

Blanchardstown: Mary Burke at Draíocht



Mary Burke, *Semidetached Portrait*, 2004, oil pastel on paper, 56 x 41cm; courtesy Draíocht

Semi-detached Reflections comprises Mary Burke's latest body of work, a series of paintings executed in oil pastel. All are detailed observational studies of suburban landscapes reflected in the bodywork of a car. Draíocht Arts Centre is a fitting location for this exhibition: from the first-floor gallery where the work is shown we look out onto a mass of parked cars, a half-hearted burst of generic (once exotic) palm trees, and the jagged and curved shapes of the Blanchardstown Shopping Centre. (Incidentally, the Blanchardstown Centre has actually displaced Blanchardstown itself as the 'town centre'.) This site foregrounds the twin concerns central to the modern Irish lifestyle that the images depict, namely the suburban house and the car.

The title of the show reads not only as a literal description of the images, but also refers to the thought process the artist has developed them through. The paintings read more as still lifes than as landscapes, and occasionally even reference portraiture as the artist's presence makes itself visible. She is seen holding up a camera twice, once exposing and once revealing her face, implicating herself in her observed subject matter and making visible fragments of her artmaking process. (This reminded me of a recent interview with Eithne Jordan who discussed how her use of a digital camera had come to transform her work).

There is clearly a dialogue with photography here, its use evident in the working process in the studio as well as being pictured by the artist. Photography also makes its influence felt on the subject matter - the interest in optics, mirrors and reflections. The suburban uncanny has also been a popular theme with photographers of late (for example Richard Page's recent show, *Suburban Exposures* at the Focal Point Gallery in Southend). The suburban subject remains both highly familiar and impossible to place at the same time.

Technically accomplished and highly worked, there is rich use of colour and tone in these pieces. There is a play between exterior and interior as well as ideas of the 'natural' and built environment: 'Nature' has been sanitised and fabricated, used for decorative purposes - a patch of green here and there. The images become slightly dizzying and disorienting to look at, depicting masses of confusing, placeless reflections...the only indicators of what side of the glass we are on are the VW and GOLF logos that recur periodically.

These are thoughtful, meditative works that suck you into their fascination with surface, reflection and illusion. Quietly and slowly observed, they seem gently critical, or at least sceptical, of the polished and generic trappings of the suburban lifestyle. Suburban houses and gardens are reflected, multiplied and distorted in the car, the new defining influences and status symbols of contemporary Irish living. The artist herself is perhaps implicated in this system too, willingly or otherwise, her identity reflected and refracted through her possession of these objects.

Sarah Browne is an artist based in suburban Co. Kildare; currently she is working on The Land project, an artist-led 'laboratory for sustainable living' in Chiang Mai, Thailand (www.thelandfoundation.org).

Mary Burke: *Semi-Detached Reflections*, Draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown, October / November 2004

A new interview with Mary Burke, by Maebh O'Regan is available online at www.recirca.com/articles/maryburke.