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ART
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Ever since I started viewing exhibitions set out in the Royal Hibernian Academy's cavernous Charles Gallagher Gallery, I've almost never found them to be a completely positive experience. Small works, whether isolated or grouped, frequently suffer from a lack of intimacy and the deployment of partitions to direct viewers through exhibitions or reduce visual spill-over by sequestering particular works has produced mixed results. One exception has been James Coleman's *Charon (MIT Project)* (1989). Though most of the gallery's features were enveloped in darkness, the generous dimensions of the room served to reinforce the impact of that impressive work.

Thankfully, *Futures 12* has changed all that. Moving through its unobtrusive S-styled layout proved to be a revelatory experience. As expected, the survey included work in diverse media reflecting a broad range of concerns and approaches, which often results in a very disjointed selection. The selections here, though, prove to be high-spirited works that don't just co-exist, but cultivate evocative comparisons and contrasts that work to enhance each other's presence and stimulate reflection.



Stephanie Rowe: *Untitled*, 2012, oil on panel, 10 x 13.5cm; courtesy the artist / Royal Hibernian Academy

This occurs right from the point of entry where viewers find themselves flanked by Stephanie Rowe's cinematic postcards and Peter Burns' absorbing oddball musings. Rowe's narrowly defined focus captures women at random moments in public and private spaces. These coquettish women are shown getting dressed, arranging household objects or focused on some anonymous task. The clothing, hairstyles and background details suggest the images derive from French films of the 1960s and 70s. Though her renderings include areas that border on total abstraction, they are predominantly realistic. Certain passages exhibit an exactness that might be associated with miniature or photo-realist technique. The works, for all intents and purposes, seem factual, but then we read that her process involves making extensive alterations to source material. Rowe, for example, will add and remove details, and change colours or the lighting. This information changes our relationship to them. Suddenly the works become much more ethereal. Like some of David Claerbout's projections, the works make us aware of the gap between still and moving images. Here that gap is bordered by film, photography and painting. Like fragmented memories or half-remembered dreams, her works take on a haunting presence.



Peter Burns: *A Lost World*, 2012, oil and mixed media on canvas, 40 x 40cm; courtesy the artist / Royal Hibernian Academy

The palpability of Peter Burns' paintings contrasts nicely with Rowe's mysterious beauties. He manhandles materials to create rugged terrains by layering and gouging. His medium doesn't just lie nicely on the canvas; it projects into the viewing space. He, for example, turns nubby accretions into bulging eyes or grotesque faces and, as in *Civet Cat* (2012), collages elements to the support that effectively converts the canvas into a wall-mounted sculpture. His work displays a remarkable restless creativity that encompasses classical subjects, views of outer space, all kinds of flora and fauna, and the occasional self-portrait laced with self-deprecating humour. Despite the quality of his canvases, his most outstanding pieces consist of a group of sculptures that occupy a single small shelf. Though these vividly coloured and crudely shaped exotic creatures and portrait studies recall the chewing-gum heads and purple pig produced by the African-American folk artist Nellie Mae Rowe, his figures are more comic. The inherent gregariousness of Burns' collection also draws us to them.



Lucy Andrews: *The Law of Contagion*, 2012, rock wool insulation, washing up liquid, electric foot spa, timer, dimensions variable; courtesy the artist / Royal Hibernian Academy

Lucy Andrews' sculptures prove how strangely beautiful ordinary commercial products can be. For *Elixir* (2012), she flicks on a black light and sticks it directly into a large clear glass filled with a sumptuously dark green liquid - which is dishwashing liquid. The result is an eerie icy-blue fluorescence that is difficult to ignore. She then fashions three monstrous hair strands out of plastic packaging that has been filled with blue hair gel that she calls *For Ultimate Volume and Hold* (2012). They are visually arresting for anyone into synthetic materials. They don't offer a comment on today's social or political ills, but so what. Viva Polyvinyl Pyrolidone!

PVC, another common non-natural substance, features in the production of Jim Ricks' *Poulnabrone Bouncy Dolmen* (2010). An array of tacky mementoes borrowed from residents of the dolmen's Burren home accompanies this monumental bit of inflated kitsch. The gaudy display immerses viewers in the atmosphere of a roadside carnival / souvenir stand and lets us feast on multiple ersatz versions of the tomb. Depicted in numerous paintings and photographs, its likeness also adorns coasters, fridge magnets, a jigsaw puzzle and dishcloth. A small floor-bound model covered in photo-reproductions proves to be the pièce de résistance of the collection. Its pepperoni-pizza skin confers a disconcerting tactility. This sense of unease not only pervades the entire installation, but it also engenders a host of contradictory feelings. Do we bounce on the inflated dolmen, for instance, or view it as an example of the ancient site's denigration? And what about the tchotchkes supplied by the Burren's habitants? What meaning do they have

for their owners? Are they valued as treasures, sentimental gewgaws or brazen oddities? What first appears as an invitation to engage in mindless fun actually tenders an insightful and surreptitious critique urging us to contemplate the appropriation, commercialisation and sentimentalisation of this heritage structure.



Ed Miliano: Diary 02 February, 2011, oil on paper; courtesy the artist / Royal Hibernian Academy

Though no less exuberant in terms of colour or spirit, the consistent scale, uniform arrangement and strict repetitiveness of Ed Miliano's Diary painting series counters the diversity embodied in Ricks' presentation. From a distance this impressive cycle of garden views, which documents a year's worth of plant growth and development, reads more like a stupendous seascape. The eyes first respond to waves of shifting colour. Then, as one moves closer to the predominantly green composition, changes in colour, texture and density begin to emerge. The greenish undulations are, for example, punctuated by subtler surges of yellow, white or brown. Move closer still and one will notice flecks of blue, red, pink, orange and purple. At the same time the unique qualities of the individual panels also become apparent. Though Miliano's

opus reminds us of Monet, an artist who also preferred painting nature in its cultivated form, and conceptualist grid structures, especially as elucidated by Jennifer Bartlett and Hanne Darboven, such correlations don't undermine his accomplishment. This visual diary conveys the fetid atmosphere of the garden, a complex environment that embodies continuity, elusive change and strikingly impermanent effects. It makes a profound visual impact and stirs rumination on the subject of time and the depiction of nature.



Caoimhe Kilfeather: *Last* (installation shot, RHA), 2012, cast concrete; image held [here](#)

Materials and process form the focus of Caoimhe Kilfeather's reticent and stunningly beautiful sculpture and photo works. The work included here makes reference to land art, nineteenth-century photography and the fabrication of reproductions with plaster casts. Moreover, her propensity for adding elusive titles reinforces its inherent ambiguities. For example, in *Being above below* and *Being below above* (both 2012), which recall projects by Michael Heizer and Richard Serra, the titles call attention to the position and / or orientation of cast-iron wedges situated on or in white concrete tablets. But, as they can be read in several ways, their exact meaning remains unclear. We also encounter wooden wedges in a pair of ambrotypes, an early photographic medium primarily used for the production of portraits. While the images of these humble structures subvert the medium's traditional use, these works display a powerful sensitivity to materials and form that makes it difficult to stop looking at them. *Last* (2012) is even more mesmerising. Cast in concrete, this tall, virtually freestanding panel of drapery evokes the historical

reproduction of classical reliefs and sculpture, as well as Eva Hesse's banner-like hangings and Douglas Gordon's alluring illuminated curtain, *Off Screen* (1998). But Kilfeather also absolves it of all these associations. The work is neither decorative nor wispily translucent; it covers nothing, nor does it function as a mere background element. Though its dark-grey body conveys strength and stasis, the material belies its hardness. Its substantial folds convey flexibility, movement. Moreover, the gentle convex curve - no doubt a souvenir of the casting the process - suggests the drapery billows out slightly from the wall. A slight lustre also plays across its surface, animating it. Once again the title injects a host of potential meanings into the work's interpretation. Do we take the work to be a noun, adjective or verb? Perhaps all three apply? Does it matter? Its presence is simply majestic. More need not be said.

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