Bernadette Kiely
'Memory Needs a Landscape'
Taylor Galleries, Dublin, 5 – 27 May 2017

THE relationship between rural Irish communities and the land is both pragmatic and poetic, played out through intimacy with its anatomy: fields, hedgerows, rights of way and historical provenance. Bernadette Kiely’s approach to landscape painting mines these psychological and physiological relationships as a site of labour, ownership and heritage. Traditional landscape painting tends to depict scenic views at the beginning or the end of the day, when people are absent and it is transformed into a form of poetry. For Kiely, daily labour provides inspiration in paintings that chronicle the cycle of farming life. In her recent exhibition, ‘Memory Needs a Landscape’, her subject is challenged by the most uncompromising grey shroud of a damp winter, which has encouraged an expansion in her stylistic range, evident in the inclusion of more abstracted and conceptually-based monotypes and more folkish and mystical paintings.

The exhibition breaks with the solid painterly compositions that signified Kiely’s past work as she steps into unknown territories of flattened perspectives, washed surfaces and diminishing layers of thin paint. The transition is tentative and not yet resolved, but its inherent risk bear out through the artist’s skill and consistency across the exhibition. In each work, the original sketch remains evident as it untidily structures the painted forms between lined smudged charcoal, graphite and paint. The effect is raw, reflecting a theme of coming to terms with change and adapting to an altered landscape, both in life and in art. Sliabh, River Nore documents the effects of unrelenting rainfall obliterating the horizon of the riverbank. In No Fun Today, a flooded playground sits at the literal and metaphorical edge of town and appears to be silently drifting downward. It Could Be Greekness, a old ordnance maps track a tributary of the River Nore and, in one painting, a distant image of the King’s River (and Claregalway II) is mythically-significant. To Fading Memories in soft-focus, with feathery trees and undergrowth blurred by a mystical haze. When compared to weightier paintings such as ‘Welcome to Claregalway II’, the world they depict gradually materializes, just as the otherworldly of Tiara de Danann’s and Tir Na nOg emerge in Irish mythology. Kiely has pushed her painting to a place that digs deep, trying to distinguish the intangible from the tangible. In doing so she creates a kind of visual doublethink in which collective memory, folklore and ritual are at odds with twenty-first-century farming, climate change and civil bureaucracy.

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