

# Best to ease off on the symbolism



## Visual Arts Aidan Dunne

Reviewed:

**Philosophical Paintings**, Conor Walton, Jorgensen Fine Art until July 5 (01-6619758)

**Maeve McCarthy, Paintings**, The Molesworth Gallery until June 30 (01-6791548)

**Laura Owens, Paintings**, The Douglas Hyde Gallery until July 22 (01-6081116)

To title your exhibition *Philosophical Paintings*, as Conor Walton has done with his show at Jorgensen Fine Art, is surely to risk pretension. And, in the event, he doesn't quite manage to avoid the risk. Even though he sets up as defences something close to the ironic distancing of post-modernism, and even though he refers self-deprecatingly to his own status as a young gey, an "evolutionary reprobate... resisting new media, abstraction and the latest trends"

There is likely to be some friction, to say the least, between subjective and objective notions of truth, given that one person's subjective truth may not, in fact, be true at all. To say that "evolution is the creation myth of our age" is, presumably, an example of Walton's own subjective truth, and it is but one of his misconceptions about evolution. It's a bit misleading to imply that science and rationality distance us from nature when religion generally sets us above nature and scientific knowledge makes crystal clear the fact that we are part and parcel of nature. As for his regret that we live in a rational and scientific age: would that we did.

Walton's elegiac note about painting itself is also misplaced. Look around and it's clear that representational painting is a viable cultural option, and, when he forgets to be the conscience of his age, he is a thoroughly capable representational painter. By far the best

the bottom line is that he is serious about the Philosophical in the title or he wouldn't have put it there.

His ambition is to make modern-day versions of what was once the most exalted genre in the academic hierarchy: history painting. That is, he is attempting philosophically charged meditations on the state of things in the form of representational allegories. Mostly they are overtly theatrical in a deliberately fusty, murky style, though there are self-consciously contemporary notes: in one, a besuited man wearing sunglasses and looking more than a bit like Steve Martin holds open a heavy tome and directs our attention to a planetary diagram of some kind, not so much a philosopher as a dodgy Bible salesman.

What, though, is at the heart of Walton's philosophical musings? *Allegory of Knowledge*, with its lovingly painted, naked fruit picker, is a variant on the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In the catalogue text, Walton suggests that "the advance of civilisation turns us away from poetic wisdom and towards a more objective truth", which implies that poetic wisdom is in some sense untrue and, as he elaborates, that rationality is a Bad Thing. But he is not quite clear about this, saying firstly that in a tired or fragmented cultural context, the painter "must piece together his own notions of truth, nature, goodness and beauty", and, immediately afterward that, if culture fails us, "nature and objective truth become vital guides."

things in his show are those in which he eases off on the more heavy-handed symbolism and deals with what is in front of his eyes: bunches of grapes, a naked figure, an architectural landscape. If he does what he does best, the philosophy will be part of the picture: he won't have to insert it in the form of book titles and portentous epistemological references.

Presumably Maeve McCarthy, showing at the Molesworth, knows that instinctively. Her carefully observed studies of coastal scenes, prosaic still life subjects and interiors are mostly fragmentary and oblique, making brilliant use of the play of horizontal, vertical and diagonal accents. Her use of paint is subtle, economic and accurate. She relishes the vibrancy of maritime light and there is a poignant quality to the deserted, inviting spaces she describes, though she steers clear of sentimentality. Giorgio Morandi and Edward Hopper come to mind.

Kitsch and whimsy dominate in Laura Owens's paintings at the Douglas Hyde. Owens is a young American West Coast painter who has been enormously popular from her arrival on the scene in the mid-1990s. She was one of a number of younger artists whose work signalled a revival of interest in painting. Since that time, her bright, lively works have drawn on a bewilderingly extensive range of imagery and styles. Apart from referencing specific movements in 20th-century painting, for example, she felt free to incorporate material from any aspect of visual culture, high and low, popular and obscure, art and craft, within the framework of any piece.

Such stylistic promiscuity sounds like a postmodernist recipe, but rather than the ironic appropriation this might suggest, Owens seems to have had something else in mind, like playful, open engagement with an expanded range of subject matter. She wanted to negotiate a position from which she could address a mass of loaded issues about style, representation and value, without apparent guile but at the same time with a cagey awareness of the baggage.

The largest piece is a free quote from the Bayeux Tapestry, copied as though by a schoolchild doing a project, in bright, startling colours. Other scenes of fantasy and violence are adapted from various iconographies, usually rendered in a similarly naive or faux naïf idiom, sometimes embellished with awkwardly cut circles of coloured felt, again recalling a classroom project, to a degree that becomes indistinguishable from pastiche.

It is playful, wildly eclectic and diverting. Yet in a way she is also setting the bar fairly low. The question is, how would one of these paintings fail? Supposing you say, well, it looks too clumsy and awkward. The rejoinder would be: well, it's supposed to be clumsy and awkward. So, within its own lights, it's a complete success. Occasionally, as in her exuberant version of a goat in the forest, there is a flash of her painterly flair.