

ART



More than meets the eye
Morrigan, left, by Gabhann
Dunne; Wheatear below

he bought in the mid-1970s, around the time Dunne was born.

The figure of the bird operates as a carrier for much of what Dunne wants to say. The 100 paintings that form the show, *Crossing the Salt*, hang like an impossible flock. Some are just blue – paintings of sky and water – but most depict a single bird, occasionally a pair, mid-flight. The room becomes a sky teeming with species not normally seen together. Seabirds mingle with land-wings; owls and canaries fly with swallows, seagulls, ducks and wrens. There are Irish resident and migrant birds. The point being that the sky is theirs, and they are free to fly anywhere in it.

Because this is a show about water and change it is also about migration, freedom and flight. It's about meetings and clashes of cultures, integration and its reverse, and how these behaviours have happened throughout history, for humans and other species.

In a painting called *Arrival*, a dark-skinned boy with a neon-pink top looks left as a pink-yellow-turquoise bird flaps above. A wolf in a cage appears in a painting called *Mosney*, a reference to the direct provision centre for refugees and asylum seekers. This is the back story – the birds appear free but are confined by the edges of the boards on which they are painted. The *Mosney* painting and the bird images also show that freedom and entrapment

sometimes look almost the same, or perhaps that entrapment can be made to look like freedom even when it is not.

There are references to climate change, drought, flooding, migration, farming and extinction. Every painting contains a series of related clues. In *The Sad and Affecting Death of Marsha Mehran*, a woman falls head first from the sky, like a diver, towards an orange mountain that matches the colour of her swimsuit. It's Croagh Patrick, near where the acclaimed young Iranian-American novelist, Mehran, was found dead in 2014. Migration and a shifting sense of home was part of her story, too.

Dunne's work operates in the liminal space between reality and imagination, and also crosses between time frames. There are wolves in these paintings, and ancient elks. Under-painting with pink and red gives his compositions an unsettling glow, a reminder that they move between reality and fantasy, vision and perception.

Discarding Sean, an unassuming little painting, is a reference to Seán Keating, the artist who depicted the construction of Ardnacrusha. Although he was not commissioned, between 1926 and 1927 Keating produced a large body of work documenting the scheme. Eventually they made their way into the ESB art collection. Keating, a traditionalist, would not have approved of Dunne's mixing of abstraction with realist representation, however.

Dunne's painting of Keating's crumpled photo portrait may have been the moment he gave himself permission to make wider-ranging work. He has not set out to document anything; rather he has painted images intended to make us think about consequences and the interconnectedness of things.

While past and present mingle with potential futures in Dunne's paintings, there is a clear continuum in his work – concern with the world and how we are treating it, the connections between animal and human behaviour, the relationship between our behaviour now and the future we are preparing for the children yet to be born.

Two paintings, *Silage Bale*

red, so the blue sky has a purplish tinge. Haughey, eyebrows raised, looks chirpy and thoughtful, as though he is alert to the possibilities.

The surface of his pale-pink forehead blurs into the base of the triangular ocean outcrop, an iteration of Inishvickillane island which

Salt isn't about pretty birds.

The starting point was a proposal to pipe water from the River Shannon to Dublin. It's anticipated that a 170km line will supply up to 350m litres of water a day from Lough Derg to Dublin city. Extracting this volume of water will reduce the amount available to the hydroelectric station at Ardnacrusha. Dunne's concerns are more about the effect this intervention has on nature, the land and environment, and by extension us.

One of his paintings, *Ardnacrusha 2060*, reimagines the site as some kind of tropical-storm location. Dunne has a lot to say without ever saying any of it entirely explicitly.

Painting number 10 is *Mr Haughey's Island*. It's postcard-sized and features the head of the former taoiseach wearing an island like a Chinaman's sun hat. It has been painted on a layer of

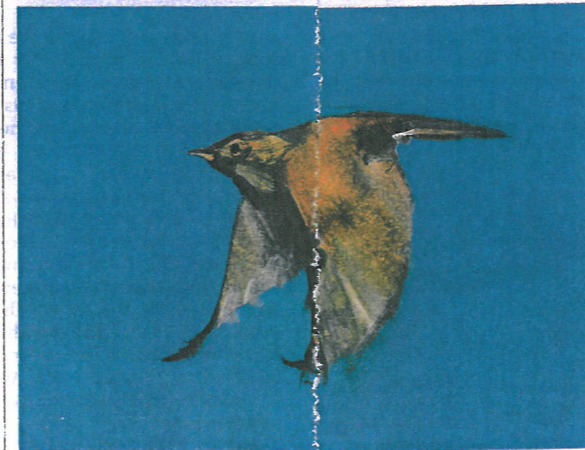
stepping as though he is ankle-deep or levitating just above the surface of the water.

There is magic and truth in Dunne's paintings, which mix reality and fantasy with anxious and wishful thinking.

The Dublin-based painter's images look familiar, as he uses a variety of materials to produce works in which mythology meets fact and intuition. These are paintings about ideas

and deep, interconnected thoughts. What is implied is always much more than what may be visible.

Crossing the Salt is, in equal parts, disturbing and delightful, ambitious in scale but delicate and measured in its presentation. The main installation is a room filled with 100 small paintings in which birds swoop, dive and flap, all captured in mid-movement. These beautiful renditions of avian antics are bewitching and enticing, but *Crossing the*



Flights of fantasy and foreboding

Gabhann Dunne's latest show offers a delicate depiction of his concern with how we treat nature and humanity. *By Cristin Leach*

Painting number nine in Gabhann Dunne's new Limerick City Gallery of Art exhibition is called *The Discovery of Europe*. It's a metre-wide oil on board in which a horizontal line divides a soupy liquid surface from a blue sky, in which hangs a pinkish storm-cloud, full of weighty dreams tinged with nightmares. Along the horizon line walks a majestic stag, antlers full,



“This is a show about water and change. It is also about migration and freedom”

and *Plastics*, show bright orange and pink domes like sunrises on low horizons. Rosslare and Kilrush are stormy looking paintings of blown palm trees and yellow flowers. Often their beauty is arresting. But Dunne is a strategist, his painting has a clear purpose. A quote from him in Cherry Smith's essay in the catalogue for the show helps explain the purpose and effect of his approach. “Beauty is a lure. You can draw people in

and then show them something else,” he says. There is also a warning. He is trying to tap into our shared cultural or social consciousness, to remind us there is more to be seen and known than can be perceived by eyes alone. It might seem like an odd approach for a painter, but it works. **✪**

Crossing the Salt is at Limerick City Gallery of Art until September 2

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