



## Old **masters** made new



Angela Griffith previews a new suite of paintings from Geraldine O'Neill, recent winner of the Ireland-U.S. Council/Irish Arts Review Portraiture Award

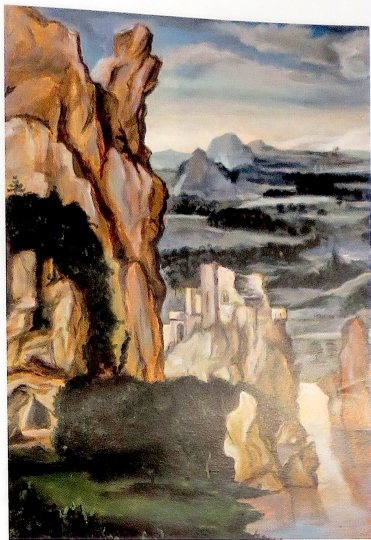
When asked what her ambitions are as an artist, Geraldine O'Neill responded by saying 'to keep making paintings'. The directness and sincerity by which O'Neill communicates, as a person and as a painter, is disarming. As her profile has grown nationally in recent years, her work is immediately recognizable among Irish art audiences comprising vividly painted objects from the world around her. Painting in the traditional medium of oil on canvas or linen, her images can be described as descriptively analytic of the substances she studies. It would be wrong to simply

see O'Neill's compositions as masterful in terms of their technique or mimetic quality (though they are just that), the objects depicted are contextually complex, their beautifully wrought surfaces demands that the viewer questions and considers their place within their world.

Throughout her career, O'Neill has had a galvanizing relationship with the art of the past. In her earlier work, she has visually quoted the compositions and motifs of Spanish and Italian Baroque painters and, more recently, she has appropriated the work of 15/16th-century Flemish artists, namely those of Hieronymus Bosch (1450 – 1516) and Joachim Patinir (1480 – 1524). Their images have provided backgrounds, similar to theatrical backdrops, for portraits of her children, or they are presented as fragmentary details. The appeal of the Flemish school is understandable as, like O'Neill, they marvel in nature, attempting to encapsulate all aspects of a divinely made world, but one, at times, sullied by the foibles of mankind. A new work entitled *Minion Man* (Fig 1) depicts the artist's son juxtaposed with Bosch's image of an impoverished and spurned wayfarer, taken from the exterior panels of the Prado's moralistic *Haywain Triptych* (1502).

Here, through her technical dexterity, O'Neill creates a marvellous visual conundrum, which the viewer must negotiate. Her revisualization of Bosch, studied from a reproduction, includes all the details of the original. However, on closer inspection, O'Neill uses a style of painting that is more painterly and fluid in its application when compared to Bosch's technique. There is a flatness created that testifies to the fact that it is a copy, and O'Neill does not attempt to deny this, in effect it is underlined. The painting of the child, in contrast, is a deft three-dimensional illusion, as is the accompanying suspended helium balloon and the satin-like cloth that surrounds the sitter's head. And yet, this person appears to stand in stark contrast to her rendering of Bosch's flatter, stylised caricatures.

Like many artists, past and present, O'Neill is greatly interested in scientific thinking and the Many-Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics holds a particular fascination for her. The theory states that there are many worlds which exist in parallel at the same space - time as our own and these corresponding realities, which never intersect, are each valid. And like science, art has sought to comprehend and control, realities as understood at particular points in history. Similar to the scientist, O'Neill uses empirical evidence, recording her close observations of select objects. Yet for all their visual veracity, her paintings are of realities



suspended in time, they are experiments in unravelling meanings.

O'Neill seeks to explore the triangular dynamic of the maker, the object and the viewer and how the relationships within change and evolve, grow and recede. Naturally as the artist, she creates works that speak to her, that resonant with her, but she is also aware of the viewer and how elements within images will have different meanings to each observer. For example, using her own children as models, quoting their drawings and their playthings in her compositions signifies her maternal bond with her offspring. Yet, the image of a child, children's toys and children's artwork will resonant with

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audiences beyond O'Neill's personal family unit. Viewers can project themselves onto the work. They will remember what it was to see the world with a child's eye, to create with abandon, to respond intuitively to things. O'Neill argues that it is part of mankind's nature to make images, to imagine. Despite knowing the wider cultural, social and political contexts of the objects and artworks (re)presented, O'Neill does not create polemical works. Rather, through the beguiling visual properties of her paintings she seeks to draw the viewer out by drawing them in – compelling them to look, to see and, ultimately, think. ■

1 GERALDINE O'NEILL *MINION MAN* 2016 work in progress oil on linen 200x190cm

2 Geraldine O'Neill in her studio

3 *LANDSCAPE* 2016 work in progress oil on linen 38x25cm

4 *BANG BANG* 2016 oil on linen 41x35cm

Geraldine O'Neill 'Many-World Interpretation agus rudai eile nach iad' Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin, 16 February – 18 March 2017. Photography Gillian Buckley.

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