

MACALLA, MACALLA

In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) William James wrote:

"The baby... feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion; and to the very end of life, our location of all things in one space is due to the fact that the original extents or bignesses of all the sensations which came to our notice at once, coalesced together into one and the same space."

I am persuaded that the whole of life is a dialectical contest between acceptance of "blooming, buzzing confusion" as the ground of being, and on the other hand the rage for order that drives us when we attempt to corral the vast sensory input from the given world into "one and the same space". It seems to me that this elemental struggle is repeatedly framed and freed in every one of these paintings by Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh. Each painting offers a variation on free and untrammelled space, a space of boundless depth that impacts on us, more or less unmediated, to the extent that we are framed to receive the sensuous impact of colour and light. We are invited to experience both our learned and our unschooled responses to mood as expressed and evoked in colour, to follow the physical echo and trace of the lifted hand of the painter. Each painting offers us also the intellectual challenge of almost-readable forms on the picture plane that we are free to interpret, as well as the blunt fact of the painting as singular fact, restrained and contained inside its frame — a presence in our shared material world, the reassurance of order in a defined object. So, then, the paintings offer us a complex of experience that encompasses direct impact on the senses, an invitation to read meaning in forms seen and half-seen, and a window into a numinous world of indeterminacy where we are free to roam as we wish. Another way of saying this: the paintings are emphatically present in the world we share, but through the paintings, so to speak, is a space where we are each of us radically free to extract and construct our own individual meanings.

"The harder you look, the more you will have seen", says Paula Meehan in her poem 'The Bog of Moods', and to stand before one of Sinéad's paintings is to be offered a rich plenum for sight and feeling to work with. There is of course the sheer visual impact of these luxurious, saturated, colourful objects; the larger paintings in perhaps an obvious way, the smaller in a more concentrated way. They are emphatically there in front of you — they make a direct, visceral impact, they arrest you, they stop time. The eye travels over the sumptuous fields of colour, vivid with light, with a viscous and beguiling presence, balanced on a drier, more sober, horizontal ground — and then the eye begins to travel inward, stopping to take in the left-to-right rhythm of brushstrokes crossing the canvas, noting the confidence of the hand, and then the eye goes deeper, back to the base layer, the underpainting that sustains the work; then perhaps our gaze comes back out again, to absorb the way in which key passages are scraped back, giving that sense of revelation, and the sense also that revelation was part of the process for the painter, that having laid down the brushstroke, something beneath called back up to her, called out to be found. And in she went again...

The dimension of depth is both obvious and inescapable in representational painting. The third dimension in Sinéad's paintings is of a different kind. Back there, behind the planes of colour, behind the ghostly grid structures, there is a vast and formless depth, something akin to the smoky void out of which the cosmos is constantly forming itself — a place of swirling gases, proto-structures, a cloudy dance of the sub-atomic. Anything at all could be coming towards form in that void, and a deep component in the pleasure these paintings offer is just this protean possibility — it is up to the viewer to find what he or she is framed to find there; we are invited in to play, to draw on our own particular and personal histories for the elements we might conjure with in that fathomless void.

There is a considerable satisfaction to be had from pausing in linear time to contemplate these paintings simply as beautifully-made objects, to allow them to be present to us for a moment (or more if we are lucky) in our one and only lives. There is another kind of satisfaction to be had when we stand before the painting with an instructed mind, aware of the art lineage in which the painting inscribes itself, aware also of the layers of kinship, with other work and with other artists, that we can deduce from a well-schooled gaze. The deeper pleasure to be found in these highly-accomplished paintings comes when we enter that dimension where we shift between what is there before us, in all its considerable material sophistication, and that place inside us, which is also outside us, towards which the paintings point and invite us.

— Theo Dorgan
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