

## **Mary Burke's MEMORY TRACES**

### **Introduction by Helen Carey**

Mary Burke has been painting places that she knows and we know for many years. They are paintings that people can recognise from their everyday lives. Her tenacious concentration on suburbia has consistently rendered the ordinary extraordinary, imbuing the timbre and the hue of the colour tones - of the car, front door - electric and passionate. However, in her current work, which she has created as a body over 18 months for exhibition in Draocht, November 2013, there is a fracturing in the work that is excitingly complex, that makes the viewer's experience of her work challengingly different.

Painting from her New Art Studio in Mary's Abbey, off Capel Street in Dublin's City Centre, Mary Burke has examined the fabric of life in Dublin, of the journey in from the home in the suburbs for the city – in this journey, we are engaged in the daily, we see the elements of what makes up her and our lives – the house, the car, the banisters, the view from a bedroom window, the road where people come in from, the cars just parked, the doors just closed, the windows through which people have glanced.

Where people occur in Burke's paintings, it is usually the artist herself, behind a camera, reflected in a shiny surface or incidentally captured. What shifts when this happens is like a trick, where Burke has suggested thinking further about these images, where she suggests that all is not the sum total of what you think you see, that perhaps that the viewer needs to examine these apparently ordinary landscapes as a place where the drama of life is played-out, looking at what is the armature of the interior responses the individual has to the outside world. What Burke suggests is that we are looking at an exterior of heightened realism, from an interior landscape that is that of the artists or of every-person. And that we are reminded of a feeling of our history when we do that.

The ideas behind Burke's early works suggest places through which we all travel and in which we find resonance are familiar and quotidian, that provoke memories. There is indeed an enjoyment in the works. However, it is always the case that the colour and the perspective lend a brilliance that is a little disconcerting, that the hard edge is a little accusing. The paintings imply a complexity of just living, and in what her subjects seek to provoke, a familiarity or a recognition, that is individual. In the current body of painting, MEMORY TRACES, Burke goes further: she suggests that the experience of re-inhabiting these familiar places is fragmented at best, and the accuracy of such re-inhabiting even questionable.

In MEMORY TRACES, Mary Burke has created paintings that are drawn from photographs of familiar places but only in part, in strips. She has juxtaposed these strips with each other, creating dissonance within the works and similarly upending the narrative of the viewer. The collage manner of these works draws out an architectural

feeling, a sense of composition that is exploratory of narrative, maybe even a story board for materials or abrupt prompts for memories. Burke uses digital technology to create the combinations in advance of painting, so there is no torn edge to the strips, no romance. There is precision and edge, and where there is curve, it is highly stylised and plotted. The finished works defy a conventional narrative – ***Alma Mater*** is redolent of the feeling and atmosphere of the corridors of potential, but they are parallel places that never converge, that are separate. The brutalist architectures of the compositions give a formal structure to the paintings that disrupt the flow of emotion for the viewer. The technical mastery of paint and colour is clear as always in Mary Burke's work, but she has created contrasts within that disrupt, that are dissonant. In fact in some works, such as ***Aspect***, as the surface is examined, what seems like representation melts into abstraction, making the place almost disappear, rendering the possibility of the place unstable, even in itself.

Ideas of memory being a place, being a site, as Pierre Nora has suggested in his *Les Lieux de Memoires*, are contained in Burke's work: she proposes that these places embody traces of memory, but crucially these are the places where memories happened but they are not the *milieux* of memories, not a place to re-inhabit. The basis of communal memories lies in mutual recognition and in familiarity but the ability to accurately re-inhabit a place goes beyond assemblage, and invokes the interior. Can this be accurately articulated, or imagined which surely can never *measure* accuracy? In Pierre Nora's words, our memory is nothing more than '*sifted and sorted historical traces*'. Nora makes the distinction between memory and history, and suggests that we confuse the two. Burke elaborates the distinction between the two in finding these places of memory in concrete expression: places of material and substance enable an organised recollection of the past, but Burke questions the possibility of remembered narrative – and maybe memory has no real narrative or need of one, indeed why should it? Perhaps this absence of fixed narrative is the only thing that enables the future to be unknown.