

Small and supple – or big and bouncy



AIDAN DUNNE

Small-scale paintings sit alongside large sculptural works at this year's 'Futures', the RHA's showcase for emerging artists

IN FEBRUARY 2011 Ed Miliano started a series of small, observational studies of his garden in south Dublin. He concluded the series at the end of February this year.

In between, he made a painting every day. Simply displayed, unframed on a set of narrow shelves, the 366 individual pieces are arranged in a grid that, if you stand back, makes up one vast, composite, enveloping landscape. As part of *Futures 12*, the annual showcase for artists who have achieved significant critical and curatorial notice, it occupies one of the enormous walls of Gallery I at the RHA.

Still, each constituent part of Miliano's opus is modestly scaled, measuring roughly 23cm by 16cm. And it's notable that, in Gallery I's cavernous interior, with just a couple of exceptions the work by the six participating artists is generally quite small in scale. At one extreme, Stephanie Rowe's exquisite paintings are practically miniatures while, at the other, Jim Ricks's *The Poul nabrone Bouncy Dolmen* is, as the title suggests, a monumental inflatable

sculpture. This may well reflect a trend in art for both very small, handcrafted and very big, industrial-scale work.

A New Yorker by birth, Miliano has substantial experience as a designer, illustrator and painter. He'd previously made very good botanical studies and intricately patterned paintings of sunlight and shadow in *Dar es Salaam*. Where crispness and precision were hallmarks of his visual style, the individual elements of *Diary* are much freer and more spontaneous as he responds instinctively to modulations of form and colour as the seasons progress. There's a tremendous sense of flux and transience in his vision of his garden throughout the year. Nothing is fixed or absolute. It's impossible to pin down one definitive image because it's always in a state of transition to the next.

Californian Jim Ricks has for some time been an iconoclastic presence on the Irish art scene. He targets "the bourgeois narrative", challenging and subverting its norms through a large number of materially diverse projects. These have been, typically, rarefied enough to come across as intellectual explorations of aspects of cultural theory. With *The Poul nabrone Bouncy Dolmen* his attention to the "contested territory between the 'manufactured' and the 'authentic'" has moved up a gear. Subtle it ain't.

The bouncy dolmen addresses the construction, fetishisation and commodification of heritage simply by being a bouncy dolmen sited in the kind of places where one might come across archaeological sites. It certainly managed to annoy some people and was subject to sabotage more than once. Apart from the dolmen itself, copious documentation of the project is on display.

There's some common ground between the two sculptors Lucy Andrews and Caoimhe Kil-



feather. The former – English-born, Dublin-based – reworks abstract sculptural tradition, undermining its classical modernity by infiltrating its forms with a range of distinctly non-aesthetic, functional objects and materials. These include plastic packaging, hair gel, washing-up liquid, and roof and floor tiles. Andrews sets up interesting tensions and possible lines of interpretation, especially when the interplay of elements in a work achieves a kind of critical mass. There's nice humour to it all as well.

Kilfeather's largest exhibited piece is a cast concrete sculpture of draped fabric. It's an intriguing work, playing on all sorts of ideas – evoking not just fabric but also a waterfall, for example. She too uses workaday and unorthodox materials (including carved and polished coal, for one) but without Andrews's irony. Rather she delves into the pungency and the history of the forms and materials she is drawn to, what she refers to as their quality of

Inflated heritage (above): Jim Ricks, *The Poul nabrone Bouncy Dolmen*, 2010, 20' x 25' x 14'; (above, right): Stephanie Rowe, *Untitled*, 2012, oil on panel, 10cm x 13.5cm



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“legacy”. There’s gravity and darkness to her work, which is made instinctively. It’s also nicely concentrated and very persuasive: it wins you over when you spend time with it.

Peter Burns reruns Romanticism as bathos. His calculatedly naive, calculatedly laboured, thickly textured paintings and especially good sculptural heads and figures zero in on an isolated human presence. This would-be archetypal Romantic loner is not so much an elevated wanderer above the mists musing on the great transcendental, metaphysical questions as a hapless everyman. He’s a tragicomic sap who doesn’t quite get it that he’s the butt of the universe’s little joke. That is to say, Burns’s sometimes autobiographical protagonist is indeed a seeker after truth, an emblematic human wanderer in search of enlightenment and musing on the big metaphysical issues, but the rules of the game are not at all as he imagines them to be. In this he joins an honourable lineage of fictional characters.

Stephanie Rowe’s miniatures are meticulously made oil paintings derived from film stills. Usually they feature a female character in the midst of some action or during a moment’s reflection. A set-designer’s eye is evident in the precision of the settings. The distinct character of the film image, the way light literally flares around the substance of things, is very evident in the paintings. The ambience comes across as generally European, dating back some decades. A Canadian-born Irish resident, Rowe manages to create a convincing, consistent world, evoking the mental space of her characters as well as the physical space of the constructed set.

She sets the tone for what is, with one notable exception, an agreeably quiet, low-key *Futures*.

Futures 12 is at the RHA, Dublin, until October 28th

