

The Ritual of the Attempt, by Jess Huon.

For Moya McKenna.

Moya McKenna has described the act of her painting as 'the ritual of the attempt.' Completed in one day, fast, always working wet on wet, many of her works do not make the walls; what we see are the survivors.

The sense of immediacy in these 'attempts,' gutsy and confident responses to the theatrical arrangement of objects she creates, reflects a refreshing absence of cerebral restraint, an intelligent release, rich and energetic.

Felt and bold, the movement of paint instinctively shifts between finer details of sunflowers' fury centres and their bright ragged petals, delicate plants and coloured tendrils, to broad sweeps giving body to forearms, (a significant McKenna feature) or the curved and slick shapes of clay objects. It is this quality of generous and almost bodily attention, both robust and sensuous, that I find striking and exciting.

The fact that Moya paints the scenes she has intimately arranged, small sized installations, an inherent component of her art, (large boxes of endless photographs depicting these changing arrangements are housed in McKenna's studio) adds depth to the 'ritual' of her work.

Her studio seems clearly to be her domain. Handling and harnessing objects in the pursuit of her enquiry, scenes are injected with her own internal psychic sense, meaning further revealed and re-enchanted with the ritual of each painting 'attempt.'

In this exhibition, for the first time, McKenna includes her photographs, further projecting her own physicality into her play. Resolute and calm in her bright yellow shoes and painting clothes, yet precariously balanced between two cupboards, her body like a bridge, her elbows in various angles, she holds painted images of bridges to different parts of her body, creating further inroads and links, leading us somewhere.

And what road could it be that Moya is leading us down?

In these new works solid objects such as dismembered for arms, working desks and drawers open to reveal or are juxtaposed with organic matter; strange, brightly coloured growths, inner organs looking like brains or placentas, tendrils looking like umbilical cords and plant life, colour the works.

The objects of modern working life are set against visceral and primitive shapes.

Desks that seem solid slightly morph. Draws open to show roads heading through red land.

The solid forearms that appear in some paintings are echoed in others as raw, bloody and skinless.

All of this 'stuff' of life, where different worlds collide and abide, where hard and soft matter, the defended and the defenceless, the actual and metaphorical, the real and surreal, co-exist, is depicted within McKenna's luminous and transcendent yellow light.

The presence of forearms continues to occupy a hefty amount of space in McKenna's work and demands attention. They look like calm and resolute protectors. I find something quietly stubborn about these arms, as if they've rolled their sleeves up and will refuse to leave until something of more significance or of equal weight can take their place. They appear somewhat defiant.

The American poet Adrienne Rich states that 'Art puts down its roots into the deepest hiding places of our natures and that its action is akin to the action of certain delving plants, comfrey for instance, whose roots can unlock nutrients that would otherwise lie out of reach of shallower bedded plants.'

It seems in McKenna's new works organic life is taking precedence, demanding a fuller presence, undermining the seemingly solid presences of hard matter, (although even the scientists now say the most solid objects are made of moving light.)

However much the solid arms and the drawers give a kind of structure, a sense of fortitude and certitude, it appears another sort of life is rising up in McKenna's work, something perhaps very female, energetic and alive; a more vulnerable, fleshy and transparent stance, intimate and personal, less defended yet bright and surprising, drawing on living air, sucking up sap from its own root.