

Exhibiting a studied lust for still life



VISUAL ARTS
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UNUSUALLY FOR A contemporary artist, Geraldine O'Neill has worked almost entirely within the genre of still life. This is mostly true of the new work that makes up her fine exhibition at Draíocht, *Luan an tSléibhe*, though in it she extends the bounds of her own practice and still life itself. Not that she has never seen still life as a fixed historical category, a set of given conventions to be learned and adhered to. Rather, she has taken elements central to its historical character and pressed them into service in relation to her own world, personally and in the wider social and cultural sphere.

Compared to much of her earlier work, what we see in Draíocht is relatively spare, though it reflects a level of technical virtuosity

that's been evident from the first. Still life has an extraordinary long and complex history, and virtuosity has played a central if intermittent role in that history. The idea of imitating reality so skilfully as to be mistaken for it, or provide a substitute for it, has been a recurrent feature of still-life painting. Combine that with material richness and you come up with the Dutch Pronkstilleven, fabulously ostentatious displays of the finer things rendered in a mode of heightened realism.

O'Neill explored her own version of Pronkstilleven over a period of several years. The surfaces of her paintings became incredibly busy and crowded, not just in terms of the density of objects included, but also with regard to her use of colour and texture. She ratcheted everything up, creating strident, blaring effects that hovered at the edge of optical discomfort. Crumpled bolts of vividly coloured cloth shared space with other still life staples, including game board for the pot, together with such modern variants as preserved and processed foodstuffs. But, with an omnivorous eye, she also included other things: children's toys; plastic figures of comic-book heroes; inflatable dinosaurs; shiny balloons; even the materials of her art – paintbrushes and pots, tubes of pigment.

There's a sense of excess, an all-consuming



Geraldine O'Neill's studio, with *Boy* in progress. Photograph: Jacqui McIntosh

consumerism, in these paintings, but not in the cause of facile moralising. It seems to be more to do with O'Neill wondering about the busyness and glitter of life as illusion or diversion. The very fullness and ripeness of still life is always haunted by an opposite, elegantly encapsulated in the French term, *nature morte*. For a painting of lush things is a reminder of what was rather than what is, of just how fleeting human life and aspirations are. Beauty and ripeness and wealth are transitory. This aspect of still life has always been acknowledged and became dominant in the form of the religiously inflected *vanitas*, laden with emblems of mortality and futility.

Gradually other subjects made an appearance in O'Neill's paintings, and they take centre stage in *Luan an tSléibhe*. One is the dead songbird, a stark symbol of innocence cut

down. As in the case of the canary in the coalmine, the songbird is also a sentinel, offering a warning that things have gone awry, a point underlined in a couple of paintings based on scenes from Chernobyl, *Sick Bed* and *Road*. These, in a spare, understated way, have a post-apocalyptic atmosphere, and may in turn refer to the show's overall title with its reference to Judgment Day.

Another recurrent feature in the recent work is the child's coloured drawing, usually of a symbol of hope, and particularly of a rainbow, but other motifs, including birds, an angel and a house also appear. Plastic action figures also evoke the superhuman confidence of the child's imagination.

These tokens of optimism are written onto the represented world, which is the grown-ups' world, the world of mortality and hubris and

shattered illusions. In mapping out all this, O'Neill's work is never purely about iconography. Just as important is the nature of her images. The songbirds lie against renderings of painted landscapes or trompe-l'oeil wood panelling. Each picture is constituted from several layers and modes of representation. Even the landscapes are, it is important to remember, still lifes.

In one of her largest paintings to date, O'Neill expressed the idea of the child's innocent, unbounded appetite for life and the world, of a supreme confidence destined to come to grief, by reworking Velázquez's equestrian portrait of the young Prince Balthasar Carlos, the doomed heir to the Spanish throne. Her current exhibition features a reworking of another Velázquez portrait of Balthasar, this time on foot. In place of the prince's sporting gun, O'Neill's *Boy* wields a paintbrush. Rather than killing, he hopes to create.

Luan an tSléibhe is certainly O'Neill's most downbeat show to date, though in many respects that is a matter of perception rather than reality. The same shadows and forebodings were built into even her brightest, liveliest works, but those works were more conspicuously about the glitzy surface of things, the noise and distraction that cover underlying emptiness and doubt. There is much less visual incident in the work at Draíocht, less obvious entertainment for our eyes. The paintings demand to be looked at more slowly, in a more considered frame of mind. Once we do that, it's clear that, without ever being prescriptive, in their complex strategies of representation and meaning, they lead O'Neill, and us, into new areas of reflection.

Luan an tSléibhe Paintings and other works by Geraldine O'Neill. Draíocht, the Blanchardstown Centre, until Nov 22