

# The art of Looking

Hennessy Craig prize-winner Mollie Douthit tells

**Catherine Marshall** 'I don't have a choice about painting' in this preview of her forthcoming exhibition at the RHA

1 MOLLIE DOUTHIT b.1986 *SNOW ON THE MOUNTAIN* 2014 oil on Panel 40x40cm

2 Mollie Douthit Photograph ©Shawna Noel Schill

3 *BETTER FIGURE THIS OUT* 2014 oil on panel 40x40cm

4 *FAR FROM HERE AND THERE* 2014 oil on panel 40x40cm

5 *FOUND OUT* 2014 oil on panel 40x40cm



What do we see when we look at a painting? We may have thought that when René Magritte produced his painting of a pipe, famously overlaid with the words '*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*', we had finally learned to differentiate between the painting and the thing it appears to represent. Life is never that simple. The paintings of Mollie Douthit ask us to re-examine the question.

So what is a painting? The novelist Ali Smith, shortlisted for the 2014 Man Booker Prize raises issues about the limitations of the novel as an art form. She believes that a painting on the other hand is a 'perfect narrative structure'.<sup>1</sup>

Mollie Douthit, the young artist from North Dakota at present in residence in Tony O'Malley's old family home in Co Kilkenny, is fully aware of what it means to paint and to represent. She mentions James Elkins' writing as a key influence on her own thinking on the subject.<sup>2</sup> While Ali Smith sees narrative potential in the painter's underlying ideas still contained within the fresco or canvas and in our ability to see the whole work in one gaze, Elkins goes significantly further. He subjects paintings to a detailed analysis of the information about the artist

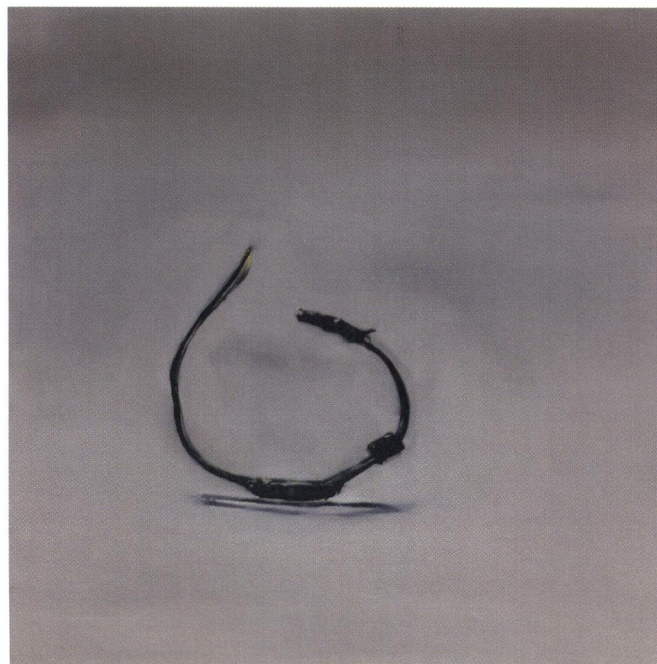


and the process that is revealed in every painted mark. Elkins' words send the viewer hurrying back to their favourite paintings to find the things they have missed in that story to date:

'Paint records the most delicate gesture and the most tense. It tells whether the painter sat or stood or crouched in front of the canvas. Paint is a cast made of the painter's movements, a portrait of the painter's body and thoughts. The muddy moods of oil paints are the painter's muddy humors, and its brilliant transformations are the painter's unexpected discoveries. Painting is an unspoken and largely unrecognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colors and the artist responds in moods...they preserve the memory of the tired bodies that made them, the quick jabs, the exhausted truces, the careful nourishing gestures. Painters can sense those motions in the paint even before they notice what the paintings are about. Paint is water and stone, and it is also liquid thought.'<sup>2</sup>

Asked why someone of her generation should put all her considerable sensitivity and intelligence at the service of painting at a time when new media seems to consume public attention, Mollie Douthit says simply, 'I don't have a choice about painting.' She goes on to explain that what interests her is the act of looking, what constitutes the good look. Her paintings, often as small as a DVD cover and never much larger than 40x40cm, require the viewer to look and look again at the most ordinary of objects from daily life, the things that fill our lives but rarely excite visual attention.

Douthit shows extraordinary maturity for a very young artist. She paints objects so commonplace in everyday experience that they would be comic, were they not painted with such seriousness and such careful scrutiny. But if that were not enough, she refuses to seduce the viewer with beautiful



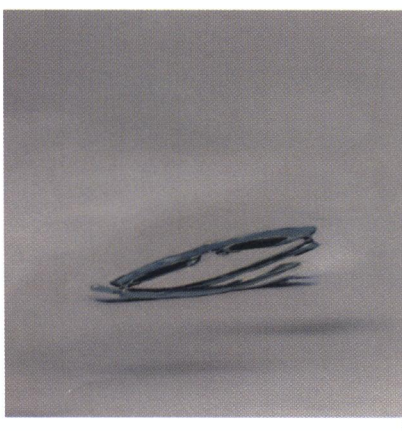
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behind them is precisely to examine how we perceive such objects. Why would an artist want to paint them with such respect, and what does her work tell us about painting itself? To answer we have to look very carefully, and that is exactly what Douthit wants us to do. While there is nothing to suggest how the objects are suspended in front of their monochrome backgrounds, it would, for instance, be wrong to say that they float. Rather they are the essence of stability, small and ubiquitous, but there. That is why a painting such as *Snow on the Mountain* (Fig 1) the models for which were a pen box and a chocolate box, can appear

## WHAT DOES THE EXISTENCE OF THIS PAINTED TRIVIA MEAN? THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPULSE BEHIND THEM IS PRECISELY TO EXAMINE HOW WE PERCEIVE SUCH OBJECTS



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coloured backgrounds, choosing instead to present her watch, her jellied candy or the paper case of a chocolate sweet against the same intense grey, so that nothing detracts from her miniature painted statements. What does the existence of this painted trivia mean? The philosophical impulse

monumental while the title ambiguously refers both to the landscape and to her mother's favourite chocolates. Unlike another American painter, Charles Brady who spent time in Ireland painting single objects with both humour and a great sense of their wider cultural associations, there is no irony and no symbolic intent here. Mollie Douthit's wonderful little canvases ask us simply to look at them, at the painting process, at existence itself. ■

Mollie Douthit 'Paintings' The RHA, Dublin 16 January – 22 February 2015.

Catherine Marshall is co-editor of *Art and Architecture of Ireland, Vol V: Twentieth Century, YUP/RIA 2014*.

1 Ali Smith, *The Guardian*, Saturday, 11 October 2014, p 4

2 James Elkins, *What Painting is*, Routledge, 1988, Introduction, p 4.

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