

Suburban Shadows
An Exhibition of New Works by Mary Burke
At the
Toradh Gallery
Ashbourne,
Co Meath

By Maebh O'Regan

Opening 11th June 2009

The artist Mary Burke has once again invited us to reflect on the mainly unexplored aspect of our every day lives by presenting us with a suite of new works addressing the subject of the urban environment. This collection of 14 large oil pastels challenges the viewer to re-examine the mundane – life in suburbia – as a passive observer strolling along the neat rows of a housing estate in Goatstown, Dublin 14. Initially the journey appears prosaic as the spectator examines solid square residences, all seemingly identical houses, red-bricked to the first storey, with projecting bay windows. Each house is semi-detached, each house has a white walled garden defining its private space, each house has a garage or maybe not, some have garage conversion, some have extensions. Little by little the burgeoning individuality begins to appear. While this is the stuff of daily life – telephone wires stung tightly against a morning sky, pivoting garage doors, square louvered ventilation shafts – the houses may be all similar but they are very different in detail. In *Late Afternoon* a single storey garage abuts a double garage extension; *Evening Shadows 2* shows a car-port, a-joining a glazed porch. Dormer windows bulge out from the side of another residence. Our attention is engaged.

The subject matter is divided into two main bodies: streetscapes (6 oil pastels) and interior views (8 oil pastels) these further subdivide into urban and rural images. The title of the exhibition is *Suburban Shadows* but the shadows in question are not just the results of climatic conditions. They have a deeper connotation suggesting the shadows of our everyday lives as we pass through this apparently anonymous environment. The external images of the dwellings subtly tract the experience of the suburban dweller as he leaves home at 7 AM to commute into the city. As the early riser ventures out he is immediately aware of the other residents and the fact that some of them are still tucked up in bed, or showering or breakfasting, as evidenced by the clutter of cars adorning driveways. It is at such an early hour that his sleep laden mind become aware of the incongruity of trees and plants imported from exotic locations, destined to be imprisoned in the cramped confines of the front garden and obliged to sustain the inclement Irish weather and the backfiring of the family car. This leads to further ruminations about the individuality of the houses as their owners modify them to suit the family needs. The next duo of images

Dormer and *Corner Shadows* keep pace with the commuter's experience as he makes his way to the bus stop. Once again one glimpses the occupant's identity through arched car ports, cobble lock and over garage extensions and one is immediately struck by the ability of the householder to customise his environment to suit his personal needs.

The commuter's return to his suburban idle is celebrated in *Evening Shadows 1 & 2* and *Late Afternoon*. Once again the artist has captured the experience of returning to the urban footpaths as the houses are transformed by the glow of the evening sun. We now observe the minutia of the golden sun-set in the plate glass and the purple shadows of the ESB wires as they form stripes on the neighbour's wall.

This new suite of pastels contrasts greatly with the artist's last collection of exhibited works *Semi-Detached Reflections*, (2004 and 2005). While the media and large format of the oil pastels remain constant, the purposeful rigidity of the approach sets a statement that juxtaposes the distorted, kinetic movement of the previous collection in which the urban environment was primarily mediated through the body work of the artist's stationary car. The current set of images represent the upright experience of walking through the suburban streetscape, rather than the sensory, fleeting occurrence of viewing the same built environment mirrored in a car bonnet. The palette is also broader, as the purple/blue tonal aspect of the previous exhibition is extended and the inevitable fields of plaster rendering are more textured, with stronger uses of chiaroscuro.

This exploration of interior and exterior is examined in *Chiaroscuro* and *Landing Window* where the external light is contrasted with the interior gloom. In both pictures the window is wide open, suggesting the possibility of a positive engagement with the outside world. The theme of journey is propagated by the *Bedroom Door* which invites the viewer to cross the threshold onto the landing and venture down the stairs. In *Hall Door* one glimpses the stunning morning sunshine through the open door and experiences an invitation to venture into the awaiting car.

This pair of paintings, measuring 56 cm x 41 cm, are clearly linked to two pastels of identical scale and format suggesting an alternative aspect of urban living i.e. the holiday cottage. These works entitled *Door, Dingle 1* and *Door, Dingle 2*. present a more 'conventional' image of a rural hallway. Here in vernacular form we have the chief architectural vocabulary associated with the Great Irish Country House. The terracotta tiles arranged in lozenge format parody the black and white marble tiles found in Palladian palaces such as Castletown House, Celbridge. The stylized shape of the newel post and the shadow cast by same takes on the guise of a standing cherub and provides a vague echo of the Classical busts which are obligatory in Great Irish Houses, while the grid like glazing bars also reference their Georgian origins. The artist has cleverly painted practically the same view but the principal difference is the time of day. *Door, Dingle 1* shows morning light and shade while *Door, Dingle 2* is bathed in the golden wash of evening sunlight. The view through the portal provides a further comment on the urban/rural divide as instead of the obligatory parklands – the prospect reveals a purpose built holiday village. This provides a commentary on Irish living as our holiday cottages have now become another version of the standardized suburban streetscape.

The interior views make an interesting comparison with the streetscapes. There is an immediate sense of enclosure and confinement. The artist has chosen not to represent the intimate personal spaces such as bedrooms or the social aspect of suburban living depicting sitting rooms and patios but instead she has chosen the narrow functional circulatory spaces, the structural complexities of *Stairs* – set in steep perspective. This is not the cosy representation of staircase with ascending steps and an ornate hand rail which might suggest invitation and promise, but instead she had depicted a steeply enclosed space with a landing window situated at an anti-social height, designed to provide light but too high to look through. Here, the protagonist is returning to the house after a long day in the city and the task of climbing the stairs marks a daunting end to the commuter's day.

The final image, *Twitching Net Curtains* blurs the divide between interior and exterior. The title of the work suggests the veil of privacy (the net curtain) being drawn aside to monitor the coming and going of ones neighbours, the viewer observing without being observed. The external pictures in this collection are all presented in landscape format to include house, garden and footpath. The interior views show tighter compositions of narrow circulatory spaces, yet *Twitching Net Curtains* is cropped, limiting the spectator's vision to the bottom part of the window and the window still. The focus is on the car in the garden, and the identity of the spectator is shielded by the opaque nature of the curtains. Yet it is also possible that the observer is being observed, as driver of the car may also be watching the householder and scrutinizing his activities.

While the chief characteristic of Mary Burke's last exhibition was randomness experienced by the fleeting glance, the current selection of work addresses the subject of suburbia from a different perspective. It contrasts images of morning and evening, interior and exterior, and urban and rural. This series of oil pastels suggest a narrative, an inspection of similarity and difference, an examination of shared experience of urban living and ultimately questioning of activities that take place behind the façade of respectability.

Maebh O'Regan, June 2009