

All things start with good intentions. This is no exception. The brief was clear enough and discussions had covered grounds well. Tulca has been covered too. But deadlines catch up with you. Here, late in the evening with a glass of wine and not a scratch written. The lecture is done for the morning. Globalization needed updating. The Gulf War was the issue then. Now it is not. Now it's the big crash. And now it is back to Marx. Round and round it goes. I must make a note of that.

So what is to be done? Work is work. Deadlines are deadlines. Art is art. And I suppose openings are openings too. There was earnestness in the air the other night. It was ambition a few years ago. It probably still is but the stakes are higher. We're just about adjusting now. The new rules ought to raise the pitch of voices networking ever so slightly - that they be that bit more enthused by the fact that you're not actually up to much at present. But if you can sense it, they can sense it too. So a dip in tone marks the new gravitas. I am concerned about that.

The air was fraught as well. Saoirse, one of the organizers, was there on opening night. She moved through space like a bluebottle. Her mouth was in the shape of an n. Serifs and all. It is often hard to get a word in, but you do have empathy:

'In a world becoming, what if we have already become?'

'Augh, I'm stressed beyond belief. What I've had to deal with.'

she replied, shifting direction quickly.

The ensuing conversation was peppered with aughs, yeahs and naws. All in earnest it has to be said. Then she's off again.

Openings can be hard work. It was inevitable that the smokers outside would draw me in. There's comfort here. Old territory. Stories are well rehearsed, refined and timed. They're great sparks for banter. And wit counts for a lot in the cold. I'm a fresh ear for this stuff these days.

But not in this instance. For there's a deadline. A deadline for words. More words. Words seeped in words. Words coming down in sheets. Words spread damp from mouths, mouldering. Words ever more electric, spattered from cursors, warm, static, ubiquitous, immaterial. Flash reviews, spontaneous opinion, blogs on blogs, hyperlinked, marketed, surplus, entropic. Every recession brings a new expressionism. This is ours. And every recession needs a new realism, whatever that could be. We're all doing our bit.

I take a sip from my glass. This really is quite a wine. I need a break. I'll turn up the stereo. Ah, The Tom Tom Club:

Rap it up for the common good/Let us enlist the neighbourhood/It's okay, I've over stood/This is a wordy rappinghood ...

Strange, an image is haunting me at this late hour. Better to write about that. There's nothing better than to be gently spooked. I can't be certain where it was seen, caught up as I must have been in the rush of images after the fall. One thing for sure is that I had seen it before - eight years ago in a refurbished townhouse in Salthill, if memory serves me right. In each instance, it was barely given more than a glance. The point of recognition was not one of significance. It is only now that a lagged unease unfolds.

Still, a description can be scabbled up for all it's worth. It was a small work of art, square in format. It was set in relief from the wall, unframed. That much is certain. If there was a title, I never saw it.

If vagueness is a feature of this recollection, at least this can be offset as an attribute of the work. For it was neither a photograph nor painting, neither a landscape nor abstract. Yet it had elements of them all. A brush appears to have been applied to photographic paper in the moment when a scene was developing. Much of the landscape was lost. The sense of depth offered by its classical vista was challenged by several curved brush marks flattening the space. Further additional strokes and bands of yellow, pink flush and ultramarine blue paint drew more attention to the surface. They were the colours of a sunset - Il Tramonto. This layering of surface created its own sense of space but never wholly effaced the illusion of depth created by the photograph. Enough remained of this world - enough to journey in and no more. That much was grasped.

Thinking back, the first encounter with the work those years ago ended at the very point of acknowledging this space amidst others. An older pastoral image was superseded by a contemporary play with abstract form. The work lingered on tradition. It had persistence; just and no more. And

After the Fall

A Short Story by
GAVIN MURPHY

part of its persistence lay in the setting in which the work was viewed. It did as much as to conclude the encounter - not on the best of terms either.

The reason for visiting the townhouse was to get some papers signed before the morning. It is the rare occasion to visit a solicitor and even more so to call to their home after hours. Then again, it is not everyday you buy a house. The paperwork was one of a number of tasks in a busy few weeks. It took all of five minutes, three of which I would be waiting.

I was shown into the reception room next to the front door. Business seems to be a regular occurrence here. The wood floor creaked and the room echoed. The layout was formal but warmed by cream walls. I was seated in one of two armchairs. They were set at an angle to each other so as to avoid direct eye contact. A table lay in between for paperwork. Other seats remained behind out of use. The armchairs faced a lit wood-burning stove, though not too close for comfort. The artwork was hung to the left of the fireplace, off-centre, sunk low in the alcove. As if it was to be inconsequent.

You recognize the tricks of an art gallery over time: how the odd placement of things can create a quirk. How oddness is an act of overturning traditional convention. How the quirk can be an almost apologetic understatement that can be contrasted to a world of brash assertion. I say almost in the sense that it holds its own authority - like the work's cool grey against the warm cream.

Here was the trickery in a solicitor's home at the point of doing business. You might expect a print of horses in a hunt leaping with those strange splayed legs. Something with the confidence and reassurance of an old order presented through cheap reproduction. Not this time. This was business funk up with a new kind of space: aware of its own artifice and revelling in it. An image, promissory in nature, stood witness to the legal contracts being signed. Imagine that. Suffice to say, the paperwork was finished. Job done. Out the door and up the road. End of story.

You'd think I'd be surprised when the work reappeared. Far from it. It was recognized for sure. For this reason I stood before it. But little interest arose other than a faint curiosity of how it ended up where it was. Of course, now that I think about it, recollections surface and even more questions arise. Why was it on exhibition in town when presumably it was bought by a solicitor? It may have been sold, returned to the artist, or lent out for exhibition. There's little point dwelling on this. Someone will recognize the work and fill me in with the details. In the meantime, the mystery can be savoured while it can.

What is striking about the image is the sense that it has been rejected. There it was, attached to a wall of a rental space that was now surplus to commercial interest. Not that there was much interest shown. For the space was in prime condition - literally. A concrete space with concrete walls, all rough in dim light. There was loose, dead wiring hanging out. I imagine a pool of black water on the ground to one side but really that could not have been. You do get the picture though.

The work had lost its spring. The grey of the photograph in the grey of the room. The receding landscape a distant aspiration. History. The swirls on the print now echoed the sweep of the plasterer's trowel. The coloured paint marks referencing an Italianate sunset were stranger still as you stood on ground where cold spreads quickly through the feet.

Then the industrialists: such crippling losses

They can't find work for more than one in three

I told the other two: Best ask the bosses

I'm ignorant about economy.

Bertolt Brecht, *Ballad on Approving of the World*, 1929-33

But in truth, this was its charm. It was not a fall from grace. It was not an image of redemption. The work held its own - and no more. Just as it did when first viewed. Where once its authority was recognized, and now appearing ever more coolly aloof from those times, it stands at present as a memory stretching far back and beyond those times and these. Its strength lies in referencing a classical pastoral image. Its persistence lies in its promise of order, stability and repose. It is a promise that can never really be delivered. If you could journey in, the colour of the pastoral retreat remained forever on the surface. The blurred photographic surface is an insistent reminder of flatness, mediating forever between depth and reference.

And this is what gets me. All the time the work has retained an indifference. Its presence each time lay consistently on the cusp of insignificance. Its lure is barely perceptible; its draw like a ghost unwanting.

I must make a note of this. But really what can be made of it? Art criticism starts from purpose; it thrives on definition. That was one of my more determined proclamations in one of Tulca's discussions last Saturday. It was meant too. Purpose and definition. What a pair to hang before a looming deadline and a ghost of an image. It's all I've got though. And anyway, it's really late now and I've a lecture to give in the morning. I've got my notepad to hand. Another glass of wine? Better not. I'll change the record first though.



'Well?'

'Well?'

'How did it go then?'

'A late night. Met the deadline. Finished the lecture. I'm a free man now.'

'Happiness dwells in the point of completion.'

'Yourself?'

'Barthes and photography in the first year studios. This has been and all that.'

'Good?'

'Sort of, I'll tell you about it over lunch. So what did you make of Tulca then?'

'Yeah, really good stuff. A lot of referencing of sixties radicalism. You were never sure if the artists quite knew what to make of it though. It's kind of interesting for that. Yourself?'

'I got round yesterday. Collectivism is cool again.'

'Y'up for lunch?'

'Yeah. You too?'

'Yeah. I'm starving.'

'The Wa?'

'The Wa, yeah.'

'Yeah, the Wa.'

'Ah, here's herself. Y'up for lunch?'

'Yeah, lunch'd be good. Where you thinking?'

'The Wa?'

'The Wa will be good.'

'The Wa it is then.'