Séan Paircéir – Book Launch Speech

Good evening – I sit most days under a cascade of Salvatore’s puke – imagined puke maybe (remembered??) puke but nonetheless a luminescent flow of glassy yellow beer puke from a piece, called “Me Being An Arse” (pages 76/77) – when I saw it I became focused/obsessed with owning it – and after a year of dilly dallying we did – it was through that dilly dallying that I got to know Kevin and Alannah here at the gallery – and most importantly got to know Salvatore a little bit better – so it was without hesitation that my wife Aislin McGuckin and I responded when asked to support Salvatore and this publication – this visual “portrait of the artist as a young man” –

When you have an interest in the arts and you encounter an artist who bursts into imagination as Salvatore has – an artist who simultaneously feels fresh and new and yet their work also seems to resonate with a deeper understanding of painting and its history – some instinct is awakened in you and you want to travel further with them in their development as an artist.

“Me Being An Arse” is a piece that conforms to the compositional frame that I admire most in Salvatore’s work – there’s an identifiable location, he himself is present, he drives some action – mainly provocative, an independent observer responds and narrates the paintings emotion for us – there’s a narrative punch – it’s a recounting or an accounting of an event – a visual documentary – maybe in this instance of life events from those formative years of your twenties where – especially in a drinking life – we’ve possibly at one time or another all been an arse – by our own definition – and importantly the definition of others, particularly those who love us. In the words of the Hothouse flowers from their twenties – “I’m coming face to face with my conscience. Coming to an understanding with myself” –

I think conscience is a looming presence in Salvatore’s work – but not necessarily in the way a catechism might define it – but before I stray into that territory of amateur psychology – I will try and remind myself of Salvatore’s rules – “don’t ask me why I paint – don’t ask me where I’m from”.

The thunderclap painting, the coup de foudre was “Me and my Dad in McDonalds” which has the compositional, emotional and narrative power of very few paintings that I’ve ever encountered. Situated appropriately in this publication next to “Me Ma healing me” – these concluding works in the first abbreviated catalogue – set the point of departure for the picaresque, slightly roguish, no in fact very roguish, narration that these paintings evoke – populated with family, with events, with imagined ghouls within and without, his companions, friends and most strikingly lovers. Joyce, that first master of the internal monologue, famously declared himself a genius at an early age – as the first painting in this publication makes a similar claim – “Genius outside Kevin Kavanagh” – not I think an arrogant manifesto – but a declaration of salvatore’s ambition – maybe in the self – deprecating way Dubliners use the word “genius” – yours though I don’t think is Daedalus’ task – “to forge in the smithy of your soul the uncreated conscience of my race”. (conscience – that word again) But it is an ambition to forge some sort of raw honest truth in this, your own creative narrative, your very own distinct creative output.

Me Being an Arse – is of course a metaphorical Arse – but there are plenty of other non-metaphorical arses in these works – many of the paintings in Fancy Situations confront us – yes let me start with those words “confront us” – with a physical reality that is not usually – at least not for my generation – not usually so publicly expressed. Joyce again – interviewed on Ulysses by the critic Frank Budgen – “my book is the epic of the human body… In my book the body lives in and moves through space and is the home of the full human personality… If they had no body they would have no mind – it’s all one” – My sense is that mind and body “it’s all one” is how Salvatore presents himself in this work – in his own words paintings that are “intuitively, rougher, more tender” – two works here “Period Sex” and “In Love after Bath” capture that corporeal reality – that journey from intuitive – raw sexual emotion – to a tender and reflective exploration of the self.

For my magpie mind the honesty of these works provokes comparison with Tracey Emin’s unsettling directness – recalling in a totally different way her quilted tent “everyone I’ve ever slept with 1963-1995” – Salvatore’s paintings have a different – maybe less confrontationally painful and more self-reflective tone, I don’t know why this word popped up, but even gentle presence. I see something of the thoughtful provocation contained in Paula Rego’s paintings – and I know – as we have discussed it – the exhibition of her work at IMMA a few years ago – titled Obedience and Defiance – hit home with Salvatore in a profound and subsequently inspirational way. Given we’re in a gallery you will forgive me this momentary historical detour but I also see an echo of Otto Dix’s work in Weimar Germany – not because of some sophomoric comparison with the times we live in – but because of the directness of the sexual narrative in his arousal – usually suggested is in these paintings depicted with clarity.

But closer to home I visited one of my favourite paintings in the National Gallery of Ireland – Jan Steen’s the Village School – which depicts a 17th century schoolmaster administering the wooden spoon an unfortunate young scholar, who’s crude scratchings are discarded in a crumpled torn mess on the floor and the origin of his punishment. I wanted to see again the ambiguous response in the face of the young girl to his mild beating – is it visceral pleasure at the vanquishing of an early foe? – or horror at the pain inflicted on a sibling? – her contorted features mediating the event for us in a way that resonates across centuries. I see Salvatore adopting that method of capturing emotion on the canvas in particular in the faces of the women (I’m assuming your mother and grandmother) in “Birthday” in this collection – drawing us into the painting and a weird moment in time.

Serendipity places Peter Breughal the Elders – Peasant Wedding – next to Jan Steen’s work – a hands in the wrong places people with contorted faces painting – and Orgy at Castle Market – may be Dublin’s modern day equivalent – but I remind myself that Kevin in a few words asked for a few words – and I’ve breached that agreement.

So to conclude – Salvatore has never described himself in these terms to me or in any other published words I can find or in the words contained in this book, and I suspect he may be embarrassed or annoyed by them. But these resonances are why I believe he is on a journey to be an even more substantive painter – this book is an important record of some of the milestones in this first chapter. Buy it – tell your friends about it. Thank you for your attention.