

# CIRCA

ART  
MAGAZINE

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## Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh, Kevin Kavanaugh Gallery, 3 February - 6 March 2011

Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh's latest exhibition imbues the gallery space with a powerful sense of silence and contemplative aura. The images recall previous series depicting freestanding platform structures and scenarios framed by elements suggestive of the proscenium stage but, while references to the former have diminished, the role of the latter - the proscenium - has both expanded and evolved. Solid dark bars of medium - an elegiac embellishment - now border the edges of every panel. Broad expanses of acid tinged greens and yellows, intense orange, tough salmon reds, and buttery layers of paint incised with the end of a brush handle or some similarly shaped implement, all familiar from previous work, have now also given way to muted hues and mottled patches of paint. Paint dabs now gather in clusters; in some works the artist has scraped them away. The constituted surfaces are leaner and, thus, obviate tooled line work. The harshly spare selection of paintings - the gallery's walls hold only eight compact square canvases - speaks of necessity. The images appear to be so concentrated, so dense; their appreciation demands spacious intervals. An absence of titles robs viewers of intermediaries that typically assist them with finding paths into the work. They must confront the ambiguous scenes directly and draw their own conclusions from what they see.

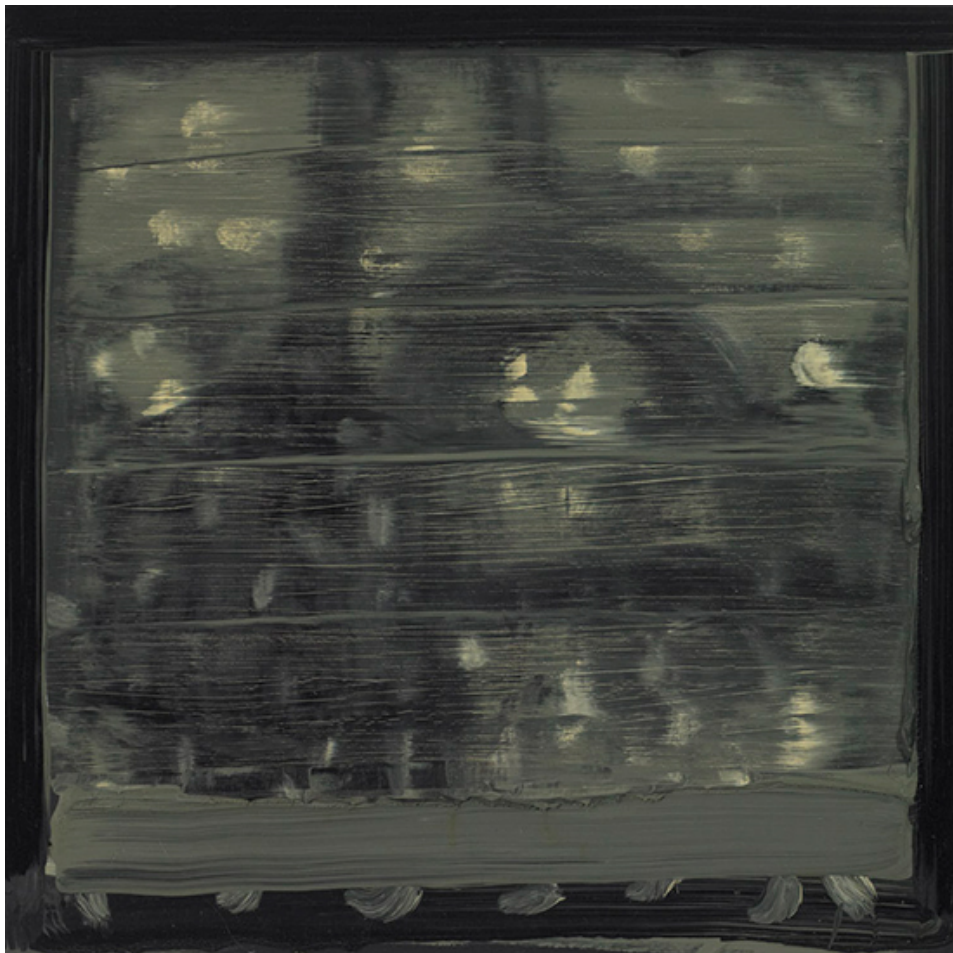


Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh: *Untitled*, 2011; courtesy Kevin Kavanagh

The paintings are said by the gallery text to explore limnal space, which is the gap between objects and forms, and an inherent feature of pictorial depictions. It refers to their material and abstract qualities, the fact that they seem to exist in two and three dimensions and the uneasy relationship between the two. The notion of separation ties into the words *Eatramh* and *An tImeall* that served as titles for two earlier shows and have been translated as meaning interval and border.<sup>1</sup> The word *limnal* can also easily be misread. I first took it for *liminal*, an anthropological term relating to rites of passage. Liminal denotes transitional experiences, something to which both the act of painting and the act of viewing paintings sometimes subscribe.

Though she considers herself an abstract painter and never speaks about representation,<sup>2</sup> Ní Mhaonaigh's output, consciously or not, flirts with traditional pictorial conventions. Not only do her painterly elements intimate roads, vegetation, buildings and sky, but paint manipulation and the irregularly

shaped dots, what seem to be snowflakes, scattered across the surface of her images also create atmospheric perspective. The scenes appear to depict views seen through windows. The weighty painted borders also invoke the flat-screen TV and call up other forms of illustration, such as medieval manuscript illuminations and Russian icons. A wide, smooth gesso build-up will sometimes circumscribe the latter, for example. Such frames serve several purposes. Typically, they isolate the image to heighten its sense of exclusivity and reinforce its symbolic power. Ní Mhaonaigh's frames operate in the same way. They suggest hermetically sealed enclosures replete with significance. In consort with a radically subdued palette and reticent visual data, her paintings evoke an intense sense of loss or abandonment. The dots that drift across the surface bestow a dreamy countenance. They appear to be arrested in time and, not unlike the closing scene of Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*, elicit a profound air of yearning.



Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh: *Untitled*, 2011; courtesy Kevin Kavanagh



Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh: *Untitled*, 2011; courtesy Kevin Kavanagh

Close scrutiny of the paintings undermines these representational overtures. The surfaces re-construct themselves as a collection of markings, elucidating the gullibility of the eyes and mind, faculties that willingly fall for even the crudest visual suggestions. What first appears to delineate architectural ornament, or a course of windows on a cathedral, converts into a row of black dabs of paint on a vaguely pyramidal, dirty pink shape. Muddy reds and mouldy yellows accompany a range of grays and blacks that dominate her narrow palette. The medium also presents a record of the artist's actions. It holds the textures made by the brush's contact and contains the ghosts of accumulations abruptly removed from the surface. The vertical and horizontal sweep of vigorous strokes honours the canvas' planarity and infers the grid. Ní Mhaonaigh also contradicts the two-dimensional character of the surface by extending colour to the sides of the works. Viewing a work from an angle not only reveals one of the colours used in the painting, it also reaffirms the canvas' presence as a three-dimensional object.



Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh: *Untitled*, 2011; courtesy Kevin Kavanagh

The collective impact made by this selection of work seems to signal a departure from previous investigations, though this stylistic treatment is not altogether new. Works compositionally similar to this selection formed one of the several small groupings of Ní Mhaonaigh's paintings that were included in *Futures 2009*. But in that situation, the work came across as fragmented. Its visual effect was also debilitated by the installation, especially the way in which the work had been gathered close together in a corner of the gallery. Here, given such a generous measure of space, the presence is unified and emphatic. It invites one to linger and carefully consider the artist's accomplishment; to sort out the work's contradictory qualities and digest the drama created with such a minimum of colour. In this context one can develop virtually private relationships with individual pieces or step back to peruse the entire selection.



Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh: *Untitled*, 2011; courtesy Kevin Kavanagh



Sinéad Ní Mhaonaigh: *Untitled*, 2011; courtesy Kevin Kavanagh

Unlike some abstract paintings which can be hung any which way or reveal challenges posed by the edge of the canvas, the repetitive format of this work precludes any questions regarding proper orientation or disconcerting compositional issues. The broader bottom member of the painted frame and horizontal brush strokes crossing the lower register of the internal scenes firmly anchor each canvas. For such inherently complex visual expressions, the rigid structure avoids unnecessary distractions. It lets viewers conjecture as to what the paintings signify or depict, if they are pictures of pictures, and to what degree have they been carefully contrived and how much hinges on intuition. This is the allure of Ní Mhaonaigh's canvases. In focusing on its seemingly disjointed aspects, she elicits a transformation in the viewer's awareness of limning that, coincidentally, can also be intensely liminal.

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1. See catalogue essays by Catherine Leen in *Eatramh*, Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, 2006 and Padraic E. Moore in *An tImeall*, Mermaid Arts Centre in collaboration with Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, 2006.

2. Kevin Kavanagh, personal communication, 8 February 2011.