

# Ingeniously recycling our world as a failed utopia



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VISUAL ART

**I**N OVERWORLD AT THE LAB, Tadgh McSweeney shows a series of eclectic works that range from relatively-conventional paintings to large-scale kinetic installations made with myriad, often found, materials. He has a quietly considered, lateral-thinking approach and there is an improvisatory, often inspired quality to the way he puts things together.

He likes things that have a history, both in the sense that they have served their intended function, and in the sense that they have just arrived at the point where he finds them through the operation of chance and circumstance, by virtue of natural weathering, for example.

This has to do with more than ingenious recycling. It's surely part and parcel of McSweeney's whole approach, the idea that we deal with an inherited set of circumstances, that the world isn't a blank canvas. So rather than setting out with utopian dreams of building something ideal from scratch, or delighting in the possibilities of material riches afforded by a highly-developed consumer culture, he starts on the basis of scraps and residues.

He'll favour the overlooked and discarded, the off-cuts, the broken-down appliance, the fragment rather than the whole, the disposable packaging rather than the shiny product it enshrined.

Yet it's important to say that there is nothing of the eco-saint about McSweeney, no suggestion of a holier-than-thou moralising greenness. It has to do more with the realisation that we must deal with a battered, degraded world of failed utopias, of chimerical grand schemes and vain good intentions.

He makes subtle paintings with oblique references to experience and narrative, characterised by judicious hesitancy and faded lyricism. The general is rooted in the local, in the specific, personal detail.

Several of the sculptural pieces come across almost as anti-monuments, edifices and columns that are unsure of themselves, that have acquired attitude and ambition by accident, as with the *Babel-ish Tower* (which is, in fact, beautifully constructed). *See View (Home)* is an absolutely extraordinary, richly allegorical piece, in which a mechanical arm gropes blindly about in a bid to grasp a see-saw arrangement of forms.

*Horn in P. (Pipe)*, which occupies a room to itself, is a visual and aural extravaganza, a terrific, mournful lament that, like all of McSweeney's work, finds consolation in the sheer largesse of the world.

*The Flight of the Dodo* at the Project comes with an elaborate rationale. Curators Jonathan Carroll and Tessa Giblin tell us that the exhibited works "celebrate



adventure, delve into factual myths, plunging in and out of notions of the hybrid, evolution imaginative escapism, the will to survive and ultimate extinction".

And there's more. By the time you reach the end of the preamble, in fact, you're prepared to encounter pretty much anything in the gallery, and in a way you do.

It's a very good, unpredictable show and manages to reconcile some extremely unlikely partners, such as Martino Gamper's stools (which are engagingly made from other stools) and Francis Upritchard's *Sloth*, which is not quite the

creature the title leads us to expect: it's elongated and much larger than life, with other unusual, slightly disturbing features, though reclining on the ground it does have a slothful air about it. Gamper, incidentally, was an apprentice cabinet-maker before diverting to sculpture, and he has a track record in reworking found furniture.

The spirit of the show's title is perhaps best exemplified in Sven Johne and Tim Braden's contributions. The latter's elaborate classroom installation draws evocatively on the literature of boy's



own adventures and derring-do with roundabout ingenuity.

Johne, meanwhile, went for the real thing, setting off on a solitary trek along an ancient wolf trail in Eastern Europe, apparently shadowed by the animals themselves. Infrared photographs record eerie views of night-time forest. The strange, often abandoned staging posts he rested at each night are as unsettling as the lonely tracts of woodland.

Douglas White makes a surreal imaginative leap with his *Crow's Stove*, a huge tree fern-like form fashioned from shredded truck tyres recovered from the roads in Belize. He manages to suggest both exuberant tropical growth and its destructive obverse, the forest burned and cleared, in a single image. The cabinet the plant sprouts from is probably not necessary to the piece, but the whole is delivered with great flair and confidence. Much less spectacular in conception, Eoin McHugh's small watercolours nevertheless draw us completely into their world, in which the orderly and familiar segue into something utterly bizarre, which is an apt summary of how the show as a whole works.

Des Kenny first came to public notice with vibrant paintings of street scenes. A certain wry, deadpan quality meant that they didn't become too cutesy generic. Also noticeable was the way he built up his picture surfaces into improbably thick, spiky masses of impasto. Since then he has pursued another strand of subject matter, the nude, and branched out into printmaking.

A large number of his paintings and prints of nudes are currently on view at Pallas Contemporary Projects.

They are not academic studies of the nude. Working from a

number of models, Kenny makes drawings of, mostly, individual figures. Subsequently he combines figures from different drawings in psychologically-charged compositions. His use of naked, or partially clothed, figures in Spartan domestic interiors and the sheer thickness of the paint used to describe them inevitably bring Lucian Freud to mind, though one could also point to other influences and, indeed, he does make reference to several historical sources.

Kenny is searching and honest in his dissection of relationships. Each work is a little theatrical tableau, a tragicomedy of desire and disappointment, arousal and estrangement.

The link between looking and desire is one starting point as he pursues the implications of artist observing model and viewers observing paintings of artists observing models. A voyeuristic, clothed observer features in several works and there is usually a mismatch between the naked figures – often paunchy and not conventionally attractive – as they fail to connect sexually or emotionally. The abiding feeling is one of melancholy isolation, of desire as illusion. The individuals are metaphorically imprisoned in dotted masses of pigment.

*Overworld*, an exhibition of works by Tadgh McSweeney runs until Aug 23rd at the LAB, Foley Street, Dublin 1, tel: 01-2225455

*The Flight of the Dodo* runs until Aug 23rd at the Project Arts Centre, 39 East Essex Street, Temple Bar, Dublin 2, tel: 01-8819813/4

Des Kenny, paintings and prints, runs until Aug 18th at Pallas Contemporary Projects, 111 Grange-gorman Road Lower, Dublin, tel: 087-7826880

