

(Catalogue Essay) 'Beholding Gravity', *SOLO: Mairead O'hEocha*, Vicenza: AMC Collezione Coppola, 2018 (unpaginated).

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Beholding Gravity

I was once a trainee florist, tasked with the role of maintaining large and showy floral arrangements installed in the foyers of expensive hotels. Carrying my toolbox, I would travel from one hotel to another, assessing the structural integrity of each arrangement, evaluating petals, leaves and stems for signs of decay. Observing how cut flowers behaved under duress, I began to appreciate those varieties that could best withstand the forces of time, gravity, and air conditioning. Never a very committed trainee, I abandoned floristry decades ago. But when I stand in front of Mairead O'hEocha's paintings, I am reminded of knowledge acquired through my body, in the work of manipulating flowers. I wonder whether I can still judge if an arrangement is likely to last a few more days, holding together or falling asunder. As I observe how O'hEocha has formed each petal, leaf and stem, in and through the work of painting, I am also forced to reckon with a shifting relationship to three-dimensional things.

Mairead O'hEocha's still life compositions, which include *Bouquet with Chrysanthemum after Rachel Ruysch*, 2017, can be read as meditations upon the history of genre painting, as demonstrations of a kind of virtuosity, or even as a commentary upon the codification of communication.¹ But, while all of these interpretations are plausible, I am more specifically struck by her attention to the work of support, performed by these once living things, which must stand tall against the forces of gravity. Both *February Ivy Burial*, 2016, and *Flowers and Herakles*, 2015, feature arrangements that are spare, rather than lush, with stems, branches and twigs protruding from vessels poised on tables. Staging a conversation between separate moments in the history of art, O'hEocha's flower paintings effect a deliberate compression of time, but she also establishes a relationship between apparently opposing registers of knowledge, bringing maintenance and support closer to the realm of metaphor and symbolism.

¹ Arrangements of cut flowers are often used to symbolise coded (and socially privileged) forms of communication, as in the case of Martin Scorsese's 1993 film *The Age of Innocence*, adapted from Edith Wharton's 1920 novel of the same title.

O'hEocha's paintings are not the first artworks to reward familiarity with the material properties and structural capacities of everyday things in the world. In his materialist account of fifteenth century Italian painting, Michael Baxandall focuses upon the experience of the socially privileged (and often typically male) beholder, and the specific knowledges that were gained and practiced through commerce and exchange, spiritual devotion or refined leisurely pursuits. For Baxandall, paintings are significant partly because like 'fossils'², they preserve traces of earlier economic life. As his own analysis suggests, a painting can be a means to access knowledges that once accrued in the body, whether through labour or leisure. Observing that Piero della Francesca was the author of 'a mathematical handbook for merchants, *De abaco*'³, Baxandall argues that some painted representations of objects, from hats to bodies, specifically appealed to merchants who were skilled in the practical art of gauging quantities and judging volumes by eye. Complex spatial arrangements could be appreciated by beholders who used visualisation in meditation and prayer, while other forms of composition were particularly pleasurable for those versed in the gestures of courtly dance.

O'hEocha's work is, as I have suggested, especially attentive to structures of arrangement, display and support, and to the changing character of human interactions with inanimate things. Her paintings often seem to manifest an estranged attitude, apprehending space and matter as though from an alien—or nonhuman—vantage point. This might be read as a strategy of disavowal but it clearly operates differently from that theorised by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*.⁴ Fried focuses on a group of mid-eighteenth century French paintings that depict figures absorbed in various forms of activity, apparently oblivious to the gaze of the painter. In O'hEocha's theatre, however, humans have moved off stage, leaving only the material traces of their action, ranging from figurative monuments—as in the case of *Thinking Statue, Stephen's Green*, 2011—to less tangible indicators of sentient presence. So, artificial light emanates from empty office buildings and petrol stations, laundry billows on an abandoned washing line, and water spurts unobserved from a freezing fountain.

² Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Second Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 2.

³ Baxandall, p. 87.

⁴ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Nonhuman living creatures appear in some of these scenes, but tend to inhabit the margins, like the scattering of pigeons in *Sculpture and Birds, Bank of Ireland, Baggot Street*, 2013, or the swan floating in the lower left corner of *Mespil Road Petrol Station and Canal*, 2013. Inanimate creatures are more prevalent, and prominent. *Gorilla Ornament, Arboretum, Co. Carlow*, 2012 and *Sheep Standing and Interior*, 2014, both feature human figurations of wild and domestic animals exposed under the flat glare of artificial daylight. Other human-made animal figures emerge from darkness, in *Horse on Gatepost near Unyoke, Co. Wexford*, 2010, and *Stray Centred Family*, 2014, and appear more lively even though they are physically bound to garden walls or fairground carousels.

The absence of humans is dramatised in *Tree for Missing People*, 2014. Devoid of leaves and disconnected from its surroundings, this tree stands on illuminated ground, separated from obscure parkland in the distance by a jagged brown path, suggesting a fracture in the surface of the earth. Objects hang from branches, obeying the rules of a familiar gravity, but the physical rules of the petrified Technicolor land portrayed in *Chopped Tree, Castle Leslie*, 2014, are less certain. Sculpted in acid greens, shards of lilac and orange, the ‘chopped tree’ erupts from the ground like a crystal or a meteorite, almost puncturing the grey clouds above. This is just one of several paintings in which colour is used to unsettle all that might be taken for granted, including gravity. In *Hoarding, Lights and Rain*, 2014, weather conditions take on a solidity that rivals objects, as bright, thick shards of water fall in front of a temporary structure.

The arrangements and structures encountered in O’heocha’s paintings rarely evoke photographic images, but the camera—a technology that both enables and signifies a pervasive economy and culture of image storage, recognition and classification—has a place in her work. In *Workyard, Smithfield, Dublin*, 2011, a wall-mounted security camera surveys a semi-enclosed space, looking indirectly toward a mysterious form, sculpted (like the yard itself) from chalky-creamy paint. This rounded thing is slightly flattened at the front as though pressed against an invisible surface and, just like the various ‘volumes’ discussed by Baxandall, it presents a kind of perceptual challenge to the beholder. But to the right, an even more enigmatic form looms much larger, dominating the painting. Describing this painting, Isobel Harbison observes that ‘a large, incongruous poster of a rural idyll appears to be wallmounted, framing an elevated door. At the centre of this trompe l’oeil, cloud-like whirls suggest a Renaissance depiction of the Assumption, the Virgin replaced by

this darkened doorway.⁵ Yet the poster could just as easily be a mirror, reflecting the sky behind the beholder, and curved doorway could be a lone headstone, awaiting transport to a grave, and the dark and almost symmetrical ‘whirls’ surrounding the doorway-headstone do not occupy the same dimension as the fluffy white clouds of the poster-sky.

According to Harbison, O’heocha’s ‘compositions each contain a point of ambiguity, everyday oddities seen in passing, identified and intensified through paint.’ To observe that O’heocha is drawn toward ‘everyday oddities’ is to imply that oddness exists in the world, ready and waiting to be noted. But the processes through which ambiguities are identified and intensified cannot be easily disentangled, or neatly sequenced. O’heocha’s arranging of odd (or ordinary) things does not occur wholly *after* looking, and nor does it precede the act of painting. In *Workyard, Smithfield, Dublin*, multiple processes of ‘identification’, ‘arrangement’ and ‘manipulation’ appear to occur simultaneously. The work yard becomes a space in which to manifest the multiple embodied knowledges that make it possible to recognise forms, quantities and volumes, so that the properties of things might be judged and measured. In O’heocha’s paintings, once ordinary human relations to material things in the world call attention to themselves. These relations are rendered as distinct and perceptible, but they are also made strange.

⁵ Isobel Harbison, ‘Mairead O’heocha, Douglas Hyde Gallery’, *Frieze* 141, 8 September 2011.