

*“Indeed, the dialectic between the past and present, between the perspective afforded by the past and the duration of the present, is perhaps the most interesting ironical story of all”*

Donald Kuspit  
The Dialectic of Decadence  
Allwarth Press 2000

Mimicry and mimetics, as in mirror neurons, are essential aspects of these paintings. The relationship of time and space as a quintessential momentum of realist representation (the visual sources of which often originate in collage) and the abstract expressionist marks, are semiotic constructs of Mary Theresa Keown’s practice as a painter.

In the painting entitled *The Rival*, sheep farmers are painted upside down. John Hinde’s tourist postcards from the 1960’s and a panel next to it has a Union flag, with symbolic figures maybe intimating conversation and mutual understanding. They may perhaps ironically refer to her own childhood in Northern Ireland. In *Skirts*, where three Japanese girls in flame coloured skirts from a magazine, appear to flaunt their clothes within the conventions of historic fashionable academy painting. Again upside down, this contrasts the other elements of the constructed picture plain being over-painted with notional marks, which unify the mimetic and the abstract elements of the work. In *Identify*, the painted animated character and a barcode over the Mona Lisa disassociates the figure from the light. The verticals are predominant as constructed elements of these *“frottage paintings”*. Frottage refers to the collage techniques which were particularly fashionable in Italy in the 1960’s, when cinema posters and other aspects of commercial street advertising were often ripped and reassembled as art works. These works often obscured the original image, and in some cases obliterated the source material in such a manner as to only obliquely reference the original tonal patterns.

These works are often constructed on the floor, the haphazard character of the eventual accidental fall of the images, are clarified and manipulated within the understanding of her own art process. The art brute and other figures reference other historical art works, not just ephemera torn from magazines. The surfaces reflect the elements of flat pictures and other aspects of the found tropes from contemporary fashion photography and other magazines, which often visually oppose the more obvious stylistic naivety of John Hinde’s red haired colleens with freckles from the 1950’s.

Particularly in *Homelands*, the archetypal Elizabeth Taylor image by Warhol, and fashion images of frocks from the 1950’s, the Hinde girl with freckles, Fanta and Rolo’s invoke a particular memory of childhood. The sail boat at sunset, with its stratified and almost kitsch oranges, intimates an attempt to relate to a looser painterly romanticism. The tonal frequencies are rebounding off the surface marks and integrating the textured allusions of the two dimensional images, into the overall surface character of the painting. The work also continues around the edges of the canvas, this continuity does not interfere with the surfaces, the mapping of

found objects as images are a continuous series of marks integrating the three dimensional character of the canvas and stretcher. The accidental linear quality also reflects the subliminal character of the actual painting process, and so continuous lines of visual allusion transpond the associative structure of the formal images comfortable illusionary painting methods. This facility for Keown as a painter seems easy and not in the least tortured, bombarded with visual images from all sources, she takes them into a painting to ask questions about their very nature as both images and constructed aspects of our social and commercial reality. It is a serious investigative process, the apparently trivial and consumerist fetish, is transposed through association and visual relativity to other more arcane aspects of her collages, where they are both analysed in a discursive mechanism, defined by her process as a painter. She is in the process of constructing a dialogue between collage and the painted image, where the eclectic nature of contemporary urban environment are the central discourses of her engagement. Her recent travels to Japan, where she had an exhibition of her work in Tokyo, obviously engaged with this process, the electric nature of the urban spaces there, where consumerism and animated tales of mythology appear to embrace a visual culture of profound and often startling dichotomies. It is analogous to her own interventions and appropriations between the visual history of this island's formulated brand of tourism and the more conventional mimetics of the photographed images of the consumer desires of fashion and marketing. There is a disconcerting sense of the illusionary mechanism of illustration, the marks on the surfaces which intersect and in some cases disfigure these illusions, are different as painting surfaces than the technically assured photo realist moments of the latent sense of still life bravura. This conflict in the surface tensions of the work, is a considered aspect of both her desire to integrate images and simultaneously obliterate the obvious character of the sources within the process of realigning the surface plain as a statement of her own presence as a painter. The intensity of photo-shopped images from magazines, are subdued by the integration of the painted surface, as a process.

In *No Rules Barred*, the bombardment of images in both the conventional commercial mode of television, cinema and print, also aspires to claim historical aspects of art history to imbue objects, often of a dubious nature, with the rarefied cultural cachet of museum pieces. The sectional depiction of a self portrait by Rembrandt, appears to fit into what might be the jacket cover of what could be coconut soap packet, or is it just an associative horizontal marking, unlike the traffic sign with no directional symbolism. The splayed and horizontal legs could be from Holbein's Christ. The two central figures obscured in glowing yellow and the grey waste of the found image, almost integrate with the social perspectives of the small terraced house.

In *Grey Gravity*, dissonance is the eclectic nature of a process, the instantaneous imagery of the street, a sort of graffiti of lost and found immediacy, transmuted through the process of painting is sustained by the free liquidity of the paint. In *The History of P*, pornography and gestured elements interface with the natural colour of the linen, and the occasional sense of the paint or painterly moments of expression beginning to intercede with the overall surface composition of the found notations

to symbolise formation. The paint is threatening to overcome the plot, or as Keown has said “the marks could behave as substances”, an affinity with their natural colour reacts to the human physical experience, and the grid format somehow maintains this structured logic, while the loose marks can overcome the total image, as it is used to cover the face of the greenish woman with the handbag, the paint will eventually obliterate the palimpsest of images.

Ciaran Bennett  
Dublin 2007

Pollock Krasner Research Fellow  
Writer, Curator and President of AICA Ireland