

Skeins of colour threaded with expansive emotion

A COUPLE of years ago, Timothy Hawkesworth, who has been based in the US for the last 30 years, recounted the story of a studio visit by Pat Murphy. Now director of the Royal Hibernian Academy Gallagher Gallery, Murphy was at the time head of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. He arrived at the studio, Hawkesworth recalled, and, having looked wordlessly for some time at the paintings arranged around the walls, turned to the artist and said: "Don't you know that Duchamp won the argument?"

The argument, that is, between Picasso the emotionally engaged picture-maker and Marcel Duchamp the chilly theoretician. Conventional art historical wisdom has it that Picasso dominated the first half of the 20th century but was eclipsed by Duchamp in the second, when Conceptualism was all-conquering. To all intents and purposes, we still live in Duchampian times.

Visit Hawkesworth's exhibition at the Taylor Galleries and you will immediately see Murphy's point. The paintings are dense, crowded masses of heavily worked pigment, their surfaces alive with myriad gestural marks. Between the two poles of black and white, numerous skeins of colour are fed into the mix. Some-

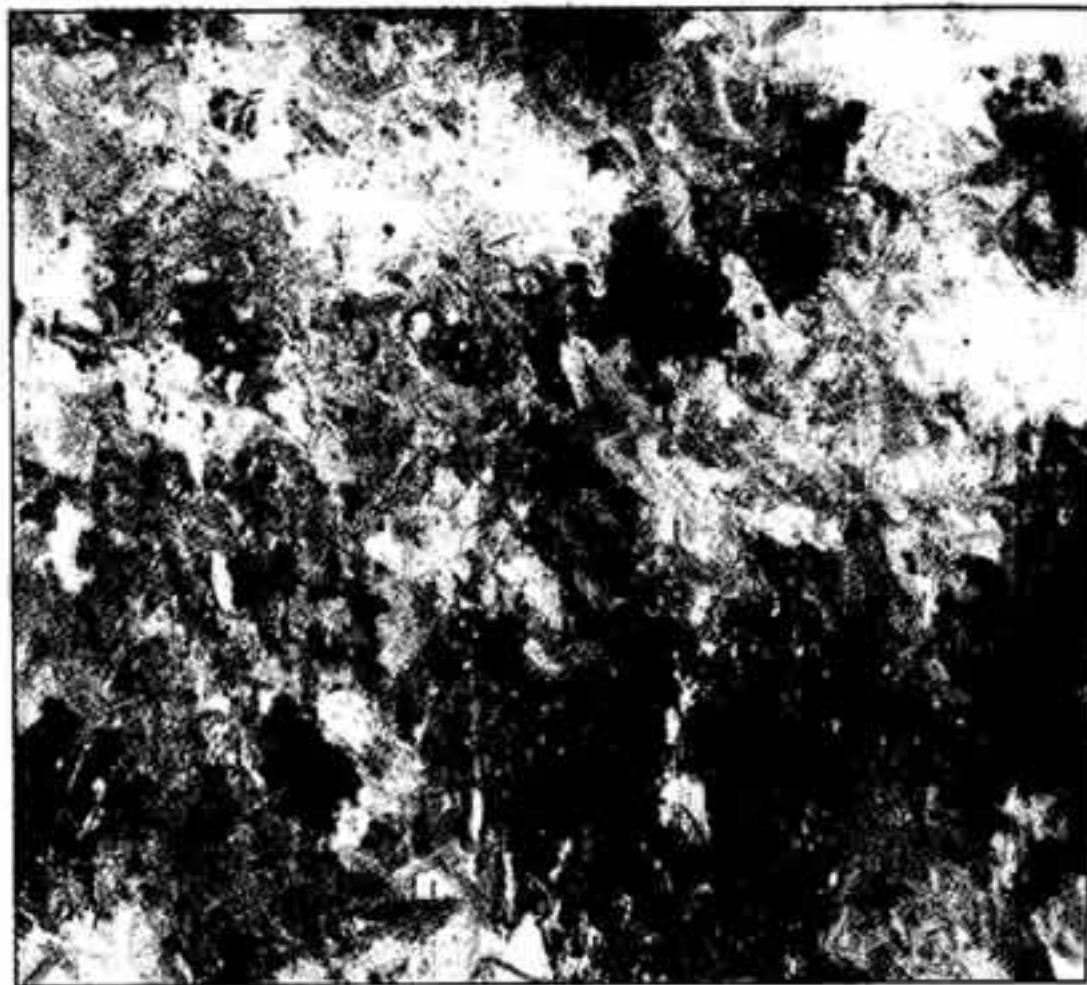


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Timothy Hawkesworth renders landscapes according to instinctive experience rather than detached intellect

times the end result resembles the aftermath of an explosion in a yarn factory, as though we are looking at impenetrable tangles of coloured threads. Equally, those dramatic photographs of galaxies forming in deep space, taken by the Hubble telescope, come to mind.

Energy, physicality, order emerging tentatively from chaos – all these things come to mind in relation to Hawkesworth's work. What doesn't come to mind is Duchamp's hands-off, cerebral detachment. Nor is Hawkesworth a penitent sinner. He loves



making paintings on the basis of gut instinct, loves the physical immersion in the medium of oil pigment, the way pictures emerge messily from the process of their making and not as the afterthoughts of intellectual predetermination.

"I know," he sighs, "that it's almost controversial to paint at all in some parts of the art world. But for me it's part of how we find out what it is to be human. Making a painting is an expansive experience." It is also an inescapably body-centred experience for him. "You are acknowledging and

Out 15 (2007) by Timothy Hawkesworth: he loves the physical immersion in the medium of oil pigment, the way pictures emerge messily from the process of their making

relating to the world beyond yourself through your feelings and movements, your body's responses." Contemporary culture, he feels, tends to distance us from direct physical awareness. Technology intervenes, we forget about flesh and blood and retreat into virtual reality.

One way back from what he sees as this destructive disengagement is to reinvest in what has been lost: "The vitality of the mark. I love [Roland] Barthes's expression, 'the insubordinate hand'. It's good to get to that place where you trust the mark you're making without thinking about it. The imagination is an animal, you know? It wants to go, to get off the leash, and we keep stopping it. It can get pretty wild if you do let it go, but strangely enough, the wilder the ride, the more coherent you find it becomes."

Originally from Co Wicklow, he attended the National College of Art and Design and subsequently lived for a time in Dublin. Painters Patrick Graham and Patrick Hall were close friends. In the late 1970s he went to the US without any plans to stay there. But he liked it, and decided to give it a go. "In fact I was miserable for a long time. For about eight years I really missed Ireland. I missed the weather, and the land. I

missed the horizontal rain. And then, somehow, I realised that it was a pictorial question in that I actually had that landscape deep inside of me all the time. It was part of me. And I had this experience of a dissolution of the boundaries between the self and the environment."

The textures and energy of his paintings relate them to aspects of landscape, but they are not landscapes in any conventional sense of the term. "I don't even like the term landscape," he acknowledges. "Because it tends to locate the work inside people's preconceptions of landscape, be it picturesque or romantic or whatever. Yet some of my favourite painters, such as Constable and Turner, are landscape painters. But that they are landscape painters is not what I like about them. To me, they don't paint landscape, they paint experience, and that's what's interesting and rewarding."

His own paintings are in part records of the duration of experience. There is a pace and urgency to them, as though a deadline is looming in each case. "That's sort of true," he says. "In the past, I would have come back to things over a period of months and months. But I've come around to going right through with a painting now. I work light into dark. They are all painted

wet-on-wet, so you have this vitality of surface. But there's a time limit, because the oil paint is going to dry out and you just have to keep at it. For me now I find the issue is not whether a particular painting is finished as such, it's that I notice that areas of the painting aren't changing any more as I work, they're settling down, and I should leave them alone."

Inevitably, American Abstract Expressionism comes to mind in relation to his work, and he greatly admires Philip Guston, for example. "In the end, a painting by Guston still opens my heart, but Duchamp's urinal just tells us how clever he is, so I'll go for Guston every time." At the same time, it would be wrong to suggest that he is not self-conscious as an artist, that he eschews analysis of what

he or other artists do. His work is clearly related to that of Cy Twombly, whose paintings and drawings merge certain qualities of Abstract Expressionism, including spontaneity, abstraction and gestural mark-making, with those of European classicism. And in a way Hawkesworth's paintings, like Twombly's, occupy a paradoxical position, historically. Because, according to a certain critical orthodoxy, you are not supposed to be able to make work like this any more. But it's as if Hawkesworth says: Hey, here's the work, deal with it. And that, as he puts it, is a radical stance to take.

Timothy Hawkesworth: New Paintings is at the Taylor Galleries, 16 Kildare Street. Until Apr 26