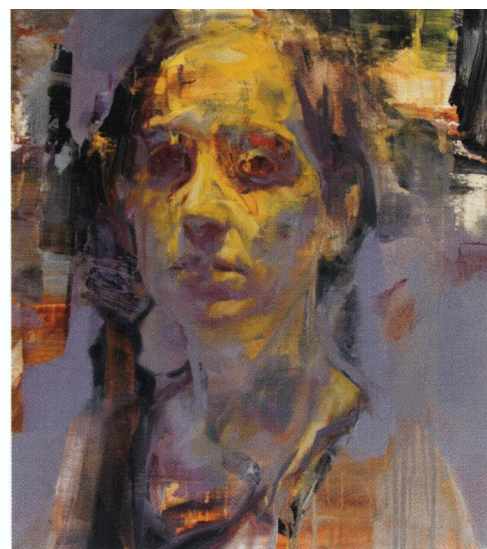


The middle watch

Brendan Rooney visits Cian McLoughlin's studio, as the Dublin-born artist prepares for his first solo show in New York



1 CIAN
McLOUGHLIN
b.1977
E 2014 oil
on canvas
61x51cm

2 Cian
McLoughlin
in his Dublin
studio

3 TERM PLUS
FIVE 2014
oil on canvas
122x183cm

4 D 2014 oil
on canvas
51x41cm

5 UNTITLED
2014 oil on
canvas
91x122cm

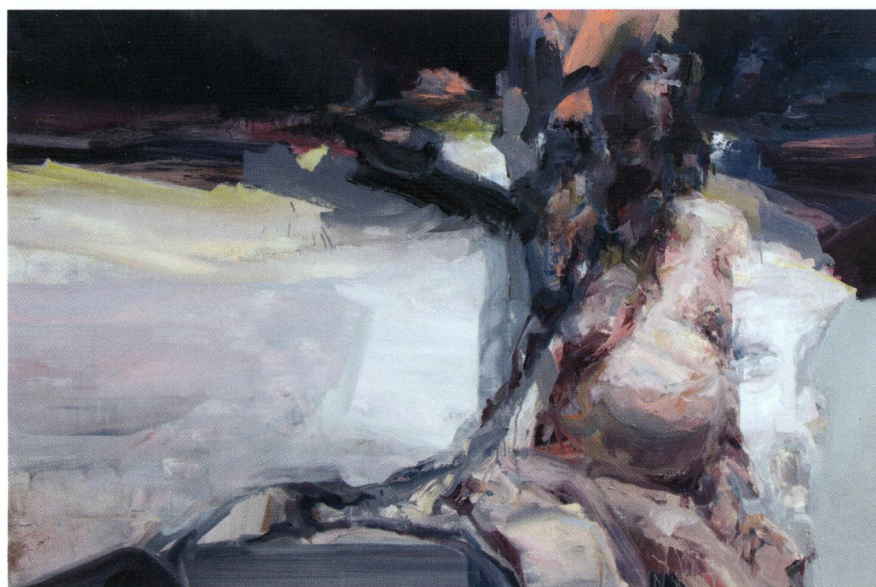
The Middle Watch', the title of Cian McLoughlin's forthcoming exhibition at the J Cacciola Gallery in New York, is as wilfully elusive as the artist's work. A nautical term, it refers to the sea watch from midnight to 4am, during which those assigned to deck duty must be particularly vigilant. The notion of accommodating at your station the seen, the partly seen and the unseen resonates with McLoughlin, who is invigorated by the uncertainty inherent in the creative process. Working without any prescribed vision, he embraces the challenges and impediments he encounters in

his work and favours a method of engagement, detachment and reengagement in the realization of his compositions.

'The Middle Watch' comprises subjects the artist knows well, among them family members and his own image (Figs 1&4). Self-portraiture is such a key element of his practice that McLoughlin firmly believes that he could not paint portraits of others without it (Fig 5). 'I may have painted as many self-portraits as all my portraits of other people put together', he states frankly.¹ Self-portraiture affords him the opportunity not only to improvise and experiment technically, but to refresh his vision. He operates on the principle that a subject so familiar works harder to disguise the derivative, the repetitious or the clichéd. 'Starting any new project,' he says 'you don't know what, ultimately, your issues are. You paint to try to find them. When you paint a subject, even one you're familiar with, the process can render it raw and newly perceived – making the familiar strange and the strange familiar'.²

McLoughlin's idiosyncratic use of colour also contributes to this contradistinction. Suspecting that he would become hamstrung by seeking traditional naturalism in his portraits, he adopts an unorthodox palette, selecting colours on impulse (and on occasion almost reluctantly). The tonal nature of his paintings, meanwhile, suggests an at least vestigial academic sensibility.

One can identify a direct link between the artist's preoccupation with issues of resolution and the changeable finish of his paintings. While some pictures are left formally unresolved





ONE CAN IDENTIFY A DIRECT LINK BETWEEN THE ARTIST'S PREOCCUPATION WITH ISSUES OF RESOLUTION AND THE CHANGEABLE FINISH OF HIS PAINTINGS

and enigmatic, others reveal their subjects with relative ease. To find portraits of characters from plays by Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*) among McLoughlin's previous undertakings is no surprise.³

McLoughlin has always been attracted to the material properties of paint, whether in the work of Willem de Kooning, Frank Auerbach or Ken Paine, the portrait painter with whom he has worked closely in the past. Increasingly seduced by the versatility and plasticity of the medium, particularly after a year-long sojourn in New York in 2012, he produces paintings characterized less by line and contour than by vigorous brushwork and the gravitational fall of paint on canvas.

Though trained as an architect, and drawn to the built environment, McLoughlin does not consider himself an 'architectural' painter.⁴ Neither his portraiture nor his cityscapes are governed by linear exactitude. Instead, he wants his paintings, a union of 'the improvised and the

observed, the broad and the specific', to function at two removes.⁵ Up close, he says, the viewer can 'explore the physical properties' of the material itself, while seeking, often in vain, to make sense of the paintings' constituent forms and interplay of colour and tone, whereas from a greater distance, they should find these pictorial elements more coherent and legible, but never literal.⁶ McLoughlin avoids giving equal attention to every detail, or specificity to the background.

It is fitting that this series should be showcased in New York. McLoughlin was hugely energized by the city and while working there made substantial changes to his technique and general approach. As he was also invited to contribute to a number of group exhibitions at the J Cacciola Gallery, 'The Middle Watch', like the works it comprises, represents for McLoughlin a welcome return to familiar territory. ■

Cian McLoughlin, 'The Middle Watch', J Cacciola Gallery, New York, 2 October – 15 November 2014.

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Brendan Rooney is Curator of Irish Art at the National Gallery of Ireland.

1 Cian McLoughlin in conversation with the author, 4 July 2014.

2 Cian McLoughlin in conversation with the author, 24 July 2014.

3 McLoughlin's exhibition 'No colour no colour'

(2006) was the product of a three-year collaboration with a group of prominent actors in the production for the Samuel Beckett centenary celebrations of a series of large-scale portraits.

4 McLoughlin received in 2013 the Don Niccolo

D'Ardia Caracciolo Medal and Award at the RHA annual exhibition for his depiction of Battersea Power Station.

5 As note 2

6 As note 2