

## COMPENDIUM

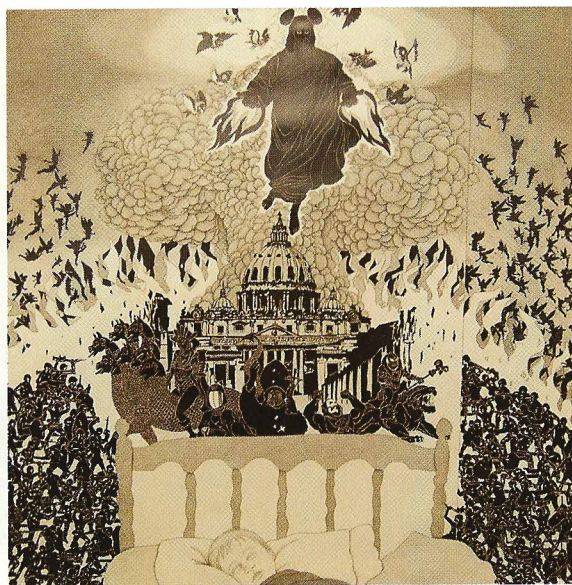
### DUBLIN

The term storytelling often conjures images full of warmth and longing. Friends sitting around a campfire, gatherings of expectant children, and generic references to the so-called good old days sharply contrast with a world in which many are symbiotically linked to electronic gadgets letting them participate in the cold and fast-paced climate of text messaging and email. So how do we respond to an exhibition that makes storyline, narrative references, and anecdotal content its central focus; a show intentionally modelled on a nostalgic rubric, that evokes memories of informative or entertaining collections? Initially, I was not too excited by the prospect of seeing an exhibition based on such a theme. But when I stepped into Temple Bar Gallery to see *Compendium*, the apprehension quickly dissipated [July 31—September 12, 2009].

Curated by Marian Lovett, the exhibition of work by artists based in Ireland and the UK takes us on a multifarious journey that incorporates both the imaginary and real. Colin Crotty's suite of paintings formed the introduction. There, mounted on a wall painted in colors invoking an institutional setting, his academically-styled oil-and-watercolor sketches proved to be curiously mysterious. Their battered frames and the tarnished appearance of the canvases impart an aged appearance, but visual clues within the work point to their photographic derivation and spurious vintage. Most depict groups of people engaged in leisure pursuits that include walking, waiting or musical activities. The images' contiguousness and stylistic attributes lead us to assume that they are connected; that we, for example, may be taking in the work of a local artist who has documented events in his community. Striving to pull a story from the installation, we find ourselves caught between physical evidence, possible readings of that evidence, and the impossibility of knowing.

Anne Kelly's *Aperture*, 2009, three drawings on diamond-shaped paper ordered into a cubic arrangement, operates similarly. Depicting three nocturnal creatures—an owl, a bat, and what seems to be a lizard's skull—the work intimates evolutionary or biological rela-





**MICHAEL BISE**  
HOUSTON

tionships organized geometrically in an implied space. In contrast, the nine lenticular prints making up Dan Hays' *Colorado Winter Wonderland*, 2009, follow a clearly linear structure. Offering us a kitschy tour of the western American state's forests, these oversize 3D postcards progress from realism to abstraction. The dazzling visual effects encountered along this journey recall crystals' light-refracting capabilities and the prismatic beauty of falling snow.

Crystals also figure prominently in Dennis McNulty's cyclical opus *the here and now/crystalline space*, 2008, which takes us from the glass-walled top floor of a skyscraper into the earth below its foundation, where materials reveal instabilities. Juxtaposing aural and visual elements, the thrust of this ominous tale of inverse relationships comes from the hollow object—which hovers between spatial entity and reflective surface—through which we see the video.

The remaining works on view revisit the past and point to the future. Copies of the contradictorily titled booklet *Unpublished Dialogue*, 2008-2009, which documents a telephone conversation between artist/designer Peter Saville and the curator, rests upon two examples of Saville's *Flat-Pack Plinth Proto Edition*, 2008. The presentation is somewhat disorienting. We are initially drawn to the booklet, which we want to read, but we find we have to choose. One booklet has been affixed to its plinth, the other remains unattached. Either way, the plinths anchor our positions. Not only are we aware of their presence, but they also become an intrusion. In the text, Saville candidly speaks about his education and influences, which have culminated in the plinth, an object that not only blurs the distinction between commercial product and sculpture but also, in a limited sense, lets anyone be a curator.

The Otolith Group's video *Otolith*, 2003, poses as a documentary from the future, detailing how humans lost their ability to live on earth. Utilizing newsreel footage, it conveys a sense of immediacy and verity. It also

contrasts natural beauty and the role of women in political protests, social projects, and space exploration with images of violence and cruelty. The video not only emphasizes the imbalances of recent history, but feels like an historical artefact, albeit from a time in the future when the world can only be accessed through media. The final scene of this intriguing sci-fi epic conveys the serenity experienced by orbiting astronauts. While it leaves some of us pondering the possibility of bifurcation and stirs up mixed feelings in others, it left me with an inescapable tinge of culture shock.

In some respects, *Compendium* reminded me of an alternative to the library. As the work demands both time and attention, the studious silence of viewers became palpable. The rich variety and complexity of this anthology invites us to read and reread the selections on offer, to compare and contrast, to contemplate possible interpretations, and reflect upon their potential meanings—a process illuminating in unexpected ways.

—John Gayer

Family matters are personal and rarely the stuff of good art. But Michael Bise's recent exhibition *Holy Ghosts!* breaks the mold and in many ways lays asunder this maxim [Moody Gallery; October 24—November 28, 2009]. His large-scale graphite drawings present a warped and often painful window into the artist's childhood, replete with fundamentalist revelry and personal demonology. The cohesive and meticulous work rises above the usual fare of therapeutic art. He unflinchingly illustrates a plethora of insecurities with a mature sensibility directed at larger cultural issues.

In one particularly awe-inspiring piece, *End of the World*, 2009, Bise presents a phantasmagoric nightmare as Disney characters, episodic biblical players, and demonic toy references all swirl above a fitful sleeper. Jesus is the mainstay of the hallucination, capped with Mickey Mouse ears, mocking His proverbial flowing robe. Mermaids and cartoon larks hover over a rambling apocalyptic entourage meticulously rendered in a myriad of tones. Bise's style seamlessly merges realism and cartooning as his attention to detail keeps him away from overstating the underlying content. Even though some characters have exaggerated features, they do not depend upon those enhancements. Nor is his sense of the macabre overstated, as can be the case with artists such as Joe Coleman, for instance. A sense of impending doom resonates in Bise's world, to be sure, but does not push his art into hyperbole, which makes the work all the more disturbing.

In *Fantasia*, 2009, Bise gives us a glimpse into an uncomfortable liaison. An older motherly figure holding a Bible looks onto a naked man-child Bise copulating with a large Mickey Mouse bent over in submission. Who is the aggressor in this image? It remains unclear. Are we to empathize with the juvenile debunker of the childhood trope or with the poor matron witnessing the disheveled bed? Either way, a childhood trauma is explicitly exposed, making each participant, including the viewer, subject to an uncomfortable carnal knowl-

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Colin Crotty, *Not this Place*, 2009, oil on linen, 31 x 36 cm [courtesy of the artist and Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin]; Michael Bise, *End of the World*, 2009, graphite on paper, 42.75 x 42.5 inches [courtesy of the artist and Moody Gallery, Houston]