

*If the phrase "the truth in painting" has the force of "truth" and in its play opens onto the abyss, then perhaps what is at stake in painting is truth, and in truth what is at stake (that idiom) is the abyss.*

- Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (1987)

The transitional process in the practice of Sarah O'Brien can be traced back to her earlier manifestations of work, which interrogated the spaces where she worked, through site-specific wall drawings, installations, material concerns and subject matter. O'Brien's earlier work tended toward abstracted biomorphic realist pieces, with a congruence to mould, clouds and other amorphous subject matter. As a foil to the more formally recognizable content, O'Brien intuitively used architectural spaces and specifically chosen materials effectively, to stage balanced installations in direct contrast to the work itself.

Increasingly, O'Brien's ongoing interest in exploring the territory of painting has been expressed in her evolving compositions and continued research. She seeks to uncover the opaque, elusive and ephemeral qualities in painting – to extend the canvas – restructuring it beyond its physical properties, to capture a unique moment of reflection.

Recent research conducted by O'Brien considers the history of painting. Of particular note and significance to her is the work of Edouard Manet. Manet proved to be a pivotal figure in the art historical canon, when he rejected the realist, narrative approach to painting in favour of stressing the very essence of painting – its material properties. This definitive and irreversible departure in Manet's practice disregarded the representational function of a painting in favour of exploring the space between the viewer and the work – his intention that the viewer become an active participant, rather than simply a spectator of the work. The direction in Manet's work was concerned with the painting as object, and was preoccupied with the palette and how paint was applied and arranged on a canvas. He deliberately flattened the painting field to emphasise depth, and in doing so, set the stage for the advent of impressionism.

Manet played a fundamental role in art history, and although painting in the extended field has been well documented, Manet's practice can claim responsibility for a contemporary understanding of the development of modern art. The significance of Manet's approach to the traditional values of painting that he eschewed, became a source of great interest to the leading French philosopher Michel Foucault, who in 1971 contributed to the legacies of art history and philosophy, when he delivered a lecture on thirteen of Manet's works: *Manet and the Object of Painting* – which was later published – examining the phenomenological aspect of the gaze; a crucial parallel in both Manet and Foucault's practices. In 2009, Foucault's groundbreaking 1971 lecture was published. It was accompanied by a commissioned text *Michel Foucault: Manet and the Birth of the Viewer* (2009), written by the French curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud, which described the crux of Foucault's analysis on Manet's works: "Foucault tries hard to articulate the implicit and invisible strategies that confine painting, to render visible what it shows, but equally what it conceals."

Manet's paintings drew attention to new techniques of using colour, the importance of lighting and material properties, using the frame as a device to play with representational and material space simultaneously. The limitations of the canvas were gradually undermined by Manet, a direct result of investigating the spatial properties versus the material properties of a painting. The displacement that occurred in the long-term understanding of art based on Manet's practice, prompted the basic properties of painting in its pure form – the material properties – to be explored, which ultimately rid the need for representation, as the picture-object emerged and evolved.

O'Brien's principal concern focuses on how to articulate the space between the viewer and the art object. Using sculptural interventions and material investigations as a means to question the parameters of the medium of paint, she examines the intrinsic qualities and limitations of the material - contingent on the construction and processes involved in making the work - in tandem with the physical encounter and experience of viewing it. Her work attempts to capture the in-between space in painting that balances raw physical materiality and the conceptual axis of the picture-object, however the hybrid product of this crossover questions pre-conceived notions and expectations by refusing to conform to either one discipline or the other, therefore challenging the constraints imposed by tradition and media.

In 2010 Sarah O'Brien relocated to Castletownshend in West Cork, where she spent a ten-month residency period focusing on her practice. During this time her work was significantly influenced by the landscapes and surrounding environment. Documentation and studies of rural images and skylines from the locality heavily governed the body of work she produced, which culminated in a solo exhibition at Draíocht, Dublin, in February 2011. Following this exhibition O'Brien participated in a very different residency in Dublin which equally nourished and sustained her practice - a six month, long-term project studio at Temple Bar Gallery and Studios. The divide between the bustling urban location and its secluded rural counterpoint would suggest that O'Brien could have struggled to find a common ground from which to derive her work, however she adapted well to both locations and stayed true to her own practice concurrently. Sources of light have always heavily informed O'Brien's palette, and were clearly taken into account at each setting - evident upon observation of the subtle shifts that occurred in synchrony with the personal

poetics behind the artworks she produced, offering a seamless transition between the contrasting locations.

In the vivacious work produced by O'Brien at Castletownshend, she used a combination of acid bright colours, inspired by nature and her immediate surroundings. In the rustic backdrop, certain sculptural installations became effigies to natural landmarks – mimicing the original structures, by using selected organic materials carefully juxtaposed to create an echoing, abstracted homage to the surrounding terrain. The outrageously loud palette, with its ostensible artificiality, complemented the use of paint, polythene and latex assemblages that were developed in-situ. In stark contrast to the searing colours in Cork, O'Brien's saccharine palette - although bright and quirky in Temple Bar - was slightly muted and quieter, suggestive of a more vulnerable and meditative period of exploration. There was a sense of a developmental shift and of reflection on the plasticity of paint in its extended form.

The synthetic bubblegum colours of more recent work may appear diametrically opposed to the organic world, but in fact have been strongly inspired by nature, referencing luminous sunsets and the startling candy hues of the changing sky. Using a series of spatial and tactile suggestions, and the theatrical ruse of architectural space to emphasise mutually independent and co-dependent relationships of adjacent works - both evanescent atmospheric conditions and surrounding man-made creature comforts are all enmeshed in O'Brien's work. Time, space, materiality and the chance phenomena that influence O'Brien's practice are part of the language of painting, articulated through layers, form and texture in her balanced assemblages.

As her practice has evolved, O'Brien's work has maintained an equivocal position with regard to the symbiotic relationship between material and form; inhabiting an interdisciplinary space which negotiates the nuances between sculptural paintings and painterly sculptures. In *The System of Objects* (1968), Jean Baudrillard states: "We can see that what is consumed are not objects but the relation itself – signified and absent, included and excluded at the same time - it is *the idea of the relation* that is consumed in the series of objects which manifests it." It is this ongoing search for an understanding of a material experience, and the device of experimenting with modes of display and theatricality - in the hope of eliciting a physical response, that drive O'Brien's practice and its impetus to engage.

Text by Rowan Sexton, September 2012.