

New forms of beauty

Catherine Leen discusses the work of four artists, each with a very personal aesthetic, who engage with the concept of beauty, ahead of their group show at the Cross Gallery, Dublin in October



1 CLAIRE
KERR ARCH
2010 oil on
linen 16x12cm

2 CLAIRE
KERR MIRROR
2010 oil on
linen 16x12cm

‘New Forms of Beauty’ presents the work of four artists whose practice is intimately concerned with the aesthetic. The theme arose partly as a response to Dublin Contemporary’s title and theme of ‘Terrible Beauty—Art, Crisis, Change & The Office of Non-Compliance’ and partly as a means of countering the rejection of beauty in art as frivolous or out of

step with a contemporary Ireland rocked by economic crisis. The four artists whose work is showcased here produce strikingly diverse works that are more concerned with the creation of a subtle beauty than with a direct narrative.

Claire Kerr’s paintings have consistently referred to and reappropriated traditions or forms from art history. *Mirror* references *trompe l’oeil* painting

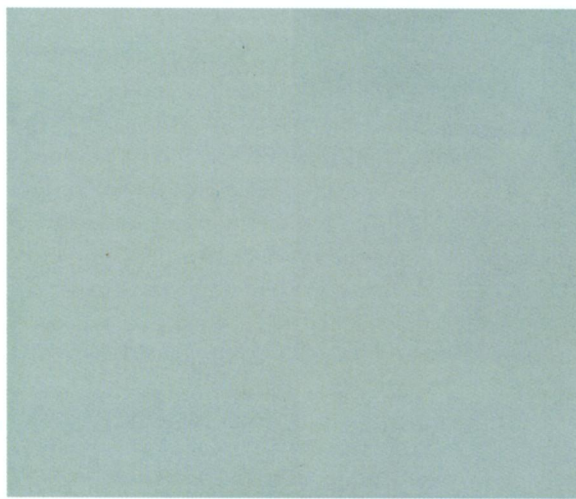
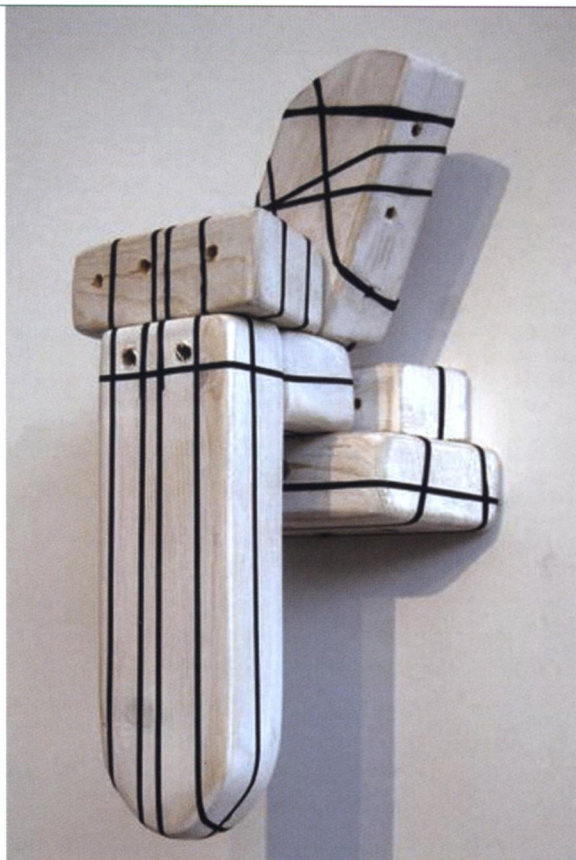
in its skilful depiction of a mirror that reflects a detail of an interior, thus referencing her inspiration from other artists through the use of the notion of the palimpsest, or a manuscript that contains the traces of an earlier text that is written over (Fig 2). Her new small paintings on vellum continue this tradition, although without specifically alluding to particular works of art or artists. Instead, she creates works based on bodily wounds that recall art-historical precedents such as the miniature or religious paintings that present the mutilated body as an object of contemplation and devotion. Her meticulous practice results in finely detailed works whose modest size belies their emotional impact on the viewer.

Kohei Nakata’s works at first seem to be completely minimalist, but his complex layering and erasing of colour means that his paintings change continually in response to different light conditions, a process of visual translation that reflects his experience as a Japanese artist living



in Ireland. He notes that although people interpret images by means of established recognition systems such as languages, when colour is uncertain or ambiguous, the image similarly becomes flexible and variable. The liminal space occupied by a person who cannot always communicate perfectly through language is evoked through the shimmering, constantly evolving surface of his painstakingly crafted works, such as *Layered Painting (between turquoise blue & lime green)* (Fig 5), and *Layered Painting (between ultramarine & red)*. Nakata's work, like Kerr's, uses the idea of a palimpsest as a starting point, but instead of using art-historical references as his inspiration, he all but erases images that still emerge through the layers in the final work.

Gareth Jenkins' process-based works on board are also intimately concerned with the textures and visual effects created by the constant



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reworking of the surface. The meticulously scored and plotted geometric planes are counterbalanced by the use of muted, organic colour applied in a gestural manner in multiple layers. The result not only blurs the boundary between painting and sculpture, as the images are constructed rather than painted, but also veers between figuration and abstraction. Works such as *Untitled 2* and *Untitled 15* centre on linear components that recall architectural or topographical drawings, yet

they do not describe any particular place, functioning instead as non-representational signifiers and symbols (Figs 3&4).

Pertiwi's work also has a strong sculptural element, as her small-scale installations are delicate yet powerfully evocative. Her works also attempt to redefine the idea of what sculpture or installation can be, as they are intimate rather than monumental and use an extraordinary range of materials, including gesso, plaster, sugar, elastics,



and butterflies. Her work is not representative of any particular idea or object but is suggestive of a powerful presence that invites curiosity and inspires wonder. It seeks to articulate the nature of beauty in and of itself, to explore the many meanings of beauty, and to consider the levels on which visual beauty touches the viewer.

As gallery director and show curator Mark St John Ellis observes, the theme of this show was intended to reaffirm the vast expressive potential of art and its capacity to engage the viewer without resorting to meaningless escapism. The fact that the artists have been given free rein to interpret the show's theme means that the works are diverse in their forms and approaches. In his seminal work *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu asserted the idea of the aesthetic as 'necessarily pluralistic and conditional'.¹

Paradoxically, it is through the very subjectivity of the artists' engagement with the aesthetic that they capture the inexhaustible richness of beauty and its continued relevance to contemporary art. ■

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'New Forms of Beauty' Cross Gallery, 6-29 October 2011.

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1 Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 1984, p42.

3 GARETH JENKINS
UNTITLED 2 2011
gesso and vinyl
tape on wood
34x16x15cm

4 GARETH JENKINS
UNTITLED 15
2011 acrylic on
board 31x30

5 KOHEI NAKATA
*LAYERED
PAINTING*
[between
turquoise blue &
lime green] 2010
PVA, acrylic &
pigments on
plywood panel
36x40cm