



Isabel Nolan: The Weakened  
Eye of Day  
Irish Museum of Modern Art,  
Dublin

Caoimhe Kilfeather: This  
Attentive Place  
Temple Bar Gallery and Studios,  
Dublin

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Two shows by two Irish artists, on view concurrently in Dublin this summer, married the language of post-Minimal sculpture with work in other media to explore the idea of the exhibition as a way of world-making. The 'tendency' of each world was very different, however: Isabel Nolan's presentation, curated by Sarah Glennie, was

characterized by a vertiginous expansion outwards, from the four rooms of IMMA's East Ground Galleries and into an array of philosophical, cosmological and scientific discourses; Caoimhe Kilfeather's tended inwards, towards a spareness and concentration of terms, while at the same time insisting upon aesthetic and conceptual contact with the outside. Together (and, indeed, separately) the two exhibitions raised big questions concerning art's relationship with fundamental aspects of visual experience (space, light, colour), with abstraction and its histories, and with philosophical and poetic composition. At their best moments they both succeeded in combining aesthetic potency with conceptual poise, and mute opacity with associative eloquence.

The title of Nolan's show was derived from a poem by Thomas Hardy, 'The Darkling Thrush', written on the cusp of the nineteenth century, in which the sun is described as 'The weakening eye of day'. This metaphor becomes an emblem of a desolate wintry world, which in turn corresponds with the state of the speaker's inner life. In the poem, the bleak mood is punctured by the strange song of a thrush, who had chosen 'to fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom.' Nolan's exhibition was comprised of four main rooms containing work in a variety of media: mild steel sculptures (freestanding and on plinths); printed text pinned to the wall; modestly scaled paintings on canvas; delicately rendered coloured-pencil drawings; a brightly coloured, hand-tufted wool rug; nine ceramic bowls; and a large-scale digital photograph that covered the last wall (plus a less striking small sculpture of a donkey stationed outside). Linking these rooms were alcoves containing single works, and the exhibition was accompanied by a series of talks, screenings and events, plus a 38-minute audio work written by the artist, available online. These supplements explicitly drew in an array of scientific and philosophical ideas that had informed the development of Nolan's work.

The four rooms charted a narrative of cosmic proportions. The first, titled 'The visible edge of what can be known',

announced the arrival of the first solid rock on Earth, which for Nolan becomes a metaphor for the beginnings of reflective thought; second, 'The invisible and the visible', engaged medieval cosmology as a system for understanding the universe; 'A structure for reality revealed' explored scientific methods of observing, measuring and charting of space; and, lastly, 'The shadow of future events: well what do you expect?', obliquely, but with a strong deflationary energy, presented the death of the Sun and the end of evolution.

There were twenty works in all, each made as a result of Nolan's recent residency at IMMA. Sculpture was the dominant medium, and the constant in each room was a biomorphic vegetal form, built from a wire armature coated in plaster, painted, and set onto a handsome stone plinth. These other-worldly protagonists grew in stature as their plinths got taller, until in the final room the support had been toppled. The other work in the exhibition was largely nonfigurative, although the paintings evoke sunrises and sunsets, and the drawings were seemingly made after astronomical photographs; indeed, the idea of a 'non-figurative' art was itself put under some pressure by the landscape of concepts spread out around the show, lending a ready set of associations and symbolic possibilities to each piece.

Nolan's relationship to the history of abstraction becomes significant here: on one hand, she seems fascinated by the cosmic aspirations of late Symbolism and early pioneers of abstract painting (Piet Mondrian before World War I, Robert Delaunay, František Kupka); on the other, her relation to late Modernist and Minimalist sculpture was even stronger. The brightly coloured steel lattices invoked Anthony Caro, and the eponymous work in the final room, *The weakening eye of day*, perhaps the most impressive moment of the exhibition, recalled the awkward elegance of Eva Hesse's *Hang Up*. Here a great spiralling mild steel rod, clad in wadding that has been laboriously hand-stitched by the artist, looped and lolled across the room, like a cosmic force misshapen by fatigue or laughter.

Hesse's work has a kind of formal irony built into its mode of sincerity; but what is Nolan's comportment towards the cosmic rhetoric of the Orphists and Theosophists to which her paintings, rugs and drawings seemed to make reference? The potent finale of the last room, in which this spiral girates before a giant photograph of two donkeys confronting us from the graveyard at Bully's Acre (*The view from nowhen*, 2014), suggests an ironic and even derisive conclusion to this survey of humanity's attempts to grasp at ontological mysteries. But the overall tone of the exhibition, and especially its accompanying texts, was one of an avowedly uncynical, unselfconscious embrace of art's capacity to explore the fascinating productions of science and philosophy.

For me, however, the consistency and force of the exhibition was at times compromised by this same lack of self-consciousness, which sometimes manifested itself in a less rigorous approach. The artist's parable-like, quasi-scientific, quasiphilosophical written text in the first room, for example, lacked the formal subtlety and boldness characteristic of her sculpture (I thought the latter could have been left to evoke concepts of genesis and reflection without this kind of explicit signalling). Neither, for me, did the three paintings in the exhibition make a substantial address to the medium's own conventions and history (and I am not sure that this was even their aim). Unlike the drawings, though, they stood up only as elements within the ensemble of the room, rather than hold their own ground as individual artworks (Nolan's best work does both).

Nevertheless, there was an overall conceptual consistency lent to the various terms by the structure of the exhibition: not that each element stood for a specific concept (the tedium of contemporary art as scientific or philosophical illustration), but that artworks found their place within an ordered arrangement, a composition analogous to a musical work. This was one of Nolan's main propositions, I felt (and it is by no means hers alone): the exhibition as a figure of thought, a relational space of

flexible dimensions that could serve to connect and cohere, imaginatively, the individual elements within it. The last two rooms achieved this particularly powerfully. Abstraction may have lost faith in its own utopian myths, but its capacity to compellingly organise a world of forms and thoughts using a minimum of means continues undiminished.

Caoimhe Kilfeather's exhibition at TBGS, *This attentive place*, was curated by Rayne Booth and accompanied by a thoughtful essay by John Hutchinson. It consisted of seven artworks, the most striking of which was at first the least prepossessing. Entering the gallery from the street, the viewer was confronted by a rather dull makeshift wall of thin material hanging in vertical strips from a steel rod above. This screen created a corridor along the inside of the wall-length window, and it was only upon entering the inner space of the gallery that the viewer could turn back to look at the translucent strips of oiled and pigmented paper, and be struck by the luminous way in which they filtered the light of day. Transformed into a subtle gradation of blues, varying in hue and saturation, the fragile paper was not fixed at the bottom, and so was left to respond to the movements of the air as well as changes in daylight. The work is titled, *The rigid thing, the moving act*, and was made to specifically for the space at TBGS.

Before turning to see this lambent screen, however, the viewer might first have paused to examine one of two large-scale black and white photographs (*At the end of his nature [I]* and *[II]*). The second was hung some distance away, but each presented the same carefully-framed scene of patio doors looking onto a paved yard in a state of mild disrepair. This unspectacular scene recalls the courtyards of Pieter de Hooch, working in Delft in the 17th century, which present an outside that is more an extension of the domestic realm, but whose order was always threatened by an encroaching and disruptive nature. Kilfeather's two images are likewise carefully framed: in one the doors are open, in the other they are closed. This shift changes the image completely, and the images therefore quietly explore

what is after all a fundamental spatial opposition.

The most imposing presence in Kilfeather's exhibition was the enormous, *A Shade* (2014), a dyed cast concrete monolith encircled a few times by a slender brass ribbon. Trapezoid in shape, and measuring 270 x 102 x 79 cm, its ominous blackness was sheer and big and silent. The trompe l'oeil textured surface, which seemed to sag gently as if it were made of plastic netting, disguised a solid, strong, obdurate mass, and lent this looming presence an even more enigmatic air, like something ancestral perhaps.

These works were accompanied by three more modest sculptural pieces: one, a five-part series of intricate grids woven from steel and copper wire, infinitely sensitive to the light and shifts in the viewer's position; another, a column of white slipcast ceramic tiles, like a delicate and domestic *Endless Column*. And thirdly, and for me perhaps the most difficult work in the show, *The kind thought that sent them there* (2014), a drop-leaf wooden table, onto which had been placed four black cast bronze balls, each one hollow, with an aperture and with a distinctive surface texture, not quite natural and not quite artificial. For me this work posed a few too many questions (why that table, why one leaf down, why these textures, why the apertures, why brass, etc), answers to which I was not able to readily derive from the aesthetic and associative qualities of the piece itself.

Together the works evoked the domestic while at the same time keeping to a compressed, at times austere and archaic, formal language. For me, the spareness, potency and intelligence of this presentation were remarkable, conjoining opposing formal, material and conceptual terms: inside and outside, public and domestic, chance and design, movement and stillness, literalism and illusion, light and dark, slightness and monumentality, etc. Again, Hesse was perhaps the most astute post-war sculptor to stage these kinds of compressed formal oppositions, and her spatial sensitivity, extending to an architectural awareness in late works such

as *Expanded Expansion* and *Contingent* (both 1969), seems a presiding influence on Kilfeather's work. Indeed, Hesse's intense investment in the handmade, so different from her Minimalist contemporaries, seems equally crucial to both Kilfeather and Nolan.

Both of these exhibitions achieved a kind of intensity arrived at by other means than personal expressivity. Equally, and importantly, the two presentations did not suppose that the viewer's encounter with the work would finish when the he or she physically left the space; each courted aesthetic and conceptual reflection as an

intrinsic part of the experience of the work, which lasts as long as its mental residues. At their best, both exhibitions achieved a power and complexity that was the opposite of ingratiating.

Ed Krčma is Lecturer in History of Art at University College Cork and co-editor of *Enclave Review*. *Isabel Nolan: The Weakened Eye of Day* was on view 7 June – 21 September 2014; *Caoimhe Kilfeather: This Attentive Place* was on view 20 June - 20 August 2014.



Isabel Nolan: *The Weakened Eye of Day*, installation shot. Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Works featured: *The view from nowhere* (2014). Digital print on paper, 349 x 530 cm. *The weakening eye of day* (2014). Mild steel, wadding, wood, thread. 227 x 218 x 377 cm. *Here (beneath the endless night)* (2014). Mild steel, adhesive, plaster bandage, jesmonite and paint, 66 x 56 x 46 cm. Images courtesy of the artist, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin and Irish Museum of Modern Art.