John Chilver

Review of Pádraig Timoney *Fontwell Helix Feely*

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How many ways can you make a painting? Pádraig Timoney’s answer is as many as you like. There’s something alluring about what looks at first glance like a group show turning out to be solo show. This selection of Timoney’s paintings plus photographs and objects from nearly two decades of work stakes a lot on its sheer variety. There are a dozen or more completely different approaches to painting here alongside handsomely crafted photographs. One impression of this generous show is that the variety trumps the content of the works. Compare this with the stylistic postmodern painting of the 1980s, such as David Salle’s: the Salle of the late 1970s and early 80s was a kind of multi-voiced ventriloquist who quoted images, marks and swatches of pattern and surface and collided a bundle of disparities together on the stage of a large canvas. In Timoney’s work the bundle of disparities has migrated outside the frame of the single canvas. It now straddles the whole oeuvre. This is a strategy that requires tact. Sometimes you feel the point of a given work is to complicate the oeuvre rather than to accomplish something singular in its own right. Other times individual pieces sing out. The beautiful *Wadas* (2009) is wonderful game of pooled watercolour-like blooms of pigment that get trapped and zoned by delicately sectioned wooden batons fixed to the canvas surface. Like an impossible union of Francis Picabia and Helen Frankenthaler, it creates a strange and delightful alliance between surface construction and chromatic process. In the same room opposite *Wadas* is the entirely different experience of *The Great Supper* (2012). This large painting of an apparently drab and nondescript suburban house is beguiling. The house stands at a crossroads or street corner. One wall is shown obliquely and the other, occupying the centre of the canvas, is shown frontally. The house is painted with a photographic reality-effect but with an enjoyable openness to the flow of the painting process. The surface of the wall is rendered by a thin, wildly brushed underpainting that contrasts with the tighter more opaquely painted windows that become the enigmatic focus of the image. Their red frames are identical and each has the same vase of pink flowers visible within. The repetition works like the riddle. A scene of normality whose rupturing demands a response. Is this an allegory of repetitious uniformity? - Precisely the homogenizing repetition that Timoney’s variousness sets itself against? Or is some anecdotal information being withheld that would supply a narrative? I’d go for the first reading, which makes *The Great Supper* an image of a haunted, ritualized sameness that the exhibition wants to oppose.

Alessandro Rabottini writes that Timoney’s stylistic pluralism “allows him to elude an authorial identity”. But that’s not quite right: rather, it allows him to elude a *visual* identity whilst conferring upon him the powerfully authorial role of stylistic puppet-master. There are a few duds but many more good moments here: the witty reflexivity of an Op Art zebra in *Lighting in the Hide* (2008); riffing with coloured set squares surrounding a blank glue-sized canvas in *One of them threw one of them through one of them* (1996); the manga-noir melancholy of *The island of the dead* (2001). Yet for all the pleasures of pictorial diversity, there were good reasons for the modernist, or even Old Master versions of stylistic consistency: the main one being that they allowed something to be distilled, intensified and, at best, discovered. The vulnerability of Timoney’s diversity lies in its sense of adopting off-the-peg pictorial tactics. This threatens merely to return us to the pluralist heteronomy of the everyday image world. That said, Timoney’s work offers a plausible and joyful response to the social fact of image diversity and makes the image’s loss of authority feel like a fertile site for painting.

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