

Visual Arts South

On knowing one's trade

On visiting Janet Mullarney's exhibition *The Bermuda Triangle* at the Crawford Gallery in Cork, it took a while to sink in - for me at any rate - that here was an artist working comfortably and fluently in the traditional skills of modelling and carving. Living in those skills like a fish in the sea. Something that has become quite rare, not so much because sculpture departments in art colleges were the first to reach for the camcorder, which they do seem to have been. More because of the shift in our perception of such skills. The decline in traditional skills can be seen in the context of a wider decline in manual skills in Western societies. For example, Jeff Howell in England has written extensively on the virtual collapse of the traditional trades in the building industry, with the demise of the apprentice system and the increasing prestige attached to the white-collar, intellectual side of the business, and pretty much the same thing happened in Ireland. In the fine arts, with the systematic, postmodernist dismantling of style, it was as if the very terms *painting*, *drawing*, *carving* and *modelling*, which had once referred neutrally to specific fields of technical and artistic endeavour, acquired invisible inverted commas. Painting became 'painting'. There was always going to be that dimension of knowingness, and by and large that still holds. If you lift a paintbrush you are likely to be aware that you are functioning within the parameters of one stylistic construction or another, and within a set of technical conventions that are likewise constructed, rather than being in some sense neutral or inevitable. Of course you can, as many artists do, work very successfully with or perhaps within that knowingness. But there is the distinct risk that, because artists encounter these traditional categories of activity as essentially arbitrary and artificial, they will dismiss and underestimate them. In fact this is something that happens day to day, year to year in art colleges and in wider art practice. There is a presumption that painting, drawing, modelling, carving can be, so to speak, quoted like excerpts from a text. Does it matter that work might be judged as being lamentable on a technical level? Might not such a technical judgement be inherently prejudicial and, anyway, irrelevant to the work's meaning? Perhaps, but there is also an argument that meaning emerges from the struggle with form. Artists recurrently point to this fact, but there is still a certain stigma attached to the whole area of formal concerns, even if we stop well short of the dread charge of Formalism. The downgrading of traditional skills can result in a certain apologetic air to the presentation of work. It struck me that Gary Coyle's recent exhibition at Kevin Kavanagh was a case in point. It should be said that Coyle is technically proficient in whatever medium he turns to, but without question he has a particular empathy with drawing, and his drawings have the presence and conviction of substantial works of art. His show consisted of both drawings and photographs but to me it seemed - perhaps unfairly - that the photographs were there partly by way of apology for the mere presence of the drawings. Intriguingly in this regard, the artist quoted one of Gerhard Richter's pithy critiques of photography as compared to painting towards the back of the show's catalogue. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Mullarney's adherence to her accustomed technical language has, with a few notable exceptions, dampened critical response to her work. *The Bermuda Triangle* seemed to me to rank her with the few best Irish sculptors. Part of the virtue of what she does is her relaxed, intimate involvement with her own skills and materials, the way she is both intellectually and manually adept. She doesn't feel any need to imply any distance between herself and her means. In this she is quite like a musician, at home within her expressive language and not, as with so many visual artists now, alienated from it.

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