



Girls' world

James Hanley is drawn into Cristina Bunello's feminine environment where the gazed upon gazes back, at the Cross Gallery, Dublin

There was an air show in Dublin recently, where commercial and military aircraft flew low over the city, following the Liffey before arching skyward and home. Post 9/11 it is difficult to look at a passenger plane in the same light when it is away from its normal flight path and in such proximity to tall buildings, even if the context is innocent.

So too when we look at images, painted or otherwise, of children, especially young girls, we bring whether wittingly or subconsciously, a whole raft of associations, thoughts and emotions, created in an ever-increasingly complex world. The saturation of images and information that comes with the digital age means that things are even more difficult to see simply, as before. Thoughts of innocence, experience, drama, danger and desire all play into our initial response to those images, as does the gender and, perhaps, motive of the author of such work.

And yet while not everything may be what it seems, it is still possible that some things can, in fact, be simple and uncomplicated, and be taken at face value, defying over analysis. So it is with the work of Cristina Bunello and her beautifully rendered paintings of young girls, the latest bound for her second solo show at the Cross Gallery in November. These angelic faces are

a picture of innocence, but they never explicitly suggest a past, present or future. They are a painted moment, a moment that in its stillness and lack of drama takes us away from any association we might imply. They are what they are – paintings after all, singular images with no narrative (Figs 1&2).

Cristina's portrait of Mary was a stand-out exhibit at the 2010 RHA Annual Exhibition, hauntingly beautiful, sensitively painted and modest in scale (Fig 3). Mary was a neighbour's daughter, a miracle child who had survived against the odds a premature birth. 'There was something about Mary...' quipped Cristina in conversation.

There was a particular beauty in this then five-year-old child, a sparkle in the eye, a toughness to survive in the face of such an uncertain start. Perhaps a metaphor for the journey of the artist herself, coming to art later in life.

Born in Udine in the Italian Adriatic, Cristina moved to Ireland initially, and then to Dublin where she was a mature student, graduating from NCAD in 2009. She had previously worked in a printing business and, interestingly, was also a tattoo artist in London for a time, with perhaps both experiences informing the flat, graphic and understated colour range in her work. Now married and living in Wicklow, she is happily making her paintings full time.

Gentle and unassuming in person, Cristina obviously brings a weight of restrained emotion and experience to her intensely private and subtle paintings. Mary was the turning point and in a way the template for the intervening work, where the idea was born. This sweetly beguiling face led to many more portraits exclusively of children, and female, single figures who either look at the viewer directly or avoid their gaze.

These imagined girls inhabit a space that is neither a specific locale or landscape. Sometimes there are props – a hat, a hairband, a hair-clip, a chair – and sometimes a feature is exaggerated almost imperceptibly but with uneasy effect by information gleaned from other secondhand images, print, film or photograph. Here the artist seeks to explore a more particular feeling or micro-drama from the pose or the expression of the subject.

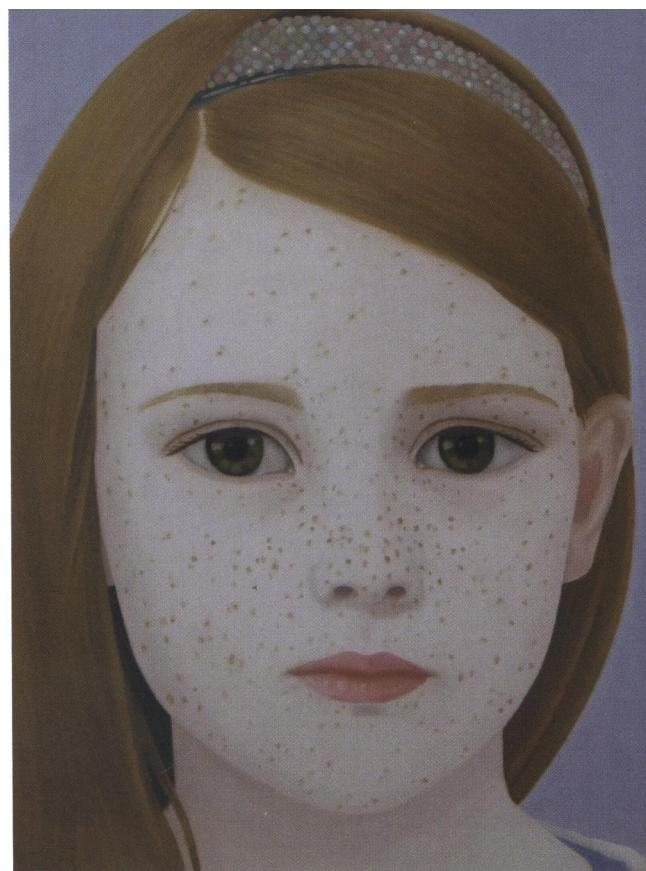
It's all subtly engaging. It's tempting to consider the weight of autobiography the painter brings to these images of girls as someone who was one herself, but Cristina is a private person, so that consideration is enough in itself.

Sometimes the less we know the more we can take from the images, and the artist's role here has been to present the familiar but take it on an imaginary journey. The innate emotional and atmospheric appeal of these quiet, precious images resonates like contemporary icons, allowing the artist to take us off the usual path, on that imaginary journey, a soaring flight between innocence and experience. ■

Cristina Bunello 'Of Innocence and of Experience' Cross Gallery, Dublin until 30 November 2013. All images ©The Artist.

James Hanley is a member of the RHA and Aosdána.

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3



4

1 CRISTINA
BUNELLO GIRL
WITH WIG 2013
oil on linen
30x30cm

2 GIRL WITH
FRECKLES
2013
oil on linen
18x13cm

3 PORTRAIT OF
A YOUNG GIRL
2010 oil on
linen
30.5x40.5cm

4 BACK VIEW
GIRL WITH
BUNS 2013
oil on linen
30x24cm