

Dermot Seymour 'The Nine Primates of Ulster'

Kevin Kavanagh Gallery
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USING WORDPLAY TO title his work, Dermot Seymour's new exhibition, 'The Nine Primates of Ulster' at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery exchanges bishops with monkeys in a series of plaintive portraits of various simian types, named individually as the Primate of each county of Ulster. Seymour's practice has consistently featured the physical and psychological landscapes that shape the North of Ireland and border counties, using wit and a sympathetic, bewildered eye for its contradictions and absurdities.

Reflecting on his career in an interview with Martin Mackin at the Kevin Kavanagh Gallery last month, Seymour described the 'north' as a place where ordinariness provides cover for 'hidden uncertainties'. He spoke affectionately about Monaghan where he lived for some years and which, like Cavan and Donegal, are part of Ulster but not part of 'Northern Ireland'. For Monaghan people, who Seymour says, "talked like me," the territory is blurred, sharing services, shopping, farms and employment in a continuous landscape. In a sequence of follies, the fictional 'Nine Primates of Ulster' bare no relation to extant diocesan boundaries which, in turn, pay no heed to county boundaries or the border. He dryly recounted how the first painting completed in the series, *The Primate of Antrim* (2023), which, when finished, reminded him of Ian Paisley, gave him the impetus to continue, initially to complete the 32 counties, but in the end, stopping at the nine of Ulster.

In his introduction, Mackin describes a fundamental quality in Seymour's work as its *soulfulness*. More than any other animal, even cows or dogs, monkeys have an uncanny human-like expressive range that Seymour captures well. This suits his painting technique that hovers in a narrow gap between realism and a tightly controlled painterliness. In 'The Nine Primates of Ulster' the likeness and details are exact, camouflaging intensely orchestrated brushwork. Except for the *Primate of All Ireland* (2024), each primate is presented in front of a filtered background that provides no sense of gravity or depth of field. This vacant air-brushed texture intensifies the focus on the primate and its remarkable human-like pose and expression.

The absurd cross-identification between monkeys and bishops begins a slippery slope into a bizarre unconscious musing of possible underlying narratives in each portrait, which admittedly, is an agreeable fiction. One can't help feeling sympathy with the melancholic eyes and hunched shoulders of the Primates of Derry and Down, or to admire the rugged, heroic, Guevara-like portraits of the Primates of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. The *Primate of Tyrone* (2023) seems perplexed but earnest as he attempts a pained grin, while the *Primate of Fermanagh* (2023) stares out through an exhausted expression of sadness. The much larger canvas for the *Primate of All Ireland* has the unlikely looking oligarch prowling over a border landscape of tidy bright green upland fields, with a single peak at its centre. It changes the dynamic in the exhibition and is a reminder of the unyielding hierarchy of the Church.

The premise of some correlation between monkeys and bishops remains unclear. Despite their 'soulful' expressions, the exhibition chills any anthropomorphic altruism and speaks more of the narcissistic human tendency to view the world and everything in it through the prism of human experience. It's hard to tell if Seymour is challenging or reinforcing accepted notions of monkeys as devoid of autonomy and bishops as holders of authority. In the end, it doesn't matter and is not important. In response to Mackin's question about whether he is a political artist, he said: "I'm just presenting what I am walking through." This ambiguous narrative has been articulated for many years in Seymour's 'bucolic' landscapes with cows, sheep, helicopters, missiles and flags that camouflaged what he describes as decades of "hidden uncertainties, hidden contradictions and the hidden histories... underneath the paint..." In 'The Nine Primates of Ulster', he continues to leave everything open and unanswered with an abundance of humour and pictorial finesse.

Carissa Farrell is a writer and curator based in Dublin.



[Top]: Dermot Seymour, *The Primate of Fermanagh*, 2023, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 60 cm; image courtesy of the artist and Kevin Kavanagh Gallery. **[Bottom]:** Dermot Seymour, *The Primate of Antrim*, 2023, oil on canvas, 60 x 50.8 cm; image courtesy of the artist and Kevin Kavanagh Gallery.