

# Art to fill the void created by loss

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**VISUAL ART:** SUZY O'MULLANE attended the Crawford College of Art in Cork as a mature student and began to exhibit in the mid-1990s. She established herself as a figurative artist with a bold, graphic style, centred on drawing from life. Lucian Freud and Paula Rego were cited as exemplars, and their influence was evident in the way she set out to convey the sense, as much as the appearance, of the human body in space.

She responded to her sitters with openness and empathy. Then, several years ago, she was devastated by a double personal loss. Her work became a way of expressing and dealing with her experience.

She feels that her current body of work, *Trajectory Through Time and Space*, at the Blue Leaf Gallery, marks a step on from the rawness of her initial response to grief. It is still relatively direct, but it locates emotion in a language of visual symbolism, one that is not simply and starkly autobiographical. It is more structured, but also perhaps more optimistic. The therapeutic presence of a reassuringly supportive male figure mitigates against a feeling of abandonment and isolation that is nonetheless there.

O'Mullane's work is consistent with Freud's idea that artistic creation stems from our attempts to make something constructive in the space of loss. In a series of charcoal drawings and paintings, she takes on an animal alter-ego, a wolf, protective and ferocious but also vulnerable. As in a fable or a fairytale, the wolf laments her inability to protect her cub. A female figure is often described purely in terms of her flowing black hair. Flowers bloom in sensuous bursts of colour. Clouds drip tears. An alert, crouching female figure, clearly closely related to the wolf, was inspired in part by the gargoyles on the cathedrals of Paris.

Whether using charcoal or paint, O'Mullane works with great urgency, the drawings built up on trials and erasures that remain visible and actually enhance the final layer. Both drawings and paintings are carried just far enough to convey the nervy vitality that the artist is after, and then left, usually with a certain roughness of surface and approximation of detail. The empathy that characterised her earlier work is still very much there. One can feel the poised energy of the wolf in the set of its body. As with the drawings of Joseph Beuys, the artist believes that the integrity of her aims and feelings will guarantee the descriptive veracity of the lines and marks she makes.

AT FIRST GLANCE, Paul Winstanley's paintings might seem unduly parsimonious in what they are willing to give us. Thinly painted and overtly photographic in their optical qualities, they usually depict empty and rather bland spaces: modernist waiting or meeting rooms, corridors, picture windows that open onto expanses of conifer plantations. Yet they are impeccably well made and quietly atmospheric. Their communal locations seem only momentarily deserted and are charged with a sense of recent or imminent occupancy, and an undercurrent of melancholy. In fact, they recall what historian Robert Rosenblum identified as the Northern Romantic Tradition, when he linked modern artists, including Mark Rothko, to the romanticism of Casper David Friedrich and other northern European painters.

As if to underline this lineage, Winstanley's current exhibition at the Kerlin Gallery, *The Gun Emplacement*, takes the sea as its subject, while one of his larger paintings, *Two Figures on the Shore*, could well be a homage to Friedrich. The composition, in which two figures stand with their backs to us and gaze out to sea, was something of a template for Friedrich. Winstanley's treatment of it is typically muted, as though there is a pall of mist over the scene.

Where Rosenblum saw a contemporary equivalent for Friedrich's expansive views of sea and sky in Rothko's abstract rectangles of colour, one above the other, Winstanley opts for representation. But he starts from the position of acknowledging photography's role as the primary representational medium of our age.

Does that mean that his painting is in some way subservient to photography? It could easily be, but in the event the paintings are persuasive as paintings rather than as versions of photographs. As ever, Winstanley sets out to eliminate rather than encourage visual incident. Only one work includes figures. Another does present a vague view of the sea from within a sanatorium, but the room depicted is, as usual, empty. Of the almost abstract views of the sea and the sky, one, *Large Channel*, is particularly ambitious (the reference to the English Channel is the only nod towards the show's title in the work on view). It is a very simple composition, and it is minimal in terms of its colour and tonal variety. It would have been easy to make this work on a very small scale, but Winstanley has managed to do so on quite a large one – more than two metres wide – and imbue this subtle, barely-there painting with great physical presence. It's worth a visit to the Kerlin to see this painting alone.

ROWENA DRING, showing *Joshua Tree and Other Stories* at the Rubicon, has devised a distinctive technique that draws on new and old technologies, notably Photoshop and sewing appliqué. Beginning with her own photographs of the landscape, she breaks the images down into discrete bands of form and colour in Photoshop. With blueprints that serve the same function as cartoons for tapestry-makers, she then matches coloured fabric to every area, further simplifying the tones and colours, and stitches the masses of fabric pieces together. The stitching reads as a dark outline and the resultant images are extraordinary.

As one writer has noted, they resemble or evoke several different things, including paintings, tapestries, comic-book illustrations (particularly Hergé's *Tintin*), painting-by-numbers kits and camouflage patterns. There is also an idealised quality to them because the places have a heightened sense of reality about them, with sharper, cleaner, edges. The effect is a bit like Thomas Demand's sculptural reconstructions of photographs, in which the world is rendered pristine and unused.

Dring does not have a nostalgic view of nature. A glance at the breadth of her subjects reveals a consistent interest in the human interaction with landscape, with the transient impact of industry, transport and habitation. Her work is fascinating and, for some reason (perhaps because of its cartoonish quality), cheering – no bad thing these days.

*Trajectory Through Time and Space: New Work* by Suzy O'Mullane, Blue Leaf Gallery,

Fairview, Dublin, until May 23. *The Gun Emplacement: The Sea in Paintings*, Paul Winstanley, Kerlin Gallery, Anne's Lane, Dublin, until May 30. *Joshua Tree and Other Stories*, Rowena Dring, Rubicon Gallery, 10 St Stephen's Green, Dublin, until June 6

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