. It contained within the matrix of its reinforced metal bars: a webbing of intricate and pleasing tensions which resulted to create an illusion of circular forms. Each line pulling at the very frame of its outlining structure. If this work by McKinney is an echo of limits and modern consequence, the piece which stood next to it looked suitably precarious. Grounded by a multi-layered grid which is made up of a clutch of shopping baskets, two copper poles pierce their way into the space at the centre of gravity of this form. Each pole holding up the large horns of a beast from the highlands, each horn showing evidence of discolouration from the smoke and flame of the blackened matchsticks which twist and curl out like hairs. Having been lit once, the work evokes quite a startling image. It perhaps confronts a sensibility of perfection and colour-coding which marks the consumerist and idealist projections of other aspects of the artist's choices. Overall, although subtle in parts, the whole was one which diverted attention rather than focusing it, resulting in an exhibit which pieces together and takes apart, but never finds itself as anything other than representative of the varying ends of an artist's practice, loosely fit into the unique townhouse venue.



Horny Grids, Maria McKinney

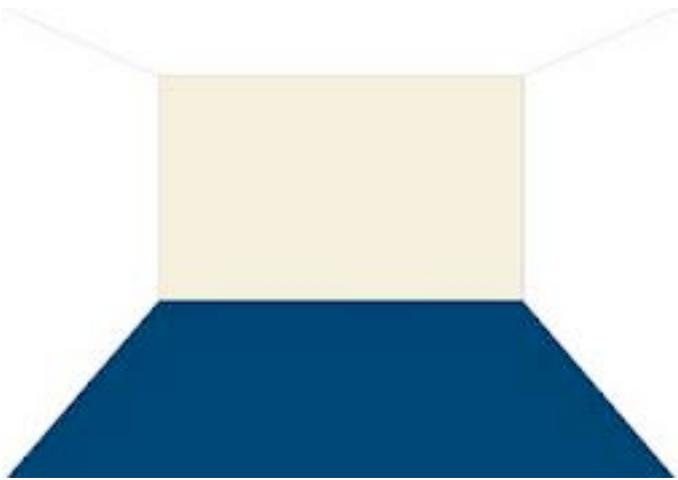
A particularly remarkable venue made available to the artist David Beattie saw devices employed which it must be said strained to be heard amongst the life and death and stillness of a rarely seen Monuments Room. Normally used simply to house and preserve the headstones and burial markings of past dignitaries, the place speaks very curiously of isolation and intervention. An interesting mix which sadly did not suit the range of the communications put out by the entire exhibit.



Transmitter, David Beattie

A fabulously rich and lucid green wall stands at an angle in the centre of the room. To this, two coloured circles are attached, which overlap away from the green surface. The work is titled *Transmitter* and there is no doubt that much is sought in this piece, electronic and

sonic; invisible and obstructive. The experience is equally one of disquiet and disturbance. By no means a product of its conditions, the artist was brave to show this work in such an undeniably powerful space but the measure of the work and indeed the artist, can only go so far when compared with the inherent depth of meaning which wraps the philosophical quandary of life and its extant loss as evidenced by the room itself. In that context, art is paltry and pitiful, even when it is not merely a throw up of a preconceived exposition underlining the varying modes and routes of man's exploration. In essence, Beattie's work is a caricature of existent forces. Never seeking to reach the breadth of their source but instead content with illustration, the curiosity of the human condition turns out to appear not like an apparition but simply a shadow or a reflection; a phenomenon wholly mechanic in its devise.



What's the matter with you?, Michael Thomas Murphy

Michael Thomas Murphy, showing in what used to be an old art shop, sought to make new work which applied the conditions of the space provided. A modest sized room, the back wall reflects thanks to a Perspex covering. It also serves to protect and highlight the colour beige that extends from floor to ceiling. Other than this, it appears not much else is going on. There is a convex mirror hanging in one corner which has apparently been moved, reflecting festival goers now instead of light-fingered art enthusiasts. As well as a crudely constructed 'bench', entitled 'I am only romantic about materials'. A look synonymous with Bargaintown furniture, it appears to offer no direct suggestion as to its intended function. It is not a wardrobe and it is too tall and shaky to be of any real support as a bench. In terms of an obvious relationship, they are each of a similar tone: off-white, beige, maybe cream. It is as though they are equally coloured by blandness.

The artist's intervention, seemingly minimal, is put to the viewer as to where they themselves fit into this unusual installation. Standing in the centre of the room, there is just you, the wall behind and the 'bench'. The colour of the back wall is supposedly taken from a finding which astrophysicists stumbled upon in their efforts to quantify as a singularity the light emissions found throughout the entire expanse of our known universe. It is somewhat disappointing. Dark even. Thankfully there is humour lurking within the mass, as not only does the whole back wall now effectively glow this colour but it seems to

almost match the colour of the bench. This is not a perfect match, rather it looks similar, as if simply “it will do the job”.

A sense of gamesmanship with the areas of perception seeking to define truth is perhaps most sharp if you observe that the narcissism of both art and science is to persuade us that the answer is waiting to be found, rather than proving us equal to it. If we are actively engaging in our own realms of doubt and persuasion, why should our truth not be here also? Therefore, it is surely neither a number nor a colour that could define the presence of life.



Bit Symphony, Liam O'Callaghan

A quiet room downstairs in a castle was host to the work of Liam O'Callaghan. This work saw the dark space being used for both installation and the screening of a related video work. The work installed comprised of many types of record players and sound equipment, all hooked up to play on a circuit which is alternated, then synchronised. The darkness which controls this soundscape recalls primal beats and electronic yawns of the kind typified by modern music. It lasts roughly ten minutes, all of the time, the beat and the warping pace build to a maximum, before once again the lights go and for a minute or two there is just darkness. Suddenly the projector once again beams light into the space, showing a video of another previous performance by the very same instrumental construction. In each case the artist is generous with his constructed language, allowing us to see the ready-made weights used and measures taken so that the needle does what is required of it. The title of the work is *Bit Symphony* and it was only the odd technical hitch which took from the atmosphere of showmanship that is so vital to the piece. The whole of this eerie space, once a store for munitions, is filled now with a clash of ages. To the left, a mirror hangs over the fireplace, reflecting only darkness and artificial lights, lasting temporarily before the video ends and the room falls again to darkness.



Revolution, Jacco Olivier

The work of two international painters brought with it not only a sense of technically grand ambition but allied to that was a real sense of accomplished skill. The Dutch artist Jacco Olivier showed work that amounted to a blowing up of the painter's palette. This simple visual, both chaotic and controlled, moves about a giant screen. Presenting to us marks made without comparison or reflection, but simply as the result of paint. This type of intense exposure could be seen also in the work of Ann Craven, where her pairs of paintings are mirror reflections of one another. Each painting is predominantly black, the source of the image: a vase of white roses spilling out in a manner which sees the artist looking from above. Each time she captures the sprawling direction with marks not wholly abstract nor are they definable. While the work by Jacco Olivier combined video technology, paint and sheer awe to captivate the senses, it was the subtlety of the shift from mirror to real which asks most of the pertinent questions in the eight paintings shown by Craven in a small well lit room in the Kilkenny Castle Yard. If it can be said that one exhibit offers us a gorge of colour into which the horizon itself can be seen to fall, then the other does at least pick out the instincts which tell us not to stand so close. While one appears to delight in the insignificance of its form, the other seems to scrutinise and demonstrate the faults within the function of soft-focus memory. Not the same, not even close, but the success of each work can be put down to focused application and vibrantly excessive, perhaps even indulgent observation, not always a bad thing in respect to the making of art.



Roses, Ann Craven

It is right and proper that visual art be so prominent in Festivals such as this and the organisers seek continually to appoint works within the townscape which both enliven and expose the locality. In truth there is little artistic merit to continuing to do so, and yet for ten days each year artists and art lovers make their way to Kilkenny to see what and where the trail might lead them. It is of course a business and visitors to the town have this year alone seen to it that art will with any luck be well profiled come time to make plans for the next Arts Festival. It will be hoped that the same level of access is open to whomever is entrusted with making the arts visual in 2012.

Festivals like this one are a wealth of energy and contribute greatly to promote the arts. Yet perhaps more so they are a promotion of a certain place, and this years works overall faired well in highlighting the features of Kilkenny tourism. Much of the town is however simply a backdrop and perhaps this is where the effect of art may become an inclusive presence, drawing on already existent groups and organisations as a way to speak proudly of those who keep the local arts going during the festivals eleven and a half month down time.

Editor's note: Please see Darren Caffrey's review of *Supreme Fiction* by Ian Burns at the Butler Gallery [here](#), which ran concurrently with the Kilkenny Arts Festival.