

Space exploration

The tensions between the graphic and richly coloured areas of Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh's new paintings at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery have a strong emotive charge, writes **Catherine Leen**



Paintings', at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, the third show by Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh this year, builds on an artistic practice as profound as it is prolific. Ní Mhaonaigh has had numerous group and solo exhibitions since 2004, and her work is represented in prestigious collections such as the Arts Council of Ireland, the Office of Public Works and the Mermaid Arts Centre. Ní Mhaonaigh's 2004 show 'Deoraíocht' was

loosely based on Pádraic Ó Conaire's *Sothscúltha*, in that it explored the spaces depicted in the stories, specifically spaces of exile, but since that time her most constant reference has been to her own work. So impressive is this body of work that, despite the fact that she is only thirty-one years old, both her 2006 show 'Eatramh' and her 2008 show 'Platform' referenced paintings from her previous shows. This is not to say that her work has not evolved,

but rather that she has remained true to the concerns notable since the beginning of her career – the exploration of liminal spaces, whether in space or time; the tensions between a spare, pared-down aesthetic and a love of often lush colour; and the exploration of painting as a philosophical and performative endeavour.

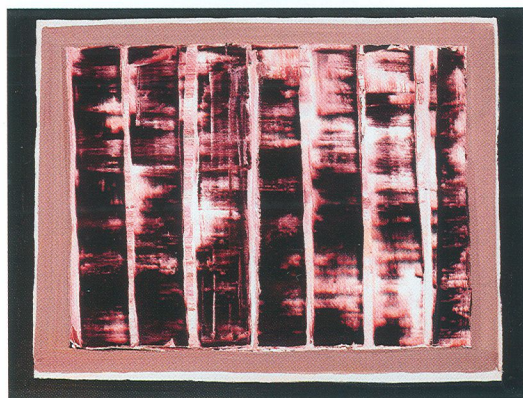
The tensions and even imbalances between the graphic and richly coloured areas of the works have a strong emotive



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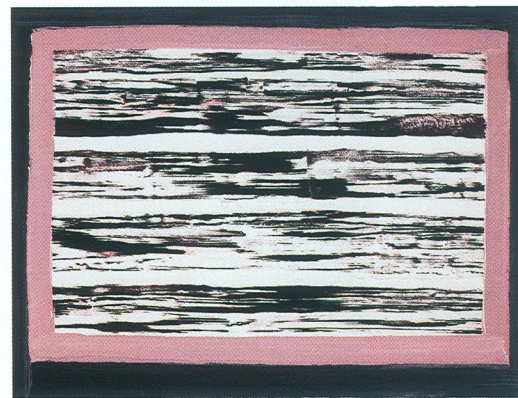
colour that suggest an interweaving of light and shade reminiscent of exposed and unexposed film. *Untitled* (Fig 4) breaks down this interplay of light and shade even further, so that the central image resembles a snowy TV screen devoid of images while simultaneously referencing seascapes. Ní Mhaonaigh's challenge to her viewers goes beyond complexity for its own sake to address key issues in contemporary abstract paintings – the limits of the image and the impossibility of translating an

charge that lends the spaces and voids a metaphorical dimension. The fact that the forms in her work can evoke vessels that resemble ancient currachs or modernist architectural designs, suggests a celebration of multiple forms of abstraction which can reference history or look forward but are always current. The constant evolution in her painting is perhaps most notable in her recent monochrome works, which focus less on colour to foreground line and the rigorous editing at the centre of her work. Simultaneously, however, she has developed another body of work that features dots and organic forms displaying a ludic quality. The careful repetition of these elements also suggests an engagement with technology, however, that is called into question by the insistence on the visual potency of what Ní Mhaonaigh has termed 'the hand made and process based.' Although the insistent return to typological manifestations of a particular practice may also suggest the saturation of



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engagement with them more of a dialogue. Her characteristic vessels return in *Untitled* (Fig 2), whose gentle, organic colours reference landscape painting, while the carefully etched lines in the background suggest an intimate engagement with surface and a somewhat stage-like setting for the central shape. *Untitled* (Fig 1) has a more architectural feel, though again there is evidence of the contemplation of staging in the framing of the central image and in the rather



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- 1 SINÉAD NÍ MHAONAIGH
UNTITLED 2008
oil on canvas
92x127cm
- 2 **UNTITLED**
2008 oil on
canvas
92x122cm
- 3 **UNTITLED**
2008 oil on
canvas 63x83cm
- 4 **UNTITLED**
2008 oil on
canvas 63x83cm

idea from the imagination to the conscious realm of representation. As she puts it: 'From my experience, the medium of paint lives and breathes on the canvas surface exercising a mindless accidental activity. Work will arise from a reaction to this experience. Abstract paintings with an ambiguous nature will address and research the vastness and non-communicable aspects of the painting process.' Paradoxically, this head-on engagement with the limits of painting and the difficulty of explaining one's work results in an expressiveness that creates another space – the metaphorical space where the subconscious and conscious meet beneath layers of paint. In a contemporary art world dominated by photography, digital imagery and other technologically enhanced media, Ní Mhaonaigh's persistent adherence to the difficult and demanding practice of abstract painting is in itself her most radical statement. ■

Sinéad ní Mhaonaigh, 'Paintings', at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin 2–25 July

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NÍ MHAONAIGH'S CHALLENGE TO HER VIEWERS GOES BEYOND COMPLEXITY FOR ITS OWN SAKE TO ADDRESS KEY ISSUES IN CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT PAINTINGS

contemporary society with images, the paintings have a dynamism and exuberance that persuade the viewer to engage with them and interpret them in a highly personal manner. Part of Ní Mhaonaigh's challenge to the viewer in this show is the absence of obvious references, as all of the works are untitled, an approach that frees them of overly specific semiotic or visual associations and makes the viewer's

spindly lines at the base of the canvas that recall makeshift props. It is in *Untitled* (Fig 3) that Ní Mhaonaigh's engagement with the relationship between deliberately ambiguous abstract painting and the specificity of photography becomes most explicit. Again here the notion of framing the image is foregrounded, but this time the central form is broken up into seven heavy columns, each of which contains washes of