

Solidity and Comfort

HAZEL SHAW DISCUSSES WORK SHOWN BY STEPHANIE DEADY IN HER RECENT SOLO EXHIBITION, 'PRIMED VISION', AT KEVIN KAVANAGH GALLERY.

PAINT IS A VERSATILE medium allowing for detailed refinement, while also permitting gestural articulation and the abstraction of forms. Oil paint, in particular, evokes a slow, considered and controlled process of observation and representation and carries with it a sense of longevity. Limerick-born artist Stephanie Deady uses oil paints on wooden boards to consider the various environments she has experienced and inhabited. Her first solo exhibition, 'Primed Vision' at Kevin Kavanagh gallery (11 January – 10 February), displayed an accomplished selection of interior scenes painted over extended periods of time. Choosing wooden boards as her surface, Deady has control over the exact speculations of her images, finding wood easier to cut to size and better for accurate drawing. Her medium is almost architectural in this sense, reflecting her thematic interest and curiosity in forms and surfaces. Taking this structural approach to painting, Deady examines the details of landscapes and buildings with clean, austere brushstrokes and studious intent. This precision is fragmented by the occasional gestural stroke or an object out of place within the composition; the artist delighting in the articulation of space through the medium of paint.

Deady's painting is informed by her astute, observational manner and meditative reflection on the spaces she occupies. Her works exist in series, often returning to depict the same room or landscape multiple times. As the artist reflects on her process and the works she has created, she often finds more to be done or another view to be articulated upon her return to the scene. As the current recipient of the prestigious Tony O'Malley Residency award, Deady now works from a spacious home and studio in Callan, County Kilkenny. The residency has been awarded by Jane O'Malley, in conjunction with the RHA, every year since 2011, with the aim of offering painters the privilege of seclusion and space to develop their practice. With a focus on space, steadiness and calm running through Deady's paintings, the O'Malley residency seems a fitting phase in the artist's career. Having graduated from Limerick School of Art and Design in 2014, she worked in various studios across Dublin before taking up this current residency. The ways in which we inhabit space preoccupies her painting, as does the role of architecture in shaping our environment and experiences. The results are slightly off-kilter rooms or landscapes only sparsely populated by objects and, occasionally, a fragmented human figure.

The artist depicts interior scenes that feel both ordinary and safe yet curious enough to be worthy of an attentive viewer. Be it a friend's kitchen in Aughtim, an exhibition space at MART studios, or the alcoves of an undisclosed location, each image Deady creates comes from a real place inhabited, observed or remembered. 'Primed Vision' – a four-part series depicting the artist's studio space in Dublin – began during her time there in 2015, but she returned to this series in 2017, creating two final works using photographs and memory. The title of the series suggests an ideal vantage point; a view carefully calculated by the artist and communicated to the viewer. It also draws attention to the medium of paint and its surfaces, a quiet reminder of the picture plane as manipulated by the artist. Despite minute detail and careful brushstrokes, throughout the series we experience destabilising shifts in perspective, distortions so subtle you could almost miss them.



Stephanie Deady, installation view, 'Primed Vision' at Kevin Kavanagh, February 2018; image courtesy the artist and Kevin Kavanagh

These subtle abstractions seem calculated to disrupt a notion of realism, continually bringing the image back to its surface. Avoiding the sentimentality that risks jeopardising the viewer's own connection to a work, Deady employs a cool colour palette and reserved manner of painting. Showing a flair for restraint, a certain stillness permeates her steady brushstrokes. These images are refined, simple and to the point. Yet their fascination is that they do not feel cold or distant, an attachment is there. These are paintings of a studio as it has been experienced, lived in and felt.

Neglecting a deeply personal narrative, Deady invites the viewer to create their own, and to become as absorbed in the space as she once was. Through continued reiterations of the same spaces, her paintings infer a sense of time passing by, as objects and people move through their environments. Deady's 'Second Thoughts' series, exhibited as part of a group exhibition at MART studios in 2015, comprised small rectangular boards depicting an array of landscapes and empty rooms, their alcoves and cornices being particularly prominent. Taking fragments of environments she has encountered, Deady creates an aesthetic trail that carries the viewer across each piece. When displayed in sequence, a line runs horizontally across images, using abstracted forms to create a sense of movement through space. Unlike 'Primed Vision', these images seem to work at a quicker pace, evocative of a journey rather than a fixed abode.

Deady is interested in the evolution of a space as we inhabit it. The interiors she paints have histories of human presence and they have also been subject to dilapidation. A blank wall in a studio or house is given patchy layers – indicating that it has been painted over again and again in the same colour – while there are spaces where paint has chipped away. This is the kind of detail Deady picks up on, these subtle suggestions of time passing and the various iterations of work that have come and gone. In her 'Aughtim House' series (2015 – 16), a worktop in the kitchen of a friend's home is studied in minute detail over the course of seven paintings. Although the kitchen is typically a site of warmth and home comforts, Deady's observations play with the boundaries of familiarity, fragmenting and reconstructing the Formica cupboards and dirty dishes in each of her representations.

Highly conscious of the simple acts of looking and representation, Deady takes a methodical yet experimental approach to the scene. Her painting is inherently connected to the ways in which we familiarise ourselves with a space over time. Each time we enter, new details emerge and different foci become apparent. These images are self-consciously fabricated and carefully constructed with this in mind. A human form appears momentarily throughout this series, abstracted and fragmented, as an almost ghostly presence. The figure is never wholly present in Deady's paintings, yet the images evolve in ways that allude to continuous human interaction with these environments. The architecture of the studio or the home provides a sense of constancy, a stillness and longevity juxtaposed by fleeting human presence.

Deady is slow to offer explanation for her work, or to enter into theoretical dialogue with critics. Although admitting that she listens to philosophy and music in order to enter a state of calm while working, her paintings are deliberately not referential to external sources. Her work is about the simple act of quiet observation, absorbing a space and its aesthetic qualities. For Deady, these paintings seem to fetishise the act of looking, finding enjoyment in their calculated representations of familiar spaces. For the viewer, these spaces are initially unfamiliar, yet they at once ignite curiosity and a feeling of calm. Through a shared fascination in observation – looking in on a habitat and examining its details – these paintings are somewhat reminiscent of Edward Hopper's lonely subjects. Yet Deady's interiors and landscapes have their own charm. The predominant feeling of the work is an invitation to join in the artist's quiet and calm delight in the act of looking. Amidst the transience of objects and human life as it shifts and disappears, architecture and environment have a stabilising presence. Their solidity is a comfort.

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