

THE ART OF MARY BURKE

From the beginning, Mary Burke has been fascinated by the possibilities for her art in the normalities of our everyday surroundings. First, she chose buses, the staccato of their seats, steps curving upwards, the patterns of glass and doors. Then she turned her gaze towards suburbia.

It seems improbable as a subject, those long rows of similar houses looking across a narrow thoroughfare to the opposite rows of replicas, the repetition of its vistas of streets and delimiting walls punctuated by the verticals and glow of street – lights. But her vision transformed these environmental banalities into a mysterious, almost dreamlike world in which an armchair communicated through a window to its companion glimmering in an identical room of the opposite house. These dwellings, seeming to live a separate life were bereft of humans. These, she, says, would have been an inevitable distraction from her preoccupations in exploring the patterns, rhythms, contrasts, of window-frame, roof, dividing wall, the lone parked car. The depth and range of the work her imaginative vision extracted from this unlikely subject was remarkable when shown in a series of one-person exhibitions, immediately affirming her individuality and reputation. Gradually the underlying structural preoccupations of the composition which underpinned her vision could be perceived as having the abstract validity of the horizontals and verticals of. For instance, Mondrian. They support the dream; made it solid.

More recently she has become fascinated by the city at night, with its punctuations of street-lights projecting pools of light on to the glistening pavements and for these she has extended her colour from the range of blues and purples and mauves she had employed to deepen the mystery of suburbia to a gambit of yellows, muted orange and brown. With these also her handling has become looser, more instinctive. It doesn't and probably never will even approach expressionism, but while her contemplation and emphasis on underlying structure remains, the surface of her work now also proclaims its making. Her medium for sometime has been oil-pastels, mostly, she says, for practical reasons: ease of carrying and changing but also, surely, since it reflects and responds to her own preference for exactitude and precision.

What remains throughout is her celebration of the ordinary, the everyday of our living, and her poetic insight, by which our perceptions of this are extended, our awareness sharpened, our appreciation of her art deepened.

Desmond MacAvock