

The Meeting

The concept for The Meeting came about as a result of the ever-popular Speed Curating event organised annually by Visual Artists Ireland. Held in the magnificent grounds of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, artists and curators gather together to partake in what has been coined 'speed dating for artists'. This is a fun and lively day where artists are allocated a fifteen- minute session to meet with individual curators in order to pitch their ideas and present their work before moving on and another artist taking their seat. This event has been lauded as a wonderful opportunity for artists and curators alike to network and meet with individuals within the art world whom they may not necessarily have had the opportunity to cross paths with otherwise. As such this event acts as a fertile creative platform which results in artists and curators often going on to form new partnerships. No more so than in the case of the Olivier Cornet Gallery itself where, in addition to the group of established artists they represent, the gallery also works with another group of artists: The Associate Gallery Artists (or AGA) are artists that Olivier has met or engaged with through the Speed Curating events held both in IMMA and Belfast. The nucleus of the idea for 'The Meeting' began at the most recent Speed Curating event held at IMMA with the actual meeting of County Laois Arts Officer **Muireann Ní Conaill** and **Olivier Cornet** at the event where the idea for the joint exhibition was born. Olivier invited David Fox and Vicky Smith to come on board while Muireann invited Darina Meagher and Aileen Hamilton to participate. This curated group exhibition opened in early July in Laois Arthouse in Stradbally Co. Laois before taking its home here at The Olivier Cornet Gallery on Denmark Street in Dublin.

David Fox, though originally from Tullamore in Co. Offaly, now lives and works in Belfast where he has a residency at the Creative Exchange Artist Studios in East Belfast. He is a member of the Associate Gallery Artists of the Olivier Cornet Gallery and has exhibited extensively from Galway to Belfast to Westmeath and also further afield in Spain and Berlin. A politically motivated artist, Fox's 2016 show held in Tarragona, Spain entitled, 'There is Much Yet to be Done' was a series of works that tied in with the 1916 centenary year of commemorations. In this series Fox depicts the barriers that remain in the North of Ireland such as peace walls and gates. Fox's work here examined the curious position of Northern Ireland in terms of the ambitions of the 1916 Proclamation, ambitions that may have been realised in the South but have remained unfulfilled in the North. In Fox's newer work, entitled Irish Border Series, which features in this current exhibition, the artist again deals with the politics of the North but in this instance his focus is upon the potential division threatened by the presence of a hard border within the communities living near to the Irish Border. The passing of the Brexit vote has made this threat a very real possibility and Fox's anxiety is palpable. The pieces that feature here in this exhibition depict very site-specific areas near the border, be they urban or rural roads. The title of each piece states clearly the roads' positioning on the map; The Border (N12, Co. Monaghan/ Co. Armagh); The Border II (R173 Co. Louth/Co. Down); The Border III (Marble Arch Road, Co. Cavan/ Co. Fermanagh); The Border IV (A4 Belcoo, Co. Fermanagh/ Co. Cavan). Fox's landscape paintings depict images of the everyday and the mundane, in this instance the motorways and secondary roads of the Border towns that connect the North to the South. These are very recognisable stretches of road that see many of the Irish population pass through regularly on their daily commute. However, there is something unnerving about these depictions. Firstly, using very restrained brush strokes of colour and tone, Fox only provides us with just about enough to

recognise the road we are looking at. The image is hazy, the lineation not always clear thus creating a sense of ambiguity about the scene. The paint bleeds down the canvas which adds to a feel of distortion and creates a sense of reality melting away. This hazy, blurred feel creates a dream like quality or perhaps it might be more apt to suggest an evoking of memory; these one-time everyday images appear to fall away and to become part of the past in front of our very eyes as the promise of the hard border looks set to become a new reality for Northern Ireland post Brexit. Notably, the scene is devoid of human or animal life. There are no vehicles on the road whatsoever, no passers-by come into view, no people enter or leave the houses in the paintings; the images are strikingly desolate. It is this sense of absence or emptiness that is unnerving to the viewer and at odds with what one might expect from these familiar bustling border town communities. Fox evokes a sinister, unnerving atmosphere in these images- a suggestion of something unnatural, as if the country has suffered an Apocalypse, the nature of which is unclear given the emptiness of the land. Using this symbolism of desolation Fox communicates a real fear of what lies ahead for these Border communities as a result of the passing of Brexit. This sense of anxiety can be found in the work of **Darina Meagher** whose paintings on view in this exhibition, a series of images depicting empty hotel rooms, are again devoid of human life. With an Honours B. Des and an MA in Visual Communications, Meagher began her career in the area of design and visual communication before moving into the area of contemporary painting and gaining a BA (Hons.) in Visual Arts Practice at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in 2011 and more recently a Masters in Fine Art Painting at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. Winner of the Peter O'Kane Solo Exhibition award at the RDS Student Awards 2011, Meagher went on to complete a much sought after three-month studio residency at the RHA in 2015 and is also the recipient of a one-month residency at Arthouse, Stradbally, Co. Laois which was awarded at the Dunamais Arts Centre Open Submissions Exhibition in 2016. Meagher joined the New Art Studios in Dublin in 2015 and has exhibited extensively. Meagher's work to date has been concerned with various transitory spaces. To date her focus has been on the theme of 'waiting rooms' in various guises be it in a hospital setting where one waits nervously for a consultation, a diagnosis or a consultation or in the limbo spaces of waiting rooms at airport, bus or port terminals where again we wait anxiously for planes, buses or boats. She has looked too at the commercial space. From the escalators of shopping malls to airport check-in areas, Meagher has explored the empty promise of consumerism. Like Fox, each of Meagher's paintings depict public spaces that are devoid of human life, soulless and empty; images that are unsettling and unnerving. Meagher's more recent work, featured here as part of this exhibition, has taken a turn. Here Meagher moves the focus away from public spaces of limbo to the semi-private space of the hotel room. Meagher was interested in the idea of 'Panopticon', the all-seeing, and, using the tool of Google as a starting point, searched for a hotel room in each of the top ten cities of the world. The three pieces chosen for this exhibition include; 'Hotel Room Beijing'; 'Hotel Room San Francisco'; 'Hotel Room Christchurch'. In these works, Meagher reflects upon the experience of the transitory space. There is no permanence or genuine comfort to these spaces. The individual simply passes through and their departure signals the arrival of another anonymous guest. The hotel room is another limbo space, a state of pretence where one is made to feel 'at home' where, in fact, the opposite is true. The uniformity of these anonymous, sterile spaces provokes an intense feeling of claustrophobia. Many of the hotel rooms lack windows or have windows that are hidden from sight, creating a sense of entrapment and the lack of any human

presence in all of these images is disturbingly bleak. With this work Meagher reflects the anxiety, loneliness and transience of modern day existence and by depicting a series of hotel rooms from cities all around the world, the artist suggests that this is indeed a universal condition.

Vicky Smith also deals with a sense of anxiety and loneliness in her work but from a decidedly feminist perspective. Smith is an award winning, Irish-based visual artist whose work is most often installation based and is presented in a variety of media such as painting, sculpture, photography, text and film. Both a learned academic and a skilled artist, Smith was awarded a BA in Fine Art and Printmaking from the Crawford College of Art and Design in Cork in 1998. The following year she gained a H. Dip in Art and Design for Teachers again from Crawford College. In 2004 Smith headed further afield to Goldsmiths College in London where she secured an MA in Arts Administration and Cultural Policy. Three years later Smith completed a diploma in the History of European Painting at Trinity College Dublin while in 2011 Smith graduated from NCAD with a Masters in Art in the Contemporary World. Smith has exhibited her work in over fifteen group exhibitions held in various galleries throughout Ireland and has enjoyed three successful solo exhibitions held in Galway, Belfast and Mayo. Smith's work is rooted very much in her own identity as a woman and indeed a female artist. Much of her work pivots around the motif of the bell jar enclosure which the artist sees as an apt representation of female experience. Her work's focus lies upon female identity within the domestic setting, the social setting and most especially the workplace as defined by the very traditional roles of house wife, work and woman. Entitled ' HouseWork, Wife, Woman'. Smith explored these concerns in a series of photo stills taken from a film created by the artist and told from the lens of a newly married woman who has found herself temporarily out of work and passing the time with mind-numbing, monotonous, repetitive and uncreative housework. The original film is non-narrative and the only sounds to be heard are those of clinking cutlery and delft in the sink along with the hum of a vacuum. Three digital photographic prints from this original exhibition were chosen to feature as part of 'The Meeting'. Each features a scene from the kitchen sink, be it the draining board piled high with pots and plates, or a surface with coffee stained mugs and dirty dishes awaiting their turn to be washed. Smith deliberately chooses plates, mugs, pots and mixing bowls that are not easy to place in a particular era. No item is of a particularly modern design while materials such as aluminium and pyrex, both substances that have remained in use since the 1950s, give these images a universal and timelessness feel. Smith makes it easy for the viewer to imagine their own mother, or indeed grandmother, at the kitchen sink doing the same domestic chores. The predominant colours in the images are stark whites and silver aluminium but it is the artist's use of hospital gown blue alongside these tones that very subtly aligns this domestic scene with the state institutions of the 1950s and 1960s. These images convey the artist's deep held belief that not much has changed for women over the last seventy years. The artist has stated that this form of domestic labour is not in any way taken seriously by society. Despite the advances made by the second wave and third wave feminists from the 1970s on this did not seem to really translate into the domestic sphere. Smith has cited a shocking statistic recorded in 2017 that reveals that 70% of women surveyed still admitted that were solely responsible for

housework in their households. Smith has argued that the majority of men boast that they 'help' their wives or partners with the housework rather than simply state that they 'do' the housework themselves. In this way, we can identify a highly political message to Smith's work. The domestic sphere in these stills is a very lonely and isolating space. There may be a window facing out above the sink but the housewife does not look out, rather her eyes focus down. Again, the images do not show any individuals in the frame. The viewer is led to imagine the housewife positioned at the edge of the sink but are never given an image of her; instead we simply view the scene through the lens of the housewife's eyes. We look down into the sink of dirty dishes as she does and join her in her monotonous domestic chores. There is a palpable sense of soul-destroying wasted time about these images. Unlike Meagher's, who's work evokes a deeper sense of anxiety, the overall feeling here leaves the viewer with a sense of sadness and resignation.

Aileen Hamilton is a decidedly different artist to the aforementioned artists. In many ways, Hamilton offers relief from the intensity of the work of Smith, Meagher and Fox and the anxiety that their work evokes in the viewer. An Irish artist and graduate of the National College of Art and Design, Hamilton has been based primarily between Barcelona and Ireland since being awarded her degree in 2001. Hamilton has extensively exhibited her work in Ireland, Spain, Japan, Sweden and Thailand. Hamilton is highly skilled in the area of 3D painting and she moves between this form and also works on canvas and paper. Hamilton's work is deeply rooted in Nature and to Nature's organic processes and ecological cycles and more especially upon the delicate balances that are essential to these cycles being realised time and time again. Chosen from her original collection *Folding Pathways* the following pieces have been selected for exhibition in this show; 'When the Source of the wave is approaching. Dusk'; 'Ground Substance'; 'Folding Landscapes'; 'Folding Pathways. Relief painting'. There is a magical, otherworldliness to Hamilton's work. Like the underworld/upside-down world from the Netflix's *Stranger Things* series or the silvery, aqueous portholes from the cult classic *Donnie Darko*, Hamilton's imagined world of in-betweenness evokes something similar visually but bears none of the dark elements. In works such as 'Ground Substance' and *Folding Landscapes* Hamilton's landscapes appear to bend as if they were in, what the artist coins, a 'space time continuum'. At other times, her landscapes appear to float mid-air. Her images are delicate, fragile, sublime and utterly beautiful depictions of the mysteries of Nature's in-between spaces. Hamilton's work is an exploration of the binary elements of Nature; life/death; dark/light; balance/harmony; chaos/order; fragility/solidity; the outer world/the inner world; depth/flatness; movement/stillness. Her delicate, intricate brush strokes, ranging from vibrant colours to muted tones, create a sense of connectedness and elasticity between supposed opposing elements. One stand-out piece is 'When the source of the wave is approaching. Dusk.' The upper part of the image contains sweeping strokes of muted greens and blues and swirling pinks all suggestive of air, sea water and sea foam. The lower section of the images suggests a type of oceanic underworld offering condensed darker colours of murky greens, dulled blacks and blues. There is a symphonic movement to this piece. Exuberant, energetic circular movements, suggestive of a large powerful wave combining both the upper and the under worlds, creating a ying/yang effect and a harmony and balance between the two. At the centre of this typhoon imagery lies what appears to be an eye, suggesting a consciousness to this process. The sea is often evoked in Hamilton's work. In constant flux,

the sea represents the impermanent nature of things and given its vast expanse, it is also a space of infinite potential, a rich source of inspiration for the artist.

The Meeting runs until 3rd September at the Olivier Cornet Gallery.

Paula Clarke, August 2017