



Maureen O'Leary: By the same sea, homes of the Irish diaspora

Verity Babbs 28/09/2023



Pink roof, oil on linen, 12 x 12 inches, 2018

Twenty five small-scale oil on canvas works are spread through the exhibition space of The Custom House Studios + Gallery in Westport, County Mayo. The works have a quality that O'Leary has perfected - capturing the sublime in the everyday and, in so doing, reminding viewers that the line between the two is much finer than we take for granted.

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This new body of work presents views of suburban neighbourhoods on Long Island, where O'Leary herself lives and works. The paintings focus on small, closely-cropped, areas like a roof or a driveway. Each composition feels as if it had been selected from photographs taken quickly from a moving vehicle driving through New York State - none of them perfectly centred, their subject matter banal, and all buildings seemingly much the same as the next.

These are the homes of second and third generation Irish Americans (O'Leary also has dual citizenship) and this exhibition grapples with the concept of an American Dream which drew more than 4 million Irish immigrants to the US between 1820 and 1930, and the ways in which by leaving one home to create another, the two places become intertwined. Just as the Irish Hunger Memorial in New York City saw a County Mayo house which had been abandoned during the Great Famine transported piece by piece across the Atlantic, the American houses in O'Leary's paintings have in effect 'come home' to Ireland.

This new body of work is a strong addition to O'Leary's portfolio, in which the artist has already shown herself to be a master of turning everyday items (such as her 2014/15 series of roasted chickens from grocery stores) into deeply impactful compositions which call into question quite how humdrum the object in question really is. Her great strength as a playful colourist shines through in this series, with her experiments in the colour of shadows and highlights bordering on Fauvism. The marvellous light in which O'Leary bathes her scenes acts like the filter of a blurred memory. The titles of the pieces are matter of fact, as if jotted on the back of a photograph label. They emphasise the ordinariness of these places - 'Pink Roof' 'Small Porch' 'Blue Wall' - while their colour scheme renders them divinely fantastical. Is that not the American Dream? For the heavenly to become everyday?

Nostalgia is key to the patriotism that holds fast to the American Dream and also keeps Americans claiming European heritage even after the last member of their family to be born in that country died generations ago. It is commonplace for Europeans to roll their eyes when Americans refer to themselves as "German" or "Scottish" when this tie is more than two generations old. And yet, the nostalgic longing for 'the old country' remains potent in each passing generation, turning the original place of departure into as much of a paradise as the original destination promised to be. The homes we see in these paintings - bright white walls, clean, safe, uniform - are testament to the American Dream, but this dream ultimately disappoints and returning to Ireland becomes the real dream. A cross-Atlantic transference of hope is captured in O'Leary's paintings which complicate the notion of American idealism. It is this sea via which hopes, values, and people are exchanged, which forms the title of this exhibition.

The pieces in this exhibition seem to have a single theme - the light and shadow on the homes of Long Island - but so much more is communicated in the selection and execution of these close-up compositions. Their otherworldly colour scheme paired with their

CRISTIN TIERNEY

mundane subject matter challenge the notion of 'reality' - when what was once so exciting to our forebears travelling across the Atlantic is now so humdrum that being painted at all - let alone in these fantastical colours - seems a subversive act.

The historic Westport building makes for a wonderfully apt venue for the exhibition. Its age reminds us that although American society and industry developed at pace during the 19th and 20th centuries, the original home of the Irish diaspora was already long heavy with culture and fraught with history. The Irish-American desire - to escape to a land that is free, stable, and safe - has flowed in both directions for more than 100 years, and 'By the same sea, homes of the Irish diaspora' expertly captures glimpses of that dream and hangs them in an ideal venue for dissecting its promises.

'By the same sea, homes of the Irish diaspora' runs at [Custom House Studios + Gallery](#) from September 28th to October 22nd 2024.

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