

Mary Burke Suburbanscapes

Catalogue Introduction

by Aidan Dunne (1991)

Cinema and television are at home in the city, having grown up with those familiar urban and suburban spaces that have dominated life in the West in the twentieth Century. But painting, an older art and one legitimately associated with such qualities as singularity and organism, as opposed to the smooth, geometric uniformity of mass production, has struggled long and hard to find a foothold in an environment shaped by building and, more significantly, perhaps, electronics technology.

At its most extreme, this sense of dislocation has led to painting, which, in effect, rejects the twentieth century, confining itself to acceptably picturesque themes and subjects. More profitably, painting has left the lion's share of representational work, in relation to the megalopolis, to the appropriate technology and, as in the case of the Futurist for example, continued the job of description by other means, or quite reasonably, simply occupied itself elsewhere. Yet, as ever, artists have been drawn to depict the world around them.

Take the relevant case of Edward Hopper, the American who, against the grain, made his life work the straightforwardly realistic depiction of a world that had been hitherto essentially invisible to the fine arts, if pivotal in literature and movies. Hopper's world was the big, anonymous modern city and what distinguishes his paintings, etchings and drawings is not so much the mere fact that he chose this urban ambience but that he finds in it such a rich source, and that he is able to describe so well what it is like to live in the city. His Nighthawks and Loners are as effective as any mythological hero or heroine in embodying a sense of human possibility, of the human predicament, and the casual monumentality of their urban surroundings is as aesthetically legitimate as any Arcadian vista.

More recently, many photorealists have chosen to use the anonymity of the photographic image as a vehicle for painting, subordinating constituent elements – brushstrokes, surface texture, expressive distortion, analytical reconstruction – to the smooth skin of photographic verisimilitude. The Camera is as at home in the city as in nature, and photorealist painting in a sense uses it as a Trojan horse to capture the stronghold of the enemy. Mary Burke cites one such painter as an influence, albeit more in a sense of finding his work interesting than specifically building on it. She liked the shop-fronts of Richard Estes for their smooth brash urbanism, the way they dealt with manufactured things. In another respect, as well, her work relates to his: though his images are entirely manmade subjects, the human presence is, to put it mildly, only obliquely indicated. One of the first things you notice about her pictures also is the absence of people in the spaces that exist exclusively to accommodate them.

Almost from the beginning, while still in art college, she felt inclined to explore in her work the immediate environment in which she, and most of her contemporaries, had grown up: the aesthetic no-mans-land of the suburbs, those palpable expressions of the prosperity and aspirations of an emergent middle class, which offered each family a comfortable dwelling, a

garden front and rear, garage for the commuter's car, in short a space to express a sense of individual self.

The suburbs are in fact a bid to regain arcadia in a post-industrial revolution world, an urban centred universe, each house and garden a haven, a retreat from the industrial and commercial focus. Although, as the move to suburbanization encompassed progressively lower socio-economic groups, the Arcadian ideal was necessarily compromised, reduced to formulaic grids of a strictly token opulence, something exemplified only too clearly in the way more recent, monotonous housing developments, compressed to achieve the maximum density of habitation on valuable land, retain in the names of streets and estates the natural and rural features that previously occupied their sites – all those groves and orchards – or incorporate a few tame oaks or beeches from erstwhile forest. Individuality, likewise, gave way to sameness, governed by the lowest common denominator of consumerism. Yet the suburbs are a success story, their attainment a near universal aspiration.

In depicting so directly the particularity of the suburbs, with their characteristic trappings- the transient, individual style of furnishing, decoration, cars, for example – Burke has her work cut out for her. Hopper's poetic city scenes may be aesthetically admissible, but a semi-detached house with a saloon car in the driveway and a row of conifers on the opposite grass verge? Such a scene offers an immediate reflection of many Irish people's lives, one that they might resist if presented with it in the guise of art. The pictures on their walls are likely to portray something closer to the Arcadian idyll of which their own lifestyle is a distant, parodic relation, such as an undemanding landscape bereft of cars and electricity pylons, a still life or image culled from the herd of art historical validation.

The suburbs are soap land, perceived, generally without irony, as a contemporary arcadia, a middle-class subtopia content in the uniform blandness of its features, its entrainments, its possibilities. But there is a dark side to the suburban dream, glimpsed in, for example, Eric Fishl's voyeuristic psychodramas, Jane Campion's film 'Sweetie'- which is in some respects like a black parody of Neighbours – or in the novels of Ruth Rendell, who has to a large extent built her career on her observations of deviant and aberrant behavior enacted behind, and in a way engendered by, an innocuous suburban façade.

In the genuine affection Burke's work expresses for the suburbs, for their space, their peace, their privacy, there is sometimes an unmistakable hint of unease, and this unease is rooted in the absence at the heart of each painting, a necessary absence from the artist's point of view. There is a Hopperish desolation to many of her night-time scenes of deserted roads and paths, illuminated by the electric glow of street and house lights. Her images are often marked by signs of imminent or recent presence: the open door, the raised boot lid on a car, the waiting chair. Occasionally a fragment of her own reflection intrudes.

The absence that such details can quite strongly suggest adds an edge of unease to many compositions. The pool of yellow light over the wall in the next house, the street, where, surely, someone must be at any moment, the space that still reverberates with the sound of a departing car or distant children's voices. We can see and sense these things from Burke's images. The serenity of the empty space is charged with tension because we look at it and can populate it exactly in our imaginations, because it is, for most of those likely to see it, an

altogether familiar world. The observer becomes the absent subject, and only the observer can draw the strands together, can assemble the picture.

Her caution with regard to the figure is deep-rooted: She recalls feeling, at a certain stage in college, that figure drawing and painting were just not what she wanted to do. The figure has since been an active absence in her work, active in the sense that, in her own phrase, “houses are like second skins into which people fit”. Our houses are shaped in our own image. But to include the figure would, she feels, irrevocably alter the balance of the picture. Figures dominate the space and prevent it from speaking for itself.

In any case, the initial layer of content of Burke’s images, their representational detail, is by no means the end of the story. In a sense her pictures take us through the image. We can see it dissolve before our eyes into something approaching demonstrations of optical phenomena though her pastels are not, of course, such demonstrations. She is fascinated by shadows, reflections, and by the glare of light on smooth surfaces. Distorted reflections take on a life of their own, twisting and reinventing the simplest things, turning them into abstractions. In a way this is entirely in keeping with her pictorial strategy, which is, broadly speaking, to take the ordinary, subject it to rigorous scrutiny, and reveal it to be something quite strange, not at all as familiar as we have supposed. Hence surfaces that are inveterately deceptive, that will not hold our glance, through which images slip and slide or are broken down and rendered as abstract patterns: polished wood, the glossy paintwork of doors and cars, plain, frosted and wired glass, tiles, chrome.

Like Hopper, but more frequently, her colours take on almost acidity, they have bite. This involves heightening the natural colours, organising individual pictures around tightly plotted arrangements of related hues. Blues and violets are ignited by splashes of orange and yellow. Whole suburban vistas are shot through with a kind of luminescence. The pace of her work is sure, methodical. It is like the photorealist’ to the extent that she eschews the expressive apparatus of gesture to animate the surface, except in the sense that, just as they use brushstrokes of one sort or another, and she habitually uses oil pastel, every constituent mark is a gesture. But the gestures are woven into patterns that render them essentially invisible.

Burke’s recent pieces encompass ever more ambitious reaches of built environments and public places, a trend that started, perhaps, with her paintings and pastels made at Dublin Airport and that has continued with some outstanding work made during a residency at a school in Birr, Co. Offaly. These latter images display an inclination to elaborate on – and delight in – complex, technically demanding spatial arrangements, but they are altogether in line with her root concern. That root concern might be expressed as simply this: to make fine art from spaces conventionally held to be beyond the pale, and through such exploration to raise interesting questions.