

Mary Burke
'Memory Traces'

Draiocht, Dublin

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Looking out the window of the bus to Blanchardstown you see semi-detached houses – lots of them. As you move through one area to another, you may see some variation in style, but there is nonetheless a strong sense of sameness. The overall impression is of inevitable, indeed unavoidable, banality. And then you walk into Mary Burke's exhibition, 'Memory Traces' and this impression is turned, quietly but powerfully, upside down.

The subject matter of Burke's work is the suburbia you have just travelled through. She too has looked at it, but with intensity and an incisive eye for detail. She has analysed it into line and form, and broken it down into its component parts. She has found and felt the textures of its materials and re-presented it in a way that dispels the banality and illuminates this everyday world.

There were nine pieces in that exhibition, each demonstrating confidence and maturity. Of the nine, I found *Aspect* and *Equilibrium* the least successful – but only in comparison to the others. There is less contrast in the colour palette and the rendering of texture and light feels less accomplished, aspects which are only – barely – noticeable next to the other seven.

Burke delivers on so many levels. Colour is perhaps the first thing that struck me. Strong, but not garish, contrasting yet harmonious. Then line. Given the subject matter, it is not surprising that there is an architectural feel to her work, bordering on a cubist approach, and at times there is a vertiginous Escher-like quality to the image – see, for example, *Above* – but it is never cold or alienating. And then there is modality. Burke's way of re-piecing elements on the canvas suggests collage or patchwork, providing glimpses of our everyday environment – a car wheel, a wheelie bin – that we rarely notice, probably never examine – and certainly wouldn't be our first choice for a painting. These are never forced on the viewer, but there to be discovered gradually. One of the sure signs that a piece works is that it draws you back again and again, and this is one of Burke's great strengths.

What makes her work stand out however, is the way in which Burke brings all these elements together so coherently. Though her medium is oil pastel on canvas, she uses digital technology and photography in the development of her work, but this process is invisible in the final product. There is a tremendous sense of interconnectedness to her work, yet it never feels repetitive. And she is generous to her viewer. The subject matter is recognisable: familiar items from indoors and from outside – houses, trees and fences. Everything presented in a way that brings the viewer to a new way of seeing this suburban landscape.

Burke's work is not outrageous, it is in many ways a traditional approach, both the choice of media and the underaggressive treatment of the subject matter. It is honest in its delivery; as the exhibition title promises, the viewer is led into a world where seemingly insignificant but very familiar memories are evoked: 'that could be my house'. Its mystery has in its capacity to make you look, and want to look again, at rooftops – not the sun-kissed tiles of Italy or the snow-covered slates of Paris – but the unlovely, unremarkable tops of Irish suburban housing. That is the magic of Mary Burke's 'Memory Traces'.

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