

Life & Culture

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Eamonn O'Kane's *Twentieth of April Sixteen Eighty Nine*, above, uses the sycamore that once sheltered James II as its starting point. The inclusion of work by Jannis Kounellis, top right, indicates the curators' desire to move away from art world excess, while Omer Fast's thoughtful film *5,000 Feet is the Best*, above right, is based on interviews with pilots of unmanned predator drone aircraft

Dublin Contemporary: the verdict



AIDAN DUNNE

Dublin Contemporary 2011's ambition is huge, its space labyrinthine and the theme profound – even if celebrity names are absent. The results are mixed, but the overall experience is rewarding

DUBLIN CONTEMPORARY: Terrible Beauty – Art Crisis, Change is Dublin's first major international exhibition of contemporary art since the last Rosc in 1988. The first Rosc took place in 1967 at the RDS and created quite a stir. Within a few years of its last flourish, The Irish Museum of Modern Art (Imma) opened its doors at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham and exhibitions of international contemporary art have been part and parcel of its programme from the word go.

Other arts venues and events, such as the Douglas Hyde Gallery, the Hugh Lane gallery and such regional centres as Butler Gallery in Kilkenny, and Limerick's annual Exhibition of Visual Art, ensured that contemporary art became generally accessible to an Irish audience.

That is why direct comparisons between Rosc and Dublin Contemporary are misplaced. It's impossible to recreate the impact of the first Rosc, because the cultural context is fundamentally different. Yet, as Imma's most popular shows demonstrate, there is still a large potential audience out there, an audience that isn't much exercised about the contemporary art world per se, but will throng to see iconic figures such as Andy Warhol and Frida Kahlo.

First mooted around the turn of the century, by Oliver Dowling, Dublin Contemporary situ-

ates itself in this challenging cultural landscape. Ambitiously, it must aim to bring contemporary art and the attention of the international art world to Ireland, to showcase and raise the profile of contemporary Irish art and to engage with that large potential art audience.

From the first, curators Christian Viveros-Fauné and Jota Castro have said that their intention was to steer clear of the conventional, mainstream biennial or art fair model. They didn't want to round up the usual suspects, best exemplified, perhaps, by close-to-celebrity artists such as Damien Hirst. Instead they've opted for an alternative approach. There are some relatively well-known figures, like the veteran Swiss installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn, in the line-up. But they are just not names that reach out to the popular audience as Hirst assuredly would. Even the late, renowned Alice Neel, whose family portraits form a fine, substantial, very accessible show at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, doesn't have the celebrity cachet.

The inclusion of Kounellis is an indication of the curators' penchant for what they term Neo Povera, a move away from all manner of art world excess. The original Arte Povera movement, which emerged in the late 1960s in Italy, embraced simple, natural materials, and basic processes and forms as a reaction to aesthetic and commercial snobbery. It was an art of the ordinary, of everyday life. Following the recent boom and bust, Viveros-Fauné and Castro argue, it makes sense to turn to the principles of Povera again as a means of finding our way out of the mess we're in.

Their exhibition, then, is all about engagement, all about a view of art as being an instrument for social thought and change, accessible to everyone. Hence the existence of The Office of Non-Compliance at the heart of Earlsfort Terrace. It's important for them that ongoing discussion and debate proceed as part of the exhibition.

Earlsfort Terrace suits the rough-and-ready Povera aesthetic. It's a voluminous, labyrinthine building complex of many different spaces, some large, some tiny, all with a worn, historical texture. Rather than trying to covert it into a series of white cubes, they've gone with the wear and tear, letting the art take its



chances. By and large it works very well. The natural light is mostly very good, and the vast majority of the pieces usefully absorb atmosphere from the spaces they occupy.

An underlying strategy is to progressively toughen the edge of what you encounter as you make your way upwards through the exhibition. By the time you get to Wilfredo Prieto's huge, unsettling razor-wire installation you're pretty sure that all is not well with the world. Suspended above your head against a handsome skylight, it's a simple though effective theatrical gesture. Theatrical gestures abound: there's Patrick Hamilton's mass of bent machetes and grids of security spikes, or Kader Attia's roomful of humble plastic carrier bags mounted on sculptural plinths. At times you can get the feeling that you're being lectured to.

It has to be said that some of the expected big-hitters disappoint. Hirschhorn's massive *The Green Coffin*, in which the planet-as-coffin with its excesses and problems, is held aloft by a

mass of up-reached arms, is overly literal, messy and bombastic. It gets a prime site, too, in the Real Tennis Court, where Dan Perjovschi's glib graffiti scrawled on the walls do nothing to help. Equally, Chinese-born Wang Du's giant, interactive cradle, *Le Berceau*, is industrial in scale for no particular reason. Neither his nor Hirschhorn's work is new.

It would be a bit of an exaggeration to say that the Irish artists save the day, but they do distinguish themselves. Eamonn O'Kane's *Twentieth of April Sixteen Eighty Nine*, using the sycamore that once sheltered James II as its starting point, is beautifully installed in the Real Tennis Court, and the levity of Nevan Lahart's installation in Earlsfort Terrace is the perfect antidote to bombast. Cleary Connolly's *STUDIO 1 Plus/Minus* is an interactive video that really works.

Nedko Solakov's giant sloth of a sculpture gains an ominous edge when you look into it. It is one of the more successful theatrical flour-



Disappointment and delight: *The Green Coffin*, above left, by Swiss installation artist Thomas Hirschhorn is overly literal, messy and bombastic. Lisa Yuskavage's calculatedly cheesy paintings, above right, hang at the RHA

ishes on view. A lot of what's really good demands the investment of real time, however. There's no shortcut to the point of Omer Fast's thoughtful film *5,000 Feet is the Best*, based on interviews with pilots who operate unmanned predator drone aircraft. Ditto Paddy Jolley's somber film inspired by Antonin Artaud's brief visit to Ireland in 1937.

You have to be careful about investing your time, though. Hans Op de Beeck's critique of the emptiness and futility of modern life, *Sea of Tranquility*, contrives to be itself futile and empty. A disappointment from a good artist.

Looking to other venues consolidates the exhibition significantly. James Coleman's spare, compelling video installation (with echoes of Beckett and Pinter) counterpoints Lisa Yuskavage's calculatedly cheesy paintings at the RHA. The excellent Willie Doherty survey at the Hugh Lane incorporates a new video work *Ancient Ground*, which synthesises many of his concerns about the memory and persistence of past violence and trauma in the fabric of everyday reality. Then there is Alice Neel and, in the National Gallery, Brian O'Doherty and Dexter Dalwood's treatment of the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh.

So extensive is Dublin Contemporary, with something like 114 artists involved in all, that this brief survey omits dozens of artists who are well worth seeing and many who really should be seen. It's gratifying that Irish artists have put on such a strong showing, but that isn't to disparage the international component, rather it's an encouraging sign of how much Irish art has progressed.

You will not like everything in the exhibition, and a lot of what you see you may well find trivial and exasperating, but you'd be hard put not to like enough to make it more than worth your while. In the long run, the show's success or failure depends on attendance and impact, both here and abroad.

Dublin Contemporary 2011 Terrible Beauty: Art, Crisis, Change & The Office of Non-Compliance Earlsfort Terrace, until October 31. Admission €15, concessions €10, children €6, plus family rates. For other venues and online booking, see dublincontemporary.ie or tel: 01-6789116