



Mary McIntyre

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Many of Mary McIntyre's most recent photographs are images of the landscape. Yet while they may, in varying ways, invoke the pictorial tradition of the romantic sublime, with its aspirations to transcendence, or that of the picturesque, with its intimations of escapism and indulgence, they do so with considerable caution and some reserve, not to say reservations. This is both understandable and salutary in the work of a photographer best known for her atmospheric depictions of the faded glory of eerily uninhabited institutional or semi-institutional interiors. While the new work signals an expansion [*as yet tentative, and perhaps temporary*] of a previously confined, occasionally claustrophobic, world-view, it does so without jettisoning the inherent criticality and social conscience which have long been notable McIntyre trademarks.

Any attempt to account for this recent rustication of what formerly were predominantly urban vistas must take note of a key series of works from 2000, all of which are titled 'INTERIOR LANDSCAPE'. These photographs maintain a productive tension between the superficially contrasting attractions of interiority and exteriority, and constitute a poignant attempt to maintain a foothold in both domains. They present us with images of the decrepit corners of desolate work

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1+2 INTERIOR LANDSCAPE 2000



spaces, each of which features a cheap reproduction of an idyllic, pastoral landscape painting hastily taped to a wall beside a grubby noticeboard, or over a light switch, or under a broken coatrail. In one photograph a scrawled notice, partly obscured by a wrecked fridge whose door swings listlessly open, vainly, and in retrospect ironically, enjoins the absent workers to 'KEEP YOUR WORK PLACE CLEAN - IT'S YOU WHO HAS TO WORK IN IT'. In another, the glass doors of a battered display-case-cum-locker have likewise been left open after much of its contents were seemingly rifled and removed. Yet the tacked-up landscapes remain. The suggestion is that these down-market depictions of a world of bucolic pleasure, as originally envisioned by a bygone age, of late provided second-hand solace to a modern, alienated and urban work-force. Yet the further passing of time has deprived them even of this lowly function. Eventually, they too will disappear altogether as suggested in a related, short video-work, also entitled 'Interior Landscape' (2000), in which these two-dimensional avenues of escape into arcadia slowly fade out of existence, one by one leaving the shadowy corners they once adorned bereft of any window to an outer, older and, by implication, better world. The specifics of time and space, of (art) history and (social) geography are thus uncannily confounded and the viewer is set adrift in an indeterminate, timeless nowhere.

This melancholic transaction between the categories of interior and landscape, between an inner and an outer world, is characteristic of McIntyre's approach. McIntyre's work as a whole consistently engages in a complex set of negotiations between a series of putatively opposing categories. These include the visual and the verbal, the documentary and the expressive or theatrical, the contemporaneous and the historical, the critical and the sublime, the temporal and the spatial, and the prosaic and the poetic.

To take the last of these first, we might note that, while a lazy characterization of McIntyre's work might describe it as poetic - meaning something like 'haunting and evocative' - it is in fact profoundly prosaic in one way at least. That is to say in its fundamental preference for metonymy over metaphor. Metonymy, which is based on a relationship of contiguity, is, as Roman Jakobson long ago pointed out, the presiding figure of Realism, especially of classic realist prose. Metaphor, on the other hand, which is founded on a relationship of similarity, is the characteristic trope of Romanticism and Symbolism, and is especially evident in lyric poetry. It is typical of McIntyre to favour one mode without entirely abjuring the other. The metonymic thrust of her work is reflected by a fascination with the paraphernalia of civic instruction and control: council room furniture, committee room tables, old school desks, stackable chairs and church pews. The impulse which causes the Realist author, according to Jakobson, to digress metonymically "from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time" finds its ideal expression in synecdochic details, whereby, for example, a physically nondescript 'seat of power', 'presiding chair' or 'operating table' comes to represent a whole complex of power-relations. This is the principle which animates McIntyre's documentation of council chamber interiors 'Chambers' 1998, and the series of chairs 'The Understanding of things rather than show outside of the self' 1995. It also informs individual images such as 'Aura of Crisis' 2000, an ominously tight circle of empty chairs in front of a curtained stage in a deserted school-hall; or indeed 'Modern Warfare' 2000, a medical folding bed set up amidst the stacked chairs and trestles of an abandoned gymnasium, a plumped pillow placed at one end suggesting that it might at any moment be called into use for some alarmingly makeshift medical procedure.

McIntyre has a remarkable capacity, through astute compositional placement and cropping, to imbue otherwise unremarkable pieces of furniture with what can only be called 'character'. In so doing, of course, she deliberately infects her body of ostensibly mundane imagery with the contagion of theatricality. This aspect of her work is teasingly acknowledged in the title of a series of photographs from 1998 collectively known as 'Mundane and ubiquitous images that retain the character of everyday lived reality, disencumbered of any deliberate intent'.

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1 UNTITLED 2001
2 MODERN WARFARE 2000

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The degree of deliberation evidenced throughout McIntyre's work is, of course, considerable, and realism as an aesthetic programme is at least as pertinent here as reality as an ontological category. Ultimately, it is in the deft and subtle manner in which these various considerations are gradually called into play that one of the principal virtues of this evolving body of work lies.

MARY MCINTYRE is an artist and lecturer based in Belfast. Her work has been exhibited at Woodstock Gallery of Photography, New York; Context Gallery, Derry; Gallery of Photography, Dublin; Bank Tube Station, London; Ellipse Arts Centre, Washington USA; Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast; Het Consortium Gallery, Amsterdam; Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast; Limerick City Gallery of Art, Limerick; Royal Festival Hall Exhibition Space, London; The Engine Room Gallery, Belfast; Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast; The Light Factory Gallery, Charlotte; Wake Forest Gallery, Winston-Salem, USA; BoBo's Gallery, London; The Pearce Institute, Glasgow; The Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin; Garter Lane Gallery, Waterford; Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art, Norwich and Catalyst Arts, Belfast.

Reviews and publications include Paradoxa, wow.ie website, The Irish Times, The Sunday Times, The Sunday Tribune, The Guardian,

The Times, The Evening Standard, The Observer, Art Monthly, Sculpture Society of Ireland Newsletter, Circa Magazine, Source Magazine, Variant, AN, Make magazine, 'Troubled' Exhibition Catalogue, 'Outside' Exhibition Catalogue, 'East International' Exhibition Catalogue and Iontas.

McIntyre has work in the University of Ulster Collection, Belfast, Het Consortium Gallery, Amsterdam, the BT Tower, Belfast and Private Collections.