

Champ on the bow

Where did I read that *ANY PLACE BUT HERE* was the motto of all sailors? Born in Northern Ireland, yet not really bound within any territory or home, Pádraig Timoney settled in the ports of Naples and New York City in the past two decades. I met him in Berlin where he is “currently based”. One of his neighbors is Scottish artist Douglas Gordon—a chuckaboo of his, acclaimed for a 24-hour long appropriation of Hitchcock’s *Psycho*—with whom he shares a passion for football. His other neighbors are the English language bookstore *Hopscotch Reading Room*, specializing in anti-colonial, non-western, diasporic and queer perspectives, with whom he shares his working space, and Cutt Press, a sham clandestine factory that remakes/remodels rare books and editions. The sailor is among the pirates (from the Greek *πειρατής*, ‘brigand, pirate’, itself derived from *πειρα*, ‘trial, attempt, experiment’). Pádraig Timoney keeps on questioning the possibilities and the limits, or rather approaching the shores, of the media and materials, of what is indeterminate.

There are many traditions intended to bring good luck to a new project. As an experienced and well-read sailor, Pádraig sees the gallery as a ship and as it is launched proposes to inaugurate it by breaking a sacrificial bottle of champagne over its bow. A literary bottle of champ made of a bit of Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Proust or of Duchamp revamping Proust, even. See how the work *Membranes, Thins, Past* (2022), overtly translating Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* into photographic terms by shortening and deriding the magnum opus, constructs an image from a recording of what is a subjective experience. This becomes an invitation to reconsider the ordinary by distorting and recomposing the mundane—a secretive meditation on the shifting, often elusive boundaries between reality and perception based on retinal stimulation, between abstraction and figuration.

Deploying a diverse and expansive repertoire from paintings to photographs and mirrors, the work channels the fluidity of time and the slipperiness of meaning. And if Beckett is not mentioned this time, he is definitely part of the referential crew. For his poetics—an aesthetics of fragments, not formlessness, but dissolution of form, an entropic mixture of words, *Wrassem* (2024) means ‘painter’ in Arabic, chemical treatments or sparkling rabbit skin glue—pervade the work. Perhaps Samuel Beckett is the parrot on the sailor’s shoulders that pleads: “Don’t expect to make sense, don’t expect to know the referential image”. According to Pádraig, the best text explanation of the monologue of Lucky from *Waiting for Godot* is undoubtedly no explanation.

The most remarkable features that keep coming and going in past reviews of Pádraig’s work, as the relentless Atlantic surf outlines cliffs in Ireland, are the “versatility” and the “heterogeneity” of a “mercurial” practice (sheer music to my ears), unfurling different styles and modes of painting, even offering the illusion that one views a group exhibition rather than a solo one. As another literary fellow islander of his would say: “I’m not one and simple but complex and many.” Maybe, with all due respect to Virginia Woolf, he’s just one and complex and there’s no cognitive dissonance in this. Nothing stands in the way, things come together. He under-promises and over-delivers, while artists who, say, think they need to defend a style, a name or a reputation often over-promise and under-deliver.

When Pádraig invited me to write a text about this group of works, I thought at first that it would be an opportunity to disclose and in a certain sense, demystify his approach—to guide the viewer and allow an active participation in the unravelling of the meaning and the purpose of the works... But would it then be assumed that the works don’t speak for themselves? As a believer in the tension between verbal and visual signification, I trivially tend to assume that they don’t and my practice might be an effort, an attempt (*πειρα*), to make sight and meaning match. Though, when the invitation comes with a brief “be free” and emanates from an artist who makes mirror works, no one more than I could appreciate this call for total freedom and self-exploration to the core.

Thinking back about me looking at my reflection through the blue and gilded surfaces of his *Blue Mirror I* (2022) and *AuAgNY Mirror* (2023) at the Berlin studio, I can’t help but think that a critical text that is supposed to reflect an artist’s work reflects more upon its own author than the work itself. Here, the writer and the viewer turn blue and gilded. This

recalls the famous argument between Susan Sontag, of whom many complained that her cerebral way of elaborating on art was a bore, and elusive artist Paul Thek, who, running out of patience, finally told her: “Susan, stop, stop. I’m against interpretation. We don’t look at art when we interpret it. That’s not the way to look at art.” The end of the story is known to all. She dedicated her 1966 collection of critical essays to Thek, and with good reason: the book was entitled *Against Interpretation*.

So, let’s look at art and be free!

Tristan Bera