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Ciaran Murphy / Kavi Gupta Gallery – review by James Yood

All twelve paintings Ciarán Murphy showed in his recent solo at Kavi Gupta allude to Nature. This was an exhibition of leering monkeys, blasted tree trunks, moonlit hills, hunting hyenas, palm trees, and wafting clouds, through which the artist, in his hesitant and proximate brushworks, offered a wary but wistful disengagement from the natural world. Nature appears to be something that Murphy largely experiences secondhand—there are not a lot of monkeys, hyenas, or palm trees in Dublin, where he lives—and his work seems to acknowledge an inchoate relationship to it, a kind of fissure that can become both suggestive and poignant. His paint handling conveys the coy awkwardness as much as his subject matter does. Murphy paints these mostly small images with a kind of washy and monochromatic indifference that purposefully eschews things like meticulousness and verisimilitude for a brushy and detached casualness that can at first lull one into seeing these images as trivial.

Monkey with Eyeshadow (all works 2008) depicts a seated simian with closed eyes, the lids of which are smeared with blue. The bright color floats on a sea of dreary monochromatic taupe, and suggests a simultaneous species- and gender-bending that is somewhat engaging and funny. The monkey sits on a platform whose perspective is inconsistent, as if Murphy couldn't be bothered to line up his elements in a logical manner. Murphy plays this juggling act throughout his works, which see moments of careful painting amid long stretches of careless space-filling, and snippets of engaged narrative purposefully undercut by a disinclination to articulate frankly, as if cunning and artifice are preferred over clarity and straightforwardness. He seeks a determined slightness with an occasional sharp sting, and one gets the impression that his is an intelligence sobered by ennui, though perhaps this is a pose or affectation. Still, nature will out, and several of Murphy's paintings are very thoughtful and even intense. Nothing could seem more reductive and casual than *Storm Damage*, where Murphy depicts a grove of palm trees silhouetted against a pale blue sky. The trees are rendered in a uniformly washy olive tone and what seem as few brushstrokes as possible, but the sequence of their thin vertical trunks, several slightly bent and one conspicuously denuded of fronds, successfully, if sparsely, evokes the sense of a hurricane passing through and conveys the fragility of nature.

Nature is also, however, shown to be inexorably cruel. *Hunting*, for example, portrays a hyena bending down to devour the corpse of its prey. Murphy paints this as if it is seen through night goggles, in that iridescent turquoise-black tone that makes the night look particularly intense and evokes primal rhythms. But most often he takes a more benign view of nature and its intersections with humanity and

culture. *Seven Sticks* is just that, an array of seven brown sticks lined up more or less in parallel, floating in an indeterminate space. There's no particular reason why this should be the largest painting in the exhibition, but it is, scale being another element Murphy employs in seemingly arbitrary ways. This work, with its off-center pile of sticks, initially appears dissimilar to the others, perhaps even irrelevant. But in its casualness the painting, like many of the others, unexpectedly offers a realm of possibility as suggestive as it is spare.

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