

## Semi-Detached Reflections

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This new body of work by Mary Burke reflects the shifting contours of the artist's development. While the theme of suburban living is not altogether unexpected, the kinetic energy inherent in the reflection and the introduction of the human figure mark a new phase in the artist's progression. Certain constants remain in place: the excellent quality of the workmanship, the use of pastel on daler board, the detached mood of the subject, the soft mauves and blues of the palette constructing a duality of emotive expression, all negotiated through the twin icons of modern life, the suburban house and the car.

Mary Burke uniquely pursues an in-depth exploration of the trappings of urban living. Painters traditionally address two polarized aspects of Irish life: the elegance of Georgian Dublin or, the way of life typified by a small cottage in rural Ireland. While Robert Ballagh ostensibly portrays life in an artisan's dwelling, the main point of his narrative focuses on his personal engagement with the visual arts, rather than the reality of city life itself. The relentless momentum of the urban sprawl has made suburban living a reality for a majority of the population. Yet interestingly, while this life style has been widely expressed in Irish literature, it has found little or no resonance within the visual arts.

This is also true of the centrality of the car in modern life. Cars increase in numbers every year and constantly congest our road network. However, fewer and fewer of us are willing to avail of public transport. While the car has always been a key motif in Burke's oeuvre, this new collection of pastels places the vehicle centre stage, as all the work is literally reflected in the body work of the car.

Many of the universal questions in the history of art are mediated through the use of reflection. From the Renaissance forward, the convention of mirror has been employed by painters such as Jan Van Eyck to question the illusionary aspect of the craft of painting. This constructs a tension between the clarity of the image, viewed in perspective, and the modified reality inferred in the mirror image. The artist Mary Burke takes this 'play' even further by presenting her subject through the burnished surface of the car via the passenger door, wheel arch, bonnet and light cluster. Each painting captures a different angle, and shows yet another distorted view of the built environment, neatly trimmed with strips of lawn and palm tree.

Distorted reflection is one of the lingering motifs evident in the artist's work. Recent exhibition piece such as *VW Reflection No. 1* (shown in The Royal Ulster Academy Exhibition, 2003) depicted a Volkswagen estate parked in a driveway with the streetscape reflected in the gleaming surface of its bodywork. Earlier paintings, such as the haunting stillness of *School Reflections* (exhibited in 1990), show the artist's preoccupation with the almost abstract shapes viewed in the polished surface of the floor. In an innovative development in Mary Burke's art-making practice, the current suite of paintings confronts the viewer in a challenging manner, as the artist mediates her image in reflection through the body of the car itself. The use of traditional perspective is abandoned and we are tantalized by a distorted familiarity of a known subject, expressed in a new and perplexing way. The visual fragmentation of the picture plane results in a kinetic force culminating in the disconcerting realization that this is similar to the fleeting moment one experiences a hundred times a day. Each piece explores the subject from a different viewpoint: the rear bumper, the light cluster, the windscreen, as the artist constantly juxtaposes the concrete and the ephemeral.

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Traditionally, whether the subject is streetscape, landscape, or interior, Mary Burke has not featured the human figure in her work. However, this most recent body of work indicates a new path in the artist's development as it includes no less than three self-portraits. The artist usually resists inclusion of the human presence as it distracts from the mood of isolation, solitude and loneliness which is characteristic of her work. Yet, approximately once a decade, she shyly placed herself in the picture. These self portraits build into a visual diary of Burke's art-making practice.

The earliest self-portrait, *Night Painting*, was created during the artist's college days in 1982. This oil on canvas represents a study of a curtained bedroom window, radiator and chest of drawers. However, closer examination reveals a Van Gogh-like interior reflected in the glass, showing the artist working with palette in hand in the tidy bedroom space. An oil pastel, also painted in 1982, reworks the same motif but now the image is negotiated entirely through the paneled surface of her studio window. The artist once again stands at her easel but the mixing palette central to the technique of oil painting, is abandoned in favor of the pastel, and the subject is backlit, providing a shadowed, negative-contour type reflection.

Nine years later, in 1991, two very different self-portraits show the artist at work. In *Volvo 340*, the central theme of the painting appears to be the monumentality of the car in the driveway of Larchfield Road. Closer examines reveals the distorted arch of an easel, echoing the front passenger headrests, and, slowly, we glimpse the shadowy profile of the painter at work. The evasive nature of this subject contrasts with a second self-portrait completed in the same year. This portrait within a picture is presented almost in the still life tradition. Once again the artist employs the interior/exterior motif as a sharply-focused portrait of the artist drawing, is situated on a window still flanked by a milk bottle and a jug containing studio equipment. The pristine clarity of the garden and surrounding houses provides an almost *contra jour* effect as it set off the darker tones of the portrait.

The current suite of self-portraits date to 2003 and signals a change in Burke's art-making practice. No longer do we see the artist posed at the easel, working directly from the subject, but instead she stands, camera in hand assessing, capturing and judging images to be reworked in the studio. The starting-point of this new body of work reflects the confluence of two technologies: the still photographic images and the freeze-frame selection of a video shot. Therefore, it is fitting that the painter has marked the importance of the 'view-finding' process in the manipulation of surfaces in her ever-evolving technique. This group of self-portraits stands apart from the main thrust of the collection because although they often present in ripple reflection, there is a clarity and directness in their approach.

While all art represents a single moment in time, there is a new immediacy about this collection of work. The unexpected multi-layered viewpoint abandons the static, and presents a sense of movement that challenges the viewer to make sense of the rhythms of the contours. The architonic structure of the streetscape takes on a new form as it writhes and twists within the reflected bodywork of the car. The fact that the artist has included her own portrait presents a personal comment on her mark-making technique. The organic nature of Mary Burke's image-making surprises and whets the appetite for future developments.

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