

## Surreal Estate

Niamh McGuinne's multi-layered *Surreal Estate* presents a world of shadows and reflections, real and imagined. It challenges one to look, to be curious and to enter a world of make believe, but a place that is put together from real objects and commonplace material.

A cluster of suspended metal boxes with richly patterned facades dominates the space. Differing in size and proportion, these constructions appear like little domestic structures. Their open windows and doors are an invitation to peek inside and discover empty ambiguous spaces, embellished with delicate motifs. Magnified and distorted, these details of glass surfaces, frames and fixtures are at first hard to decipher. Their shapes echo those found in the intricate embellishment of their exteriors. Some of the constructions are lit from within, like lanterns, subtly revealing their centres. Others make use of the ambient lighting of the gallery allowing it to cast real outlines into the complex patterning of the interior. The ornamentation appears strangely exotic like the rhythmic calligraphic decoration of Islamic architecture or the wings of a gigantic moth or some flying insect. In reality it comes from the oil, dust and rain soaked surfaces of dilapidated windows.

Sharp use is made of play and humour. Parts of the exhibition even taunt the spectator. A motion detector triggers a light to come on in one of the boxes. In another a tiny curtain shoots across the open window, violently cutting out the prying eyes of the intruder. The toy-like boxes fashioned into imaginary dwellings, hang from the ceiling as if in a child's bedroom. One of the inspirations for these constructions was Rachel Whiteread's installation of her collection of dolls' houses at the *Psycho Buildings* exhibition in the Hayward in 2008. McGuinne's inventive sculptures differ not only in the way that they are installed, but in the way that they have been constructed. The boxes in *Surreal Estate* remain 3 dimensional prints as much as literal houses.

Along with the sculptures, the exhibition also features a series of digital prints, *Surrealshadow* and a 3 minute animated film, *Shadowlight*. This presents a night-time environment, with close-

up shots of net curtains and rain-covered windows that switch from real objects to their reflections and shadows. The camera peers through openings giving glimpses of vacant interiors—an old fashioned fireplace and an abandoned sofa. All is veiled in the moving contours of changing light that fall through the window pane, distorted by the shapes of the net curtains or by the pattern of rain drops on the surface of the glass. The cascading rivulets of water reflected on the walls and floorboards of the fabricated spaces are reminiscent of sleepless nights spent staring at such reflections or of a child's fascination with tracing the structure and forms of such phenomena and delighting in their apparent random nature.

Switching to views of the box sculptures, suspended in a darkened space, it becomes apparent that the film depicts a constructed space. The details of the interiors are made using etching, screen print and thermal heat-transfer on paper, polyester and polycarbonate. Ambiguity is central here, as it is to the rest of the show. This quality of uncertainty, as Ernst Gombrich has noted in the seminal *Art and Illusion*, forces a deliberate effort to arrive at an intelligible interpretation of the act of seeing. The camera takes the role of voyeur, peering into a veiled world of private spaces and moving silhouettes, but it also evokes more fundamental questions about the act of looking. One has to make sense of what ones sees and the film prompts an awareness of the subjective nature of looking. The artist wants 'to blur the lines between apparent reality and created fantasy'. All is not what it seems in this imaginative exhibition.

The title of the show *Surreal Estate* brings together both the catastrophe of the recent property collapse in Ireland, the mass nature of suburban housing and one of the most challenging art movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rich legacy of the latter is a major source of McGuinne's strategies in her creation of the work. The found object recurs in the materials and methods she uses, most notably in the recycled aluminium signage from which the boxes are made and in the various inadvertent items whose surfaces provide their ornamentation. For example windowpanes are used directly through screen printing to supply this patterning. They come from the artist's home, from buildings she passes on her way to work, from skips, junk shops and public buildings.

The reliance on chance, another Surrealist trope, re-emerges throughout the exhibition. The giant net curtains that screen off the back wall of the gallery transform the sanitised gallery space. Their large scale contradicts that normally associated with domestic and private aspects of the home and is dramatically out of scale with the delicate constructions hanging in front of them. While the elegant patterning on the material appears to be the result of a refined textile printing process it was in fact spray painted on using a stencil.

The monochrome colour of the materials, the recycling of discarded objects and the emptiness of the spaces counteract the decorative aspects of the work. The openings in the boxes are cut crudely into the metal surface in a rudimentary fashion. The motifs come from streaks of rain, dirt and the textured surfaces of obsolete, often mottled glass, which was never intended to be seen through. References to such deliberately obscure material, like that of the once ubiquitous net curtain, suggest the murky secretive aspects of the home. By focusing on these details the work highlights the vulnerability of abandoned habitations, with their secret spaces now left exposed to prying eyes. The imagination is brought to a furtive domain of forsaken dwellings. Ultimately the changing patterns of light and shade, the delicate ornamentation and the refined tones of brown, blue and grey transform the detritus into a graceful elegy. This inventive exhibition speaks of the aesthetic power of derelict buildings and their overlooked fixtures and their continuing ability to fascinate the curious passerby.

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