

John Boyd esse est percipi

Jenny Fitzgibbon previews work from John Boyd's forthcoming exhibition at the Cross Gallery, Dublin and assesses his explorations into the nature of perception

The word image, when cited in photographic terms, is used to refer a visual representation to its counterpoint in the real world. Painters have another more abstract definition of the term, used to reference a mental representation created not through direct perception but internally in the mind's eye. Since the mid 1970s, John Boyd has made an enquiry

into the artifice of image making a central concern in his paintings. This exploration between what is real and perceived underpins Boyd's practice, and it has informed his interest in subjects ranging from toy models to the figure. While his paintings have previously depicted elusive scenarios, the selection of works for exhibition at the Cross Gallery, Dublin exhibit different concerns.

Painted in a subdued palette of greys and blues, Boyd's recent paintings bring his ongoing interest in psychology to the fore.

Born in Carlisle in 1957, Boyd studied at the Slade School of Art (1976-78) and subsequently at the University of Newcastle (1978-1980). He later relocated to Kilkenny and established his reputation as an important Irish painter through numerous solo exhibitions at the Cross Gallery and at various galleries abroad, including the Christopher Hull Gallery in London and the Lydon Gallery in Chicago. Apart from an occasional departure into what the artist terms 'invented landscapes' Boyd's paintings are mostly concerned with the figure, which is usually depicted in a highly realistic style.

Boyd typically presents the figure frontally, forming an immediate psychological relationship with the viewer. In *Solus IV* (Fig 3) the figure's physicality appears to dissolve and form simultaneously, while the surface reveals a host of textures and layers on closer inspection. Although his figures appear to be representations of the same person, a study of *Ad Hominem XIV* (Fig 1) shows subtle differences in the rendering of facial expression. Despite their verisimilitude, Boyd does not paint his figures from life or photographs. The identity of these nameless ciphers is constantly deferred to the imagination of the interpreter.

In 2007 Boyd created a series of works inspired by highly realistic miniature toy animals. Playing on different associations of the model as an artist's muse and child's toy, works such as *Elephantus VII* (Fig 2) create a strange encounter between the natural world



1 JOHN BOYD b.1957 *AD HOMINEM XIV* 2004 oil on board 96x96cm

2 *ELEPHANTUS VII* 2007 oil on canvas 110x110cm

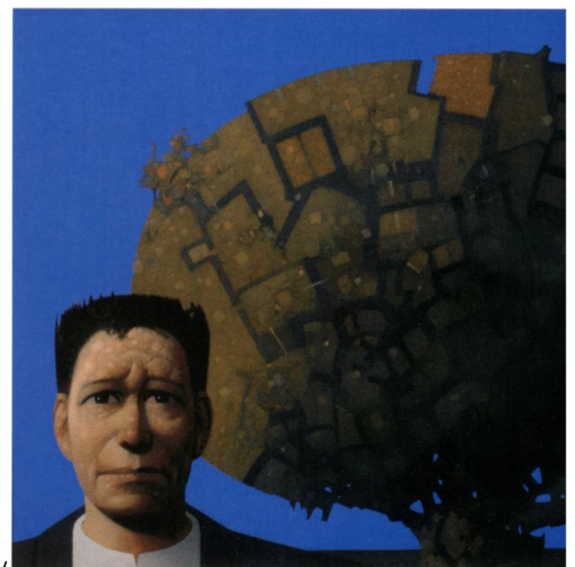
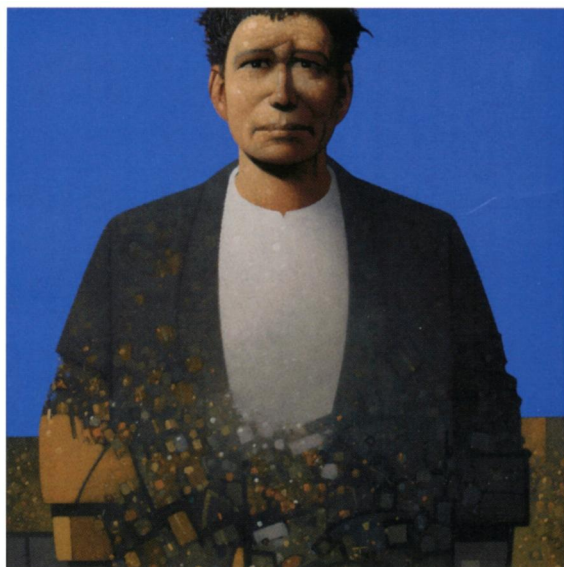
3 *SOLUS IV* 2010 oil on board 38x38cm
Photo ©Hugh McElveen

4 *ARBOR IV* 2010 oil on board 38x38cm
Photo ©Hugh McElveen



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and suggestions of a theatrical stage. The animal series is one of many series in Boyd's oeuvre; others include *Signum*, *Embolium* and *Dodo (Fortasse)*. By repeating the same image with slight modifications, Boyd highlights the arbitrariness of visual meaning and demonstrates how simple changes impact on the reading of an image. The artist's decision to create a series often follows the completion of the first painting, suggesting that his process is an ongoing enquiry rather than a preconceived strategy. Although he rarely commences work with a final image in mind, Boyd imposes limits on the size and format of his works, which creates a sense of visual continuity between different paintings.



Such striking similarities exist between *Solus IV* and *Arbor IV* (Figs 3&4), where one could potentially read both images in sequence, like frozen frames on a film reel. *Arbor IV* shows Boyd's continued interest in playing with visual perception; paint is applied flatly yet there is a marked sense of recession space. Similarly, the foliage on the tree seems more like a solid mass than an array of individual leaves. The composition is closely cropped and contains few elements, yet it could be suggested that the image conveys an event on the threshold or aftermath of occurring. It would appear that Boyd is more concerned with creating a sense of implied narrative rather than depicting scenarios in these recent paintings.

Boyd follows our second interpretation of the word 'image': his paintings are projected from the imagination and play with ideas of reality and perception. This interest in play has led Boyd to create deliberately misleading and disjunctive titles for his paintings, a practice that is also informed by his interest in etymology and Victorian puzzles. While images can have multiple interpretations, what remains constant is Boyd's ability to connote layers of meaning and draw out associations between ideas and images in a dexterous display of wit articulated through paint. ■

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John Boyd, Recent work, Cross Gallery, Dublin
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