

# Matters of life and death

Bosch meets quantum physics in Geraldine O'Neill's clever show, writes **Cristín Leach**

**G**eraldine O'Neill is such a remarkably good painter, it's a surprise that she is not better known. She paints in the

style and tradition of an Old Master, with skilled handling of light, shade, colour and composition, filling her paintings with many of the basic elements of the classical still-life and portrait genres. But she adds something more: the master touch. O'Neill paints like a realist with the sensibility of a surrealist, like a hard-nosed scientific investigator with the heart of a romantic, a cerebral thinker with the hand-eye skill of an artist at the top of her game.

A native of Dublin, O'Neill held her first solo show in 1998. She has won and been short-listed for portrait prizes, and her work is in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland and the Irish Museum of Modern Art. In her paintings, references to art history, contemporary popular culture, quantum physics, hard-won personal experience and the travails of childhood play out. She paints with love, curiosity and a feeling of nostalgia, mixed with the facts of the present moment. Her work has inquiry and intuition; much of it contrasts the finality of death with the vibrancy of childhood. It is a heartfelt and heady mix.

Perhaps it is this ultimate combination of head and heart, substance and style, that makes her oil paintings triumph. Dead birds lie atop her iterations of children's drawings while toys nestle among foodstuffs. Half-used tubes of paint are in her still lifes, and her children appear like time travellers from recognisable art-historical landscapes. All of it is a play on the idea of memento mori, Latin for "remember you will die". While focusing on the detail of a shiny olive, a child's hair or an element of an early 16th-century Hieronymus Bosch composition, O'Neill is painting a bigger picture — one about life itself.

The largest painting in her current solo show at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery is *Minion Man*. It is dominated by the image of a young boy — her son — holding a balloon featuring

the head of an animated yellow Minion character from the *Despicable Me* children's films. Minions seem likely to remain a popular childhood reference point for early 21st-century western society, and this floating object anchors O'Neill's painting firmly in the now. It is a version of *The Wayfarer*, as he appears on the exterior panels of *The Haywain Triptych*, a masterpiece by Bosch from about 1516.

The Renaissance master was celebrated for his depictions of hell, human turmoil, monstrosity and pain. The *Haywain* is about the consequences of sin; its exterior shutters contain what is known as *The Path of Life* panel, which feature a hanged man and a robbery in the background, both of which have been edited out of O'Neill's version.

The wayfarer is interpreted as a man who follows his path despite temptation — a version of the biblical prodigal son — and a symbol of laziness. Pilgrim, peddler or thief, he is on a journey through life.

In O'Neill's painting, her son is holding a broken football-table pole, on which three players are skewered. Like the wayfarer, the son holds the pole as a staff. He is wearing rubber boots, dressed for the journey or the task of his life. His face is a near pout; it is a face of heartfelt injury and insult, and it carries that sense of injustice that only children are permitted to indulge in publicly.

This is a put-upon, insulted, and hard-done-by child. Perhaps it is because his football table is broken, or his mother is painting, or simply that life feels unfair when you are a small boy with limited autonomy.

Mathematical equations and forms appear regularly in O'Neill's work. The title of this show, *Many-worlds Interpretation* *Agus Rudai Eile Nach Iad* ("and other things that are not"), refers to a brain-melting theory of quantum mechanics, which holds that many worlds exist in parallel at the same space and time as our

own. According to this concept, an infinite web of alternative timelines is creating new, distinct worlds in every moment, each of which is experienced by a different version of you. In other words, we live in a multiverse, not a universe.

The many-worlds interpretation has implications for our notion of self, our ideas about mortality, our understanding of time, and our interpretation of the world. O'Neill has described

painting large works in which art history serves as a backdrop to a contemporary portrait as "creating my own alternative world". Her work *Is Feidir le cat Schrödinger an Dá Thrá a Fhreastal*, which was shortlisted for 2014 Hennessy Portrait Prize, incorporates "seemingly disparate concepts of history painting, quantum theory and child's play", she has said.

This show includes small paintings with references to Chernobyl. Nuclear power plant

structures and what look like abandoned decontamination vehicles appear in the paintings *Weeds*, *Tank*, *Lá an Luain* and *Gan Dídean*. *Scamall Nimhe*, which translates as "poisoned cloud", features a toy American Indian, a childish blue-crayon-sketches rain cloud, a half-squeezed tube of red paint, a house dark with overgrowth, and a dead bird. O'Neill makes work about the fragility of life and beauty — and the impermanence of both. Her

**She paints with love, curiosity and nostalgia**

tank paintings are overlaid with a painted tendril of flowering buttercup blooms in one, and a red-tipped tulip in the other.

O'Neill's use of the Irish language in the paintings' titles points up her interest in origins, roots and meaning, in what can be conveyed or hidden by language and imagery, and what gets lost in interpretation and translation. Every element of her work can be read symbolically but, as with Bosch, there is no definitive guide for meaning.

**Heartfelt image**  
O'Neill's *Minion Man* features a picture of her son

Her paintings are rich in the physical use of colour, the depth of pigment, and in the layers of references.

O'Neill paints children, flowers and still-life objects, the preserve of genteel women painters, classically and socially acceptable subject matter. She turns all of that on its head by adding weighty art-historical imagery and references to quantum physics. In doing so, she lifts these symbols out of their fixed meanings and reposit such domestic references as important.

Her portrait of the fashion designer John Rocha, part of the National Portrait Collection, includes a child-like drawing of a family, Rocha's family, in an inserted rectangle at the bottom. A traditional portrait, it includes the tools of her subject's trade and her own stylistic twist, making it instantly recognisable as an O'Neill painting.

She is, in the broad sense, a portrait and a still-life painter, but she appropriates, acknowledges and embraces the traditional elements associated with that kind of work while producing paintings that tell a personal story in which broader, universal themes are concurrently at play.

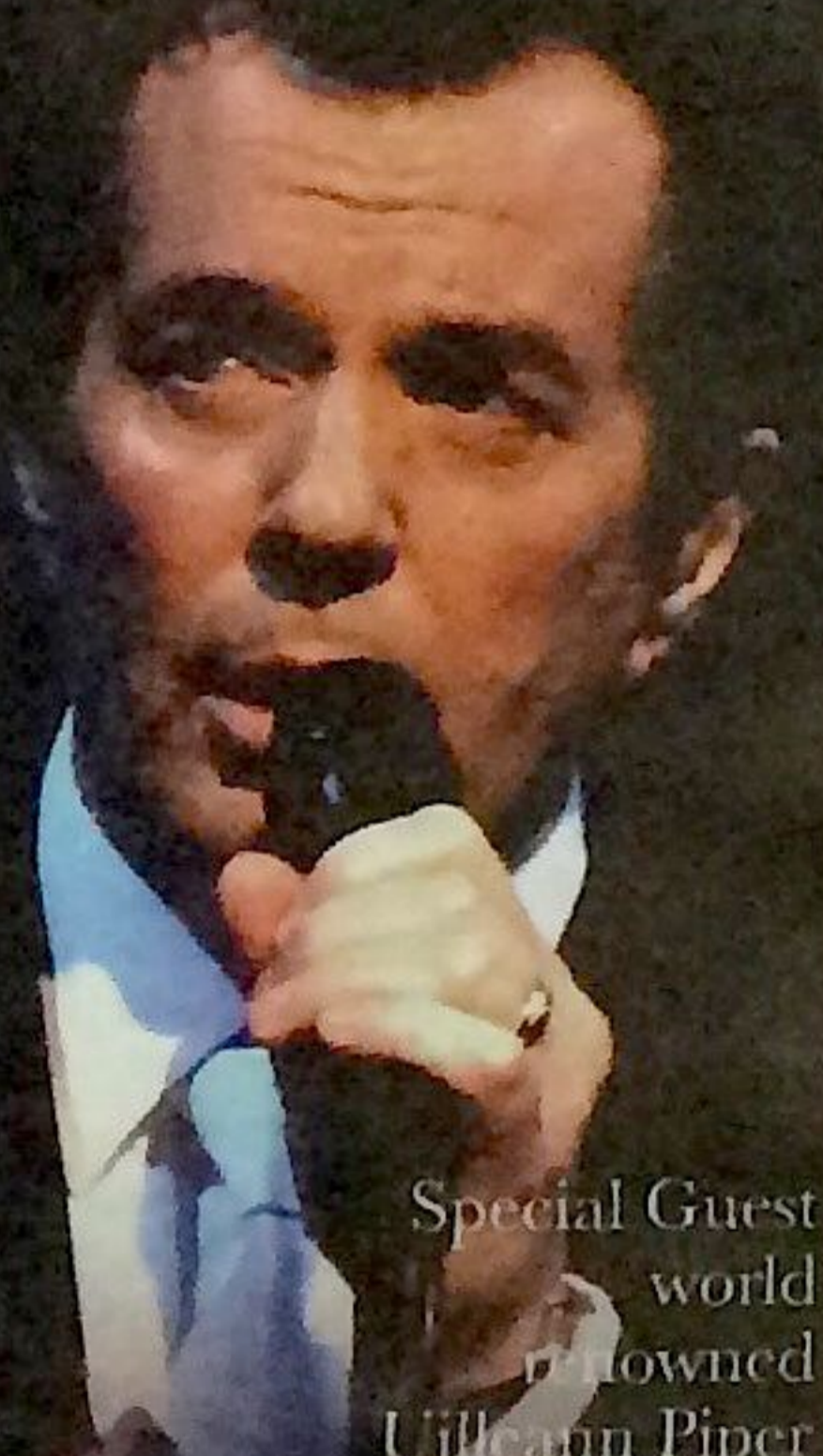
*Ag Teitheadh* (*Fleeing*) is a small painting in which two butterflies appear on an image of a horse. Two childish, oblong ovals appear in the sky above as pink clouds. Simplicity and complexity co-exist in this work — life and death, too — as if to prove that neither is intrinsically more important than the other.

Each element of O'Neill's most enticing, thoughtful paintings carries a weight of meaning, cerebrally and emotionally. Nothing is overworked. She builds up detail and finish where needed, and lets it go when it is not. She picks and chooses from the symbols and art-historical references available to her. It is an approach that makes for nuanced, clever work, which is endlessly visually pleasurable. O'Neill makes heart- and brain-felt paintings that are beautifully formed and seriously meant. **■**

*Many-worlds Interpretation*  
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