

Paul Winstanley

'Faith After Saenredam and Other Paintings'

Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, 20 May – 01 July 2017

WRITING a review of an exhibition means finding an angle, a perspective, a particular point of view from which to approach the work. In the case of 'Faith After Saenredam and Other Paintings' this is particularly challenging, as Paul Winstanley's recent work here is almost all about angles, perspectives and points of view, in the physical, rather than metaphorical, sense. The main gallery contains 10 paintings, while two preparatory drawings are located in the gallery office. Both their inclusion and location seem puzzling at first, but as with so many aspects of this exhibition, clarification only comes with further investigation.

Pieter Saenredam was a seventeenth-century Dutch painter who specialised in church interiors. A preparatory sketch of the Mariakerk in Utrecht made by Saenredam in 1642 (the final painting is missing) provided Winstanley with the starting point for this exhibition, and therefore the justification for including the preparatory sketches mentioned above. In fact, closer examination of these two works shows that Winstanley is already playing with perspective, choosing in one case a two-point perspective, in the other a one-point perspective.

From these drawings, Winstanley produced two paintings: while *Lost* is a re-creation, *Faith After Saenredam* (2016) is a re-imagining. In the latter, he includes a window and a tapestry known to have existed in the church. In doing so, he keeps to the same dimensions and uses gold leaf as Saenredam did, while maintaining the same clarity of line and muted palette.

With these four paintings alone, Winstanley is demonstrating how representational art is something of a misnomer. The painting never simply represents: it shows us reality from a new perspective. In this case, however, there is another angle to be considered: which reality is being represented? That of the Mariakerk, or that of Saenredam's version of the Mariakerk? In fact, the Mariakerk was demolished during the first half of the nineteenth century, so Winstanley can only interpret or imagine Saenredam's view of the church. With this in mind, his preparatory drawings add a further layer of dissimulation in the ostensible 'truth' of these works. The ground underneath the viewer becomes even shakier when we learn that Saenredam himself did not always respect the reality before him. He is known to have enlarged, heightened and broadened elements for greater effect.

Saenredam also played with the perspective of the viewer, according to Arthur Wheelock, of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, who points out, for example, that "the rapidly receding barrel

vault in St. Anthony's Chapel in the St. Janskerk in Utrecht ... only works spatially when the viewer is situated at the proper distance point and directly opposite the vanishing point."¹ This insight provides, albeit obliquely, a neat segue to another group of paintings in this exhibition – *Apostasy (Enrapture)*, *Apostasy (Drift)* and *Looking at Vermeer*. – where Winstanley depicts viewers observing paintings.

In these works, the viewer (in the Kerlin) is looking at a painting (in the painting) from behind other viewers (who are depicted in the painting), conjuring a Chinese box effect which seems to ask: what does it mean to view? Are we drawn into the painting (within the painting) on its own merits, or is it the fact that someone else is looking at it that brings us in? Let's be honest, who doesn't feel more at ease, particularly in a gallery setting, when there are others present?

In the two *Apostasy* works, some of the viewers in the painting are moving – an effect created by Winstanley through blurring of lines, in strong contrast to the precision seen elsewhere. This highlights the static, single perspective of the image on view in the painting while simultaneously reminding us that we can move around to find other vantage points. Is it any wonder that this exhibition can feel vertiginous at times?

Looking at Vermeer (2017) feels less successful because it lacks this juxtaposition of motion and motionlessness, and indeed the remaining paintings add little to the delicious rollercoaster effect engendered by those discussed above. *Metaphysic 1* and *Metaphysic 2* do at least reference the gold leaf, which is an intrinsic element of the *After Saenredam* works, but *Sunlit Birch* is a jarring element that undermines the impact of the exhibition as a whole.

For a body of work, which at first appears classically representational and easily interpretable, 'Faith After Saenredam and Other Paintings' is, in fact, a magnificent exercise in ambiguity. Even the title lends itself to multiple interpretation – the 'after' could mean both chronologically and as an homage. On reflection, the inclusion of 'other paintings' may well be a deliberate attempt to further confound the viewer, who is, after all, already being challenged on many levels. What's one more spanner in the works, in an exhibition which is as layered as an optical illusion by Escher?

Mary Catherine Nolan is a Dublin-based artist with a background in linguistics.

Note
1. hnanews.org/archive

Bernadette Kiely

'Memory Needs a Landscape'

Taylor Galleries, Dublin, 5 – 27 May 2017



Bernadette Kiely, *No Fun Today*, oil on canvas; image courtesy of the artist

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 bears 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 lines of 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. *Silence, 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 downriver. *It Could Be Graiguenamanagh I* brings old-fashioned Irish humour to temper frustration at increasingly mercurial weather patterns. In *The Past is Present, it's the Future Too*, a farm gate and tarpaulin-covered mound are barely visible through mist and smoke, while the shadow of a farm worker stands by. It is neither poetic nor beautiful, but, without needing to be literal, it captures the damp monotony of an Irish winter.

A series of monotypes trace old ordnance maps with a convincing archival quality that implicates civil administration in the complex relationship between people and the land. *The King's River (and Church)*, *Old Map Image I and II* track a tributary of the Nore that once had seven working mills dotted along its banks. *Shadow Trees I*, *Flooded Land II* and *V*,

and *Ground, County Home* denote an artform that sits somewhere between cartography and drawing, pulling the viewer into an intimate investigation of detailed marks. Though brittle and threadbare, they convey the importance of title deeds and rights to land.

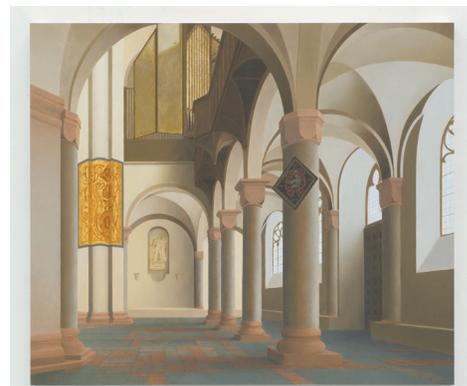
Rising Water is the most surprising work, made from a deliberately naïve perspective in both an emotional and a graphic sense. Similar in function to an ordnance map, this work reflects the significance of recording geographic phenomenon for civic purposes. Embedded in the composition is key visual information outlining the vulnerability of the area to rising waters, marked out in the waterline on higher ground – knowledge that will be usefully referenced for drainage solutions in the future. Contrasting with this pictorial diagram, in *Rising Waters, River Nore*, Kiely has worked up an image of a flooded field with striking lucidity using only a minimal application of charcoal, white chalk and water. These works underpin the metaphysical aspect of Kiely's approach to landscape painting and her implicit acknowledgement of the land as a precious and fragile resource.

More poetic and allegorical are several paintings that focus on the spaces between tracts of working land: the boundaries of farms, the banks of rivers and, in one painting, a distant image of the mythically-significant *Sliabh na mBan*. Agricultural superstition in Ireland is extant where farmers sprinkle holy water along the edges and corners of fields to prevent *piseogs* from ruining their crops and livestock. The co-existence of modern farming with these practices highlights the elemental and sometimes contradictory nature of how farming communities think and feel about the land. Kiely paints *The Garden I*, *Fading Landscape* and *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 materialises, just as the otherworlds of Túatha de Dannan and *Tir Na nÓg* 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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Paul Winstanley, *Looking at Vermeer*, 2017, oil and gold leaf on gesso on panel, 66 x 55 cm; image courtesy of Kerlin Gallery



Paul Winstanley, *Trial (After Saenredam)*, 2017; oil and gold leaf on gesso on panel; image courtesy of Kerlin Gallery