

The thing about Mairead O'hEocha's still lifes is that they are very reluctant to stay still. The longer I look at them, the more restive they become. Take this spider, trapped beneath a bell jar, surrounded by the tools of a weaver. These objects and their meanings seem to slip away from the constructs that my mind must impose upon the world to make sense of it (I need under normal circumstances to be sure that this is a spider under the bell jar, and that it will stay there). Logic dictates that the fabric in the background must be a curtain but now it looks disturbingly like combed hair; the impossible light in which the spider is bathed seems to be pitching her forward on some luminous platform; she is separated from me by a darkness that should be shadow on a tabletop but which my eye comes to read as a chasm.

The effect feels analogous to the auditory illusion by which a repeated phrase is transformed in the ear of the listener into song. The longer you gaze at these paintings, the more the discrete units of meaning of which they are composed break down into patterns that play out over the canvas. Is the screw of citric green suspended in that pitcher of water a twist of lime? It looks like some celestial condensation of the more muted greens scattered across the scene, illuminated like the sun by the sheer density of its accumulated material. Which way do you read these paintings? Is the meaning of a poem communicated through the lyrics or the melody?

I am engaged in something like an argument with the goldfish. It should be swimming in its bowl but it, too, seems after a time to hover in front of it like an apparition. Or it might be a trick of the light – some weird refraction through the curved glass of that aquamarine tassel – misread by a mind primed to summon spectres from suggestive patterns of light. Indeed, the dimly lit and richly upholstered rooms in which these paintings are set bring to mind nothing so much as the parlour of some Victorian spiritualist, a mise-en-scène contrived to unsettle the boundaries between bodies and minds. In which case the title of the exhibition might be read as a command, invitation, or warning. We are moving into other worlds.

The paintings were in fact made in a Georgian house in Dublin over two years during which the Irish government imposed extended lockdowns, and the worlds between which they mediate are numerous. They all take place in a more-or-less ghastly dark and are lit by the unnatural light that springs from the glass vessels at their centre. These contain or connect the viewer to some discernible form of life (nocturnal creatures flit and skitter around these paintings) and suggest (to me, at least) the electric force that through the fuse of the body drives all living things. If the appearance of this light suggests some kind of commune with the spirit realm, then its ghostly glow also conjures the backlit screens through which we communicated with other living beings through the lonely nights of the pandemic. O'hEocha describes her experience of that period as 'triple-glazed', and the phrase suggests the way that screens distort our worlds in ways consistent with the often monstrous proportions of objects in these paintings. Yet it also conjures the sense of being caught between panes of glass, trapped in the airless and claustrophobic space between two worlds. And here all order breaks down, as I consider where the light of these paintings comes from and what it might entail. Am I on the outside looking in, or on the inside looking out?