

Darkness Visible (Galway Arts Centre 14th July – 23rd August) 2008

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There is much to be said for Breda Lynch's assertion, in the catalogue to this show, that the Gothic is ubiquitous. Mass culture is saturated with images of the monstrous, of darkness and the uncanny; teenage subculture has made a return to something like the goth styles of the eighties; and the shock tactics of the YBAs, Douglas Gordon's gloomy filmic meditations and the continental neo-mysticism explored by the Glucksman's Blake and Sons exhibition, all point to a fascination in visual culture with the morbid, introverted and unnerving. The problem with such an immersive experience is that it becomes difficult to discern the specific shape of the contemporary Gothic, to work out whether it is all of a piece or a multiplicity, to judge what the phenomenon might mean. There is the added pressure of the mood of apocalypticism abroad, of the news media's readymade images of threat, disaster and horror. We are all living in the House of Usher, with walls made of television screens.

Indeed, since the Gothic reminds us continually of its radical subversiveness, would it not be perverse, or rather, hopelessly establishmentarian, to try to establish a critical viewpoint within the contemporary Gothic, to pull its constituent phenomena into anything as classical as perspective? Surely any representation of the Gothic, in the form of an exhibition or of criticism, should be a witches' sabbath of an affair: chaotic, polymorphous and obfuscatory?

Darkness Visible is certainly not such an exhibition. Ann Mulrooney and Breda Lynch have put together a spare, elegantly arranged selection of works from nine artists, all either Irish (most of whom passed through the Crawford College of Art) or London-based. The hanging has made the negotiation of the building almost as much a pleasure as the works themselves – Andy Harper's *Orrery for Other Worlds* appearing initially at the end of a three-room vista; Breda Lynch's *Brideheads* positioned like family portraits over a fireplace; Kate Street's *Bird in the Hand* polychrome plaster and clay piece meeting the entrant to the room like a large set of macabre coat hooks. In fact, the exhibition stops just short of converting the building into a series of eccentrically furnished, uninhabited rooms, the final effect being one of circumambient calm, despite the claustrophobia within the works, and of a strangely natural, unforced relation with the Victorian interiors.

This is, after all, an exhibition about interiority, the distinctly negative interiority of the Gothic. The interior of the decaying house or castle has both functioned as metaphor for this kind of 'inner experience', to echo the title of Bataille's 1943 book, and has historically accompanied the genre. This is especially true in Ireland, whose ascendancy population proved a fecund source of Gothic writing. Maturin, Le Fanu and Stoker (perhaps even Edgar Allen Poe, who had ancestors from Cavan) not only introduced the 'house by the

churchyard' and 'Dracula's castle' into the popular imagination, but were representatives of the 'Big House' class, a population who were identified and identified themselves with their aging mansions. Gothic interiority is parasitic upon the greater world – it is generated by a sustained withholding from outside public life, in contrast to the withdrawing and returning, with new social forms, movement of religious experience, the convulsive energies tapped into and released by the baroque, for instance. This gives the house / interior metaphor a threefold character: depending on the protagonists' relation to 'ordinary life' it is either a site of threat (under threat of invasion or full of threatening chambers and inhabitants), the place of identity or a combination of the two, a site of passage. This last is often associated with puberty or marriage, and as the interior is both identified with and a source of threat in this case, it tends to produce images of doubles, split selves and ghostly or monstrous others. By the twentieth century the Anglo-Irish experience had very much fallen into the middle category, and memoirs and visitors' reports of Big House life tend to concentrate on the delapidated old houses, the mildewed rooms and the strange collection of typical furniture. As Peter Somerville-Ross has commented, "someone could write a paper on the significance of elk-horns in Anglo-Irish life". Such was the level of identification of this class with their interiors that their typical furniture took on a fetishistic power, became the real equivalents of the house occupants' condition, in the absence of outer, public expression.

It is at this point of access that *Darkness Visible*, through a particular Irish rural experience (the opposite pole, perhaps, to an artist like Nevan Lahart's satirical identification with New Rural Ireland's rude vigour, the triumph of the natives, as it were), enters the territory of the Gothic. The exhibition had originally come out of conversations between curators Ann Mulrooney and Lynch, about points of convergence in their artistic practices. Ornament as subject and the art of drawing were to have been the foci of the exhibition, and this initial narrower field has given the expanded exhibition its coherence – the aesthetic possibilities of black on white, and the uncanny effect of treating ornament as a subject in its own right, are seen throughout and serve to keep a certain consistency. Mulrooney's own pieces – sculptural objects, moulded from moss and cast in glue – introduce the ornamental theme. They take decorative details, like the tops of iron railings (*Palisade*), and give them an organic feel, suggesting that these forms have not been designed and cast, but have grown. The objects making up *Epigenesis* were even more animate and phytomorphic, while the somewhat isolated *Skeuomorph*, a weird little object incorporating the shape of a pug dog in relief, gestured further towards the interiors and lives that these otherwise self-sufficient, disconnected objects evoked. Like the infamous elk-horns they seemed like archaeological remains, lifted from a bog; again like the elk-horns, they were invested with excessive meaning, which in their case had led to their taking on a half-vegetal life.

Ornament appears again in Eoin McHugh's watercolour *Division*, in which foliage patterns, half wallpaper half vegetal growth, begin to colonise an old-fashioned interior, making explicit its suggestions of inner time and walled-in lives. On the opposite wall is a study by McHugh for a gothic, in the architectural

sense, spire or font cap (*Dome Study*), and a photograph of the finished object. The decorative and architectural are joined here, but with a certain feeling of Disneyfication.

Technically, Andy Harper's three paintings and painted globe are probably the most impressive pieces in the exhibition. Densely covered in obsessively described plant or seaweed forms, they are claustrophobic and unreal, exploiting the capacity of hyper-naturalist art like seventeenth century Dutch still-lives to border on the artificial and ornamental. They also reveal a second cultural lineage for the exhibition, that of post-thirties surrealism, the period that saw the writing of Bataille's study, and the affiliation with the movement of a number of talented women artists. The feeling of the close observation of a non-human world, of an occupation of human space by alien, half-animate forms, not only owes something to the surrealist use of decalcomania, but calls to mind work like Leonor Fini's 1946 painting *Sphinx Regina*, with its promiscuous combination of zoomorphic and vegetal forms, like a Dutch still-life given an posthumous decayed life. Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's intriguing, untitled video diptych, which on each screen pictured a rotting sea-creature (a dolphin and a whale?) in a mysterious landscape with moving sky, dwelling on the phosphorescent small lights in putrescent flesh, with will-o-the-wisps like sympathetic reflections in the surrounding land, opened onto the kind of post-diluvian dreaminess much beloved of post-war surrealism: as if the public world had been washed away by a cosmic catastrophe, and the decaying interiors of negative experience had survived and flowed out into the exterior vacuum. Photographs on the adjacent wall explored a similar territory, mixing twilight interiors with nocturnal exteriors.

The link to late surrealism is complemented by the inclusion of two pieces based on motifs from Hieronymous Bosch by Alice Maher. Though these avoid the figurative and autobiographical tendencies evident in much eighties Irish neo-surrealist art (the anthropomorphic Bosch figures are reduced to black, Rorschach blot-like silhouettes), they nevertheless make a satisfying bridge, not only between the work of this generation and that of decade and a half before, but back to the, admittedly self-portrait based, hermetic painting of Fini, Varo, Kahlo and company. Also proximate to this particular formulation of Gothicism are Dorothea Tanning and Leonora Carrington, the former drawing on memories of the drab interiors of American mansions for many of her paintings, the latter a writer of Gothic fiction as well as visual artist, and the provider of a link with the influential writings of Angela Carter.

The contemporaneity of the work I've mentioned so far, and its distance from related eighties art, owes much to a counter-figurative asceticism, and a post-minimalist awareness of the artwork as object. The mixed media pieces by George Bolster buck this trend, and have a more recognisable contemporary feel. His baroque saints, both grotesque and camp in their suffering, are more open field and medium unspecific – they include text, suggest autobiographical references, are both humorous and aesthetically polished. In the context they seemed a little too immediate and catchy for my liking. Breda Lynch's *Brideheads*, a series of eleven negative portraits, bring in relations to the mass media, and to the Gothic as it has been assimilated by cinema and fashion. In

the context of *Darkness Visible*, however, it was more so the sense of their role in an imagined interior, of their role as domestic portraits, as opposed to moveable images, that came to the fore. The figures represented, dark doubles of some marriageable heroine, have movie star glamour but seem eternally locked in an unreachable and alien otherworld.

The decorative tack on the black and white undertakers' horses ('found objects' in a way – they are a piece of Victorian formality still provided by an undertaker in London) in Angela Huntbach's photographic print *How Short the Distance Between Two Poles of Existence*, pointed to the separate question of fetishism as a practice. Its exploitation of the possibilities of a bold contrast of black and white wove it in, however, with the show's core themes. A smaller room on the top-floor displayed Kate Street's *Bird in the Hand*, a collection of disturbingly realistic hands holding items associated with birds emerging from the wall, and a series of meticulous drawings of plants with bird skulls in the place of flowers. These were astonishingly well executed, but led me to think about the meaning of the word 'graphic', about the short-circuiting of the passage from image to nervous response.

There is a book forthcoming from Die Gestalte Verlag, entitled *The Upset*, which suggests (as far as I can tell from a catalogue preview) that Street's art is representative of a kind of neo-surrealism on the rise among young contemporary artists. My initial impression is that I won't like it, and that I'll suspect that it reflects a mediatisation of the Gothic interior. I left *Darkness Visible* thinking about issues like this; in other words I found myself with a basis for judgement and thought concerning the Gothic phenomena (might it even be a condition)? This is a far cry from the Walpurgis Nacht of criticism, which I outlined earlier, but perhaps it is not anything as rationalist as a perspective either. Perhaps *Darkness Visible* revealed something of the story of the inhabitants of the house on the hill, and by means of that piece of knowledge a side-door had been opened, and a lesser character had invited me in.