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# Order and chaos

Equivalence is not defined by the square inch, writes **Catherine Marshall**, of Ciarán Murphy's pairing with Nigel Cooke at the Douglas Hyde Gallery this summer

This summer the Douglas Hyde Gallery will host the work of two artists born since 1970 who unhesitatingly endorse the future of painting for a new century. The TCD gallery has steadfastly promoted serious art-making since it first opened in 1975 and the paintings of these two artists sits comfortably within that history. When the main gallery was increased by the addition of Gallery Two some years ago, the Douglas Hyde benefitted from the opportunity to present two quite different kinds of art experience, a chance to play with degrees of scale and intimacy, opposing views of a common theme, complementary or contradictory approaches to similar subject matter and, most importantly the possibility of dialogue between the two.

Nowhere has this been more evident than in this show of work by Nigel Cooke and Ciarán Murphy. Cooke's paintings 'aim to bring the whole history of painting together in one picture, not as a display of different styles but as a collection of visual mechanisms that convey the vastness of thought that

painting has brought about and been subjected to'. This is an ambitious aim, and certainly the range of historical allusions in his work is vast, from Van Gogh to Bosch and Caspar David Friedrich, with references to Philip Guston, Roy Lichtenstein and Roberto Matta along the way, not to mention touches of Arthur Rackham and Kate Greenaway. Paintings like *Mimosa In Valbonne (Writer Slumped at the Base of a Tree)* play with scale, putting small figures to the front of the picture plane when reason says they should be larger, forcing the viewer to bend to the ground to see the myriad of detailed activity unfolding almost at their feet; Romantic landscapes metamorphose into Pre-Raphaelite heads or Disneyland constructions and all refer to a post-tsunami world of devastation and degeneration (Fig 1). Each painting becomes an art historical cabinet of curiosities. Yet it is hard to take this juggernaut of luscious visual experience too seriously despite the emotive use of colour.

By contrast, Ciarán Murphy's approach is to present us with a series of individual specimens or isolated groups of specimens. These can refer to either the natural (animals, bones, sticks and skeletons) or built (ghostly architectural remains) environment and each one is carefully presented to reveal both the hesitancy and awkwardness of the single human perceiver in a world that for all its apparent familiarity is still strange and fragile. Like Cooke's paintings, Murphy's *F Stop* and *A Room with Walls*, give us pause (Figs 2&3). They ask that we question our place in a world where nothing is guaranteed. His ghostly staircase, in *A Room with Walls* can be read equally as a reference to Leonardo's famous staircase in the *Adoration of the Magi* or to the aborted housing projects of the Celtic Tiger. All the while his paintings resist the temptation to show off, acknowledging a hesitancy in the face of historic achievements, yet forging on despite the artist's scruples.

Murphy's paintings suggest 'silence and slow thought' where Cooke's are so packed with detail that the viewer is plunged into physical action, looking, bending, smiling, admiring. Both clearly and knowingly embrace what Cooke once described as a brain-aching process. The strategies they together employ offer the viewer two alternative ways of engaging with the world and with the history of art. Some twenty years ago Leon Golub and Nancy Spero had a joint exhibition at the Douglas Hyde. Golub hogged the walls but Spero bandaged the space above his large canvases with a continuous frieze of drawings about twenty inches high. When asked why she, as a feminist, allowed her husband to dominate the space, Spero responded, 'You just measure it, honey'. In this exhibition equivalence is not defined by the square inch. It resides in the strength of each artist's practice. The dialogue they generate is greater than the, very powerful, sum of the parts.

The Douglas Hyde has done it again. ■

Nigel Cooke, Gallery 1; Ciarán Murphy, Gallery 2, Douglas Hyde Gallery, TCD, Dublin, June – July 2013.

Catherine Marshall is a curator and art historian.



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**MURPHY'S PAINTINGS SUGGEST 'SILENCE AND SLOW THOUGHT' WHERE COOKE'S ARE SO PACKED WITH DETAIL THAT THE VIEWER IS PLUNGED INTO PHYSICAL ACTION, LOOKING, BENDING, SMILING, ADMIRING**

1 NIGEL COOKE b.1973  
*MIMOSA IN VALBONNE (WRITER SLUMPED AT THE BASE OF A TREE)* 2012 oil on linen backed with sailcloth 230x320x5.1cm © the artist; courtesy Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

2 CIARÁN MURPHY b.1978  
*F STOP* 2013 oil on canvas 70x100cm

3 CIARÁN MURPHY b.1978  
*A ROOM WITH WALLS* 2013 oil on canvas 35x40cm



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