

## Courbet's Tent/ Winter 2014/ *Satis House*

Satis House is a gallery space located in a small Edwardian terrace house in South Belfast. What was once the master bedroom of the modest dwelling has been stripped of most of its original fixtures and fittings, and is transformed on a bi-monthly basis by curators Kim McAleese and Eoin Dara. Since March 2012, they have been inviting artists to respond to this unique environment, using it as an exciting space for the presentation of new work.

*Long they look, and deeply* was the first exhibition of painting staged in the gallery. The show ran from 5<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> July 2013 and the exhibiting artists were Hannah Casey, Andrew Cranston, Jeffrey Dennis, Fiona Finnegan, Christopher Hanlon, Tim Millen, Dougal McKenzie, and Flora Moscovici.

***Dougal McKenzie: Firstly, can you give a little more context about Satis House- what it is exactly and why you started this project?***

***Kim McAleese:***

Satis House started as a place for us to experiment. After having worked together for two years we decided to continue to collaborate, and a bedroom within our house was deemed an appropriate space to transform. The features are still visible, there are traces of an old chimney covered and replaced with a vintage and somewhat gaudy 1960s grill fire, complete with iridescent tiles. The single-glaze sash windows are decaying and greying, and the corner of the room is taken over by a 1980s radiator, making most of that 'wall space' redundant. These elements for us were indispensable and had to be retained, as they hint at layered histories and pasts that could not possibly be ignored.

***Eoin Dara:***

Beyond our own curatorial interests, we also wanted to increase the visibility of the artists in this city. We see our current activity at Satis as part of a much wider cultural shift that has shaped how art in Northern Ireland has been produced and received over the past two decades, and we continue to find ourselves in a situation where there is limited space in the city for the presentation of contemporary art. There is almost no commercial representation for artists in this region, especially for younger emerging artists, and so by showcasing work in the house we're hopefully going some way to addressing this, or at least making others aware of this gap in the arts infrastructure here.

***KMcA:***

An artist creating work for Satis House is not simply entering a white cube void, and whilst many elements are muted within the space, it will never be neutral. With this at the forefront of our minds, and celebrating this history rather than ignoring it, we have worked with artists who we know will be responsive to the space and aware of its multiple histories and readings. Satis has been home to immersive, colourful installations; monumental sculptural objects; hypnotic soundscapes; barely lit projections thrown across the walls. *long they look, and deeply* was our first exhibition in which such a vast collection of artists were using painting as a medium.

**DMcK: Was there an expectation that a painting show might operate differently than the exhibitions you had curated in the space previously?**

**KMcA:**

In some ways, the process of curating this show was the same as any previous project in Satis – we first invited the artists to dine with us to discuss ideas for the show and how the work would develop. Being a domestic space, it is vital for us that the artists are sensitive to its intricacies and irregularities, and that in developing their work that this is always considered.

**ED:**

However, I think we were definitely aware from the outset that this exhibition might be something quite different from the shows we had curated previously in Satis. Our programme before this had been very much focused on site specific installations and sculptural work- media and materials that you would never expect to see in a domestic space. By contrast, paintings are a relatively commonplace presence in houses and homes, taking pride of place above the mantelpiece or bed. Therefore, when considering the artists to work with on this project we wanted to select painters who really consider the specific context in which their work is presented, and this resulted in a wonderfully diverse range of approaches to the exhibition.

**DMcK: What was the idea behind the title and connection to a literary source?**

**ED:**

Literary references and allusions seem to abound in much of what we do in the house, which I suppose is a result of our mutual love of reading. ‘Satis House’ itself is taken from the name of the decaying stately home inhabited by the inglorious Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*.

In curating a group show of painting, we felt there needed to be something more than just the space itself for the artists to respond to, and so we looked to our ever-expanding reading list concerning domestic spaces and places for inspiration.

The title of the exhibition was taken from Virginia Woolf’s short story *A Haunted House*, which was written in 1921. This beautiful little text lies somewhere between prose and poetry, and explores an unknown domestic space from the perspective of its ghostly former inhabitants. It is saturated with imagery of fictitious rooms, domestic interiors and potential histories. We felt that this was at once specific enough to tie together a diverse group of painters; broad enough for them to individually step off and develop new work, or propose existing pieces for inclusion in the show.

In Woolf’s time, painting was often described as the sister art of writing (it also just so happens that her sister, Vanessa Bell, was a celebrated painter). Woolf herself described painting as a ‘silent art’ which does not suffer from the limitations of language. In this respect, you could argue that her writing liberates language from these restrictions, by using methods taken from the world of painting and fine art. She challenges the temporality of the written form in much the same way that painting does. In *A Haunted House*, she

fragments, interrupts and abandons typical narrative structure to form a heavily layered and abstracted text, where aesthetic emotions are evoked by descriptions of volume, mass, colour and light.

I suppose in using it as the backbone for the show, we were in some ways trying to transform the text into an exhibition, where overlapping fictions and realities were explored through eight different presences in the room.

**DMcK: How did the artists react to the particular site at Satis House, and how did the works relate to Woolf's text?**

**KM:**

Some of the artists in the show responded specifically to the architectural features of the room itself, using Satis House as the stepping off point. Perhaps the subtlest pieces in the space were those created by Flora Moscovici, entitled respectively *The Wardrobe* and *Trapdoors*. Taking reference from the ghostly spectres pervading Woolf's text, Flora captured the spirit of certain previous domestic assemblages within the room. Working with phosphorescent paint directly onto the walls, she highlighted what once was a wardrobe, and what she imagined was a trapdoor. In daylight there was an iridescent glow on parts of the floor, wall and ceiling- hints of marks she had made. However, this work necessarily only came to life in the darkness, when the space was empty and hidden from public view.

Similarly, with nods to the specific architecture of the site, Tim Millen produced *Stitch (Satis House)*, a fractured and muted detail of the sash window of the house as seen from Deramore Avenue. The image is distorted, ruptured in two and painted in a monochromatic palette, using the 'Street View' function on Google Maps as source material. In a digital age of pervading surveillance, Tim created an image of the domestic viewed from a public perspective, and in doing so highlighted Satis House as a peculiar space where elements of public and private life intersect.

**ED:**

I think the rich imagery of Woolf's text, describing light, shadows and reflections, resonated particularly within the work of Hannah Casey, whose intuitive and atypical approach to watercolour painting resulted in a loosely figurative depiction of an interior occupied by a lone skeletal form.

Then Christopher Hanlon and Fiona Finnegan chose to depict seemingly specific spaces, forms or objects, but deliberately removed or occluded certain details so as to create uncanny scenes that are at once familiar and unknown. Hanlon's piece presented the viewer with a peculiar pleated structure, floating in an unidentifiable interior, whilst Finnegan's *Ceremony* isolated the hair of a group of six ghostly figures, creating a darkly surreal scene, very much echoing the tone of Woolf's story.

**KMcA:**

When looking at Andrew Cranston's work I was reminded of the opening lines of the text: "From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure." The painting he created embodies a pictorial representation of this text; the rooms that the ghostly couple inhabit and traverse- and the interventions they make- leave unknown but sometimes unobtrusive resonances within a given space.

**ED:**

Dougal, I think both yours and Jeffrey Dennis's contributions to the exhibition were perhaps the most abstracted responses to the site-specific and literary framework of the show, and as such were wonderful painterly counterparts to Woolf's style of writing, where narrative and context are so often refracted, sometimes even completely dissolved. The painted assemblage of objects created by Jeffrey introduced a playful variety of themes and images, juxtaposing them to create a constant sense of both unity and discord. Your own dense exploration of 20th century biography, literature and cinema resulted in a painting that moved beyond *A Haunted House* to consider Woolf herself, Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Barnett Newman's seminal *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* series of paintings.

**DMcK: How did your experience of curating *long they look, and deeply* differ from previous exhibitions at Satis House?****KMcA:**

Compared with other exhibitions in Satis, this one forced me to consider the domestic space in a way I had not before. It may have been the immediacy of a painted image, the discernible brushstrokes and gestures on certain works, or the physical presence of other site-specific works in the space, but I spent hours contemplating these pieces and considering the history of the room. I had been struck by painter Ellen Altfest's idea that 'painting both represents a world and creates its own world.' For me, *long they look, and deeply* illustrated this duality- not only did the exhibition represent a diverse and dynamic spectrum of contemporary painting in response to a certain idea, but also, as a viewer, I felt as if I could enter each work and occupy that figurative space.

**ED:**

This exhibition was the first time we chose to build-up a curatorial framework around a particular artistic medium, and so in that respect it was an entirely different experience to anything that had gone before in Satis House. More broadly, this particular project caused me to reflect further on the connections between different artistic fields- obviously, in relation to this show, between literature and fine art. Much like Kim, I too spent more time than usual in the gallery space over the course of this exhibition, re-reading the text, then re-reading the room; each time constructing a different narrative from the painterly fragments on the walls, ceiling and floor.

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<http://www.satis-house.com/long-they-look-and-deeply.html>

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