

Imagined Spaces
A Collection of Oil Pastels on Canvas by Mary Burke

Imagined Spaces is the title of the most recent collection of works by Mary Burke that marks a significant development in her art-making practice. The scale of the work, the square format and the use of canvas signals a radical change in approach yet the subject matter once again explores spaces and places but in a considerably different manner. These exciting paintings have a Baroque flamboyance and a kinetic force that on closer inspection reveals an incoherent narrative challenging the viewer to interpret their subject matter.

Previous exhibited works such as *Suburban Shadows* or *Semi-Detached Reflections* engaged with the present, exploring the split-second view that frequently inhabit our peripheral vision but *Imagined Spaces* moves away from that time-frame as the work is based on revisited memories of childhood and imagination. These visual mediations were informed by Gaston Bachelard's thesis on the seminal influence of the family home through forming an architectural landscape of childhood. Consequently, this painter's family home is and has been one of the principal sources of inspiration for her various artistic endeavors.

The process employed by Mary Burke in the creation of these pieces marks an important development in her usual studio practice. Traditionally, the artist begins with the mechanical eye of both the SLR and the movie camera capturing, enlarging and distilling the photographic image to point where it would be ready to act as a direct reference point for the painting. The genesis of the current work stems from the use of collage. Beginning with her personal photographic archive, the artist selects a number of pictures and arranges them on backing paper. There is a significant element of 'play' in this process. The photographs are then manipulated, enlarged, cropped or deconstructed according to the dictates of the composition. The subject's original meaning is often lost during the process of dismantling and deconstructing. These frequently unrecognizable images are laid down in conjunction with other photographs taken from published sources. Slowly, working within the dictates of complementary colour axis, the artist begins to build up an overall image from the fragmented debris. This composition then undergoes a further transformation when the collage is scaled up from an A4 size sheet and reinterpreted into a larger square-format canvas. Some of the finished paintings adhere strongly to the original collage, while other interpretations are less faithful to their creative origins.

The concept of 'play' is an important aspect of all human development, as it provides an opportunity for the child to rehearse various aspects of adult life. It is a well established fact that the artist's fascination with cars and driving was influenced by the toy steering wheel mounted on her cot. Her engagement with children's literature has similarly informed this collection as C.S. Lewis *The Chronicles of Narnia* left a lasting impression on her childhood imagination. Certain titles such as *Portal* and *Forgotten Forest* link directly into this concept but a closer examination of this pair of works provides a diverse narrative as *Portal* seems to relate directly to adulthood while the subject matter of *Forgotten Forest* is more ambiguous.

Portal suggests a liminal space with the outline of a female figure looking inwards towards the interior space rather than outwards into the garden landscape. In the

foreground there is a door-case leading to a steeply stepped terrace while the left foreground is occupied by a dark wooden picture frame. The person facing the viewer has a ghost-like presence and she appears to be excluded from the comfortable interior. The work has an eerie feel, suggestive of the ghost of Cathy visiting Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*.

Portal contrasts with *Forgotten Forest* which is also set in a moonlit landscape. The forest is situated on the right and in the foreground there is what appears to be a sleeping head. This is not a human form and given the context, it could be one of a dozen creatures that inhabit Narnia. The mood of this painting suggests peace and tranquility and it contrasts with the nightmare effect of *Portal*.

The strong nocturnal aspect of this collection stems from the fact that the artist's teaching practice usually takes place in the evening and, like Francis Bacon, she habitually works from late evening until early morning. The painting *Dappled Light* has a peaceful, relaxed atmosphere. The beam of light bisecting the composition on the left, the distorted windows and the recognizable patio door are all suggestive of the before-dawn tranquility that floods the human soul when the entire world appears to be asleep. Distant lights reassure us that we are not alone, and the dappled yellow glow enlivens the patio and heralds a promise of another bright and pristine day.

Remembered Place creates a more sinister narrative. Torn images on the right of the composition create a Dali, balloon-like head – while disparate objects such as a laptop and a yard brush occupy an unidentified space. The soft blues and yellows lure us into the composition. But the red in the lower left foreground halts this approach. There is a duality at play here. The energy of the fragmented images and the soft colours attracts the viewer towards what on the surface appears to be a very bright subject but like the connoisseur who admires the skilled craftsmanship of a Grayson Perry vase, the up close view is not what one initially expected. The hermeneutic aspect of these works is captivating but subsequent personal interpretation may lead to a dark place.

Painting on canvas rather than Daler board is a new departure for the artist and the technical sophistication of the works makes it difficult to believe that her medium is still pastel. Drawing with pure pigment is essential to her craft as the direct contact with the medium is an important part of her mark-making practice. The quality of the materials she uses are vital to the finished product and not content that only two of the three makes of artist quality pastels are available in Ireland, she imports the third variety from North America.

The square format for all of these works, and the combination of large and small scale is a very deliberate choice as it is linked closely with the issues of display. While other artists give little thought to the presentation and hanging of their works, Mary Burke considers that the painting is finished only when all aspects of their presentation is taken into account. Her move to paint on canvas was influenced by the ability to work on a larger scale but the square format was also central to the exploration of the change in narrative when certain canvases were exhibited side by side. The work comes in three sizes, with the smallest images (30 cm x 30 cm) automatically generating a more cohesive composition. The majority of the works are (80 cm x 80) cm and this allows the artist to group them in a variety of combinations:

small and large pairs, as diptychs or triptychs and in many other arrangements. Each lay-out will generate a different synergy within the grouping, accenting different elements of their multi-layered narrative.

The word 'play' is a central to the understanding of this body of work. Childhood 'play' governed the artist's memory that initiated these painting. The creation of the collage could be described as 'play' and their further metamorphosis from collage to canvas is also 'play'. The fragmentation of the picture plane allows a variety of readings – an action that most certainly is 'play'. Although all these works have a distinct architectural element the tension between what might be described as Gothic pieces and the more documentary images also constitutes 'play'. The final play, the end-game, will relate directly to display, bringing us full circle to the title *Imagined Spaces*.