

Melissa O'Faherty, 'Turning it Over'

Ashford Gallery, RHA

14 January 2022 – 06 February 2022

'TURNING IT OVER', by Melissa O'Faherty at the Ashford Gallery, explores botanical and landscape themes in a fully primed arsenal of semi-abstract paintings that whirr, pop and detonate mini efflorescent explosions of squelchy paint over the canvas panels. There is a phenomenon – “something about paint and painting”, that, despite being confined to the “fairly limited convention of liquid paint on flat grounds”, makes painting a profoundly flexible and romantic tool of expression available to communicate the human condition¹. In cosmic terms, how this works is a bit like dark matter or Maslow's theory of belonging, that despite being purely hypothetical, they are accepted because without them the universe makes no sense. Painting in all its genres is essentially primal, as a rudimentary hand produced artform and conceptually in its manipulation through style and language and in the case of abstract painting, it's notional. A self-reflexive intuitive and cognitive process of capturing notions through a notional medium became the holy grail of twentieth-century abstraction. O'Faherty describes this with a sense of modest wonder stating: “the act of making an image and a physical object with permanence like a painting, from seemingly nothing more than canvas, pools of paint and imagination still feels surprising to me just like a magic trick and it is this unexpectedness that motivates me...” In 'Turning it Over', O'Faherty bears this out in her measured and gentle facility to create this magic.

The exhibition comprises sixteen oil on canvas panels that are slim and taut with finely woven canvas that are neatly finished with precision edging in deep indigo. These basics are the foundation upon which O'Faherty builds her canon. Throughout the exhibition she daubs, squelches, drips, scrapes and applies plenty of loose brushwork mingled with exquisitely rendered botanical features of grasses, fronds, leaves, ferns, and translucent flowers in an arts and crafts style. This choreographed potage of abstract and *trompe-l'œil* elements are painted onto backgrounds that sink into depths of field that are as sublime as they are illusory. The surfaces of the panels invite close inspection to decipher this alchemy. From the proximity of a flower bouquet in a vestibule space to an over-head sky-light view of an endless cosmic expanse, O'Faherty's spatial configurations are felt rather than observed.

Colour and tone aid in sculpting perspective but these components are more impressive at jolting the plants into hallucinatory flutters. In *Cyclamen*, *Still Dawn* and *Arching Pampas* streaks of black paint skid and slide around foliage being battered by the elements. In *Under You*, red and yellow flowers waft in the dark waters of a lake floor. O'Faherty's disorderly shallow pools, spills and drips of paint capture the tension that suspends delicate plant life under the weight of gravity and atmospheric pressure.

'Turning it Over' alternates between interior and exterior space, taking place in domestic, landscape and cosmic realms. *Bouquet* is a jumble of spritely flowers within arm's reach, placed on a shadowy hint of a table. *Night Sky*, and the more controlled *Lucien's Flowers* punch out autumn colours picking up artificial light against a deep umber background, echoing the dark drama of Nature Morte. *Orchideae*, 2021, and *Lucien's Flowers* foreground exotic floral decoration that from some angles are framed as flat tapestries. *Blue Garden*, is a satisfying feat of chromatic

ic and compositional abstraction suggesting the comfort of longevity in frayed environments and muted tones of gentle decay.

Lake Side's, 2021, light dims with cold damp air breaching the land, bearing the fatigue of a seasons end in the sodden detritus of summer foliage. Depth and structure are literal as the lake's edge and distant horizon are clearly visible. O'Faherty tentatively taps into the rich vein of Irish landscape painting but creates enough bluster and froth to hold the threshold of abstraction. In *Chasm*, 2021, falling autumn tendrils fade and whither while losing their grasp of a ghostly white entity.

Yello Mountain and *Lunar*, 2021, explode with exponential cosmic energy, combining backgrounds of distant billowing clouds, rocks and the night sky, rendered in *trompe-l'œil* and overpainted with disconnected splodges and daubs in white, black and pink paint. The tension between the illusion of the background and the physicality of the surface draws attention to O'Faherty's process. It compels closer examination again, to sense the textures, glazes, veined pools of thin paint, gloops of inky black, to feel the grain of the finely woven canvas repelling and absorbing paint in different places, to enjoy the precision edging and observe the smooth pink and peppermint-coloured blobs. These are paintings to live with: complex, deliberate, conceptual, considered and hard won. They represent O'Faherty's commitment to the integrity of her painting instincts.

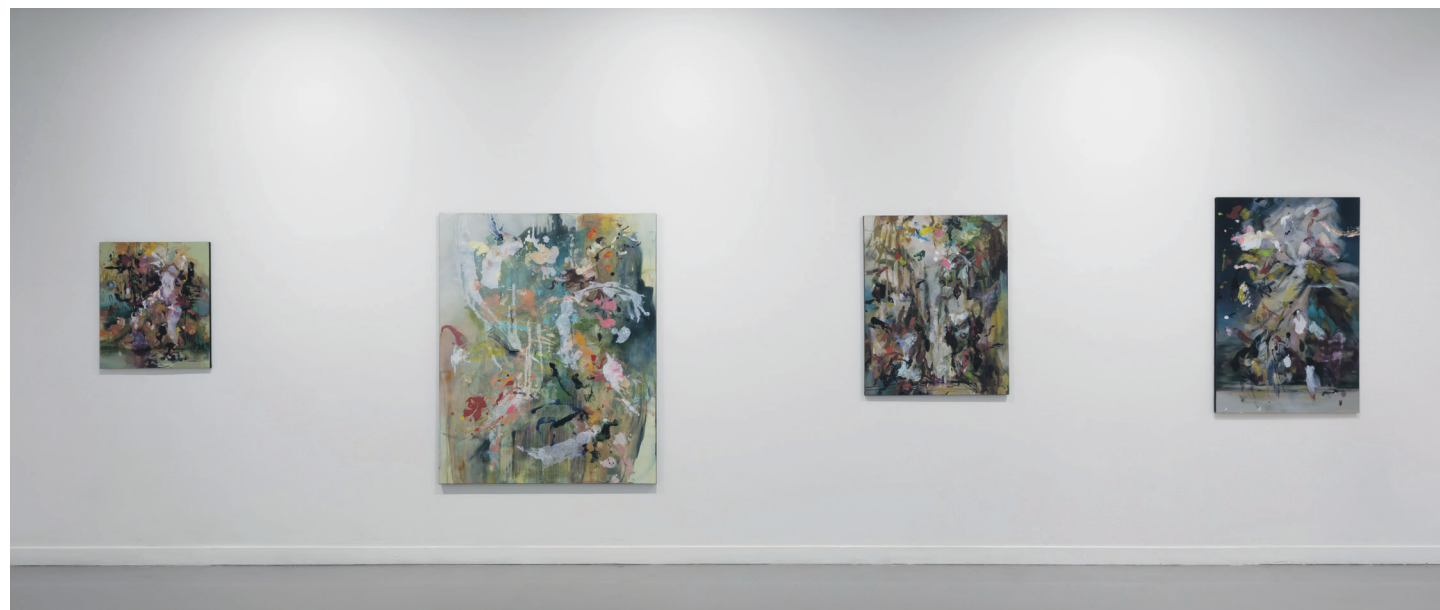
Carissa Farrell is a curator and writer based in Dublin.

Notes:

¹ From 'Something About Paint', by Carissa Farrell, *Irish Arts Review*, November 2013-January 2014.



Melissa O'Faherty, *Orchideae*, 2021, oil on canvas; photograph by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy of the artist.



Melissa O'Faherty, L-R: *Lake Side*, 2021, oils, *Light Years*, 2021, oils, *Chasm*, 2021, oils, *Lunar*, 2021, oils; photograph by Kate Bowe O'Brien courtesy of the artist and RHA Gallery.