



Homilies

Mike Fitzpatrick reflects on the sombre, otherworldly quality of Michael Canning's work

Having decided at the tender age of nine that he was going to be an artist, Michael Canning's subsequent development shows a deep intensity and adherence to an arduous process in the creation of his artworks. His parents, though not engaged in the arts, both contributed to his development as an artist. He has an ingrained memory, and admiration, of his father working with cars, as a panel beater, spray painter and colourist. Canning builds up layers in his paintings, washing off and slowly reworking their surfaces.

An early win in a national art competition prompted his mother to introduce the young Canning to the Limerick travelling library, where he relished books relating to art. She also sought out Benedict Tutty, an artist and Benedictine monk at nearby Glenstal Abbey. Tutty introduced Canning to their collection of Russian ikons and for the first time the young boy was aware that paintings did not just exist in books, but were real physical objects as well. 'I had to navigate my own way through what was good in art or what I was interested in. I was fairly open-minded and everything was worth reading and worth looking at: Peter Paul Rubens, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Georgia O'Keeffe, Eva Hesse, Rembrandt. It wouldn't matter whether the artists were male or female, contemporary or from 500 years ago. By the time I got to art school I was comfortable with most facets of art history.'

Canning studied at Limerick School of Art and Design, the School of Fine Arts in Athens and the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. (His initial study of sculpture in Limerick solidified his adherence to process.) He sees himself primarily as an abstract painter, although he paints plants he collects on weathered surfaces he has created, holding them while he works. Canning's paintings are informed by a European tradition of painting, both abstract and figurative in terms of figure-ground relationships.

His upcoming show is at the Lyndsey Ingram Gallery in London, one of the few prestigious galleries that specialises in works on paper. These new works have a sombre, otherworldly beauty to them. While each has a unique sensibility, they share a transcendental quality. Canning reflects this feeling with prayerful titles such as *Liturgies*, *Orison* and *Confessional*.

His studio overlooks the rolling pasture of the Golden Vale, a fertile lowland in Co Limerick that forms a specific reference point within his paintings. The large paper works in his studio are hung directly side by side in a tight grid. This juxtaposition forces them to fight for equal visual validity or face further reworking. Canning works on paper and canvas using a variety of techniques and materials. Each piece can take up to five years to complete.

His paintings are best explained by the slow and iterative process they develop from. Having allowed the background to develop and age, Canning says, 'I turn the plant around a few degrees until it is somehow more satisfyingly "right". I hold it in my left hand and paint it until



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it's realised. But then I need to turn it another few degrees in order to make the next phase of it more satisfying in relation to the other things that are happening around it. Every mark I make, every leaf I paint on, every petal I apply, has a bearing on the decisions that I have to make in relation to all the other ones that come subsequently.' The final stage is reworking the painting surface using various materials, some of which include pigment, which is another means of distancing the work beyond a descriptive norm.

In his upcoming show, the most complex work is *The good life is out there* (Fig 2). It features four plants set against a sombre landscape. 'The good life is out there somewhere' is

a quote from the Smiths' song 'Hand in Glove' (the 'somewhere' is left out, so the audience may fill it in). The four plants are protagonists in the painting and they resonate with place, individual structure, colour and temporality, evidenced by the physical act of responding to their existence through paint. The construction of these four plants in a painted plane is akin to arranging actors on a stage set, where the action is devised and implemented by Canning. His definition of success in a specific work is achieving an elusive sense of significance. ■

Michael Canning, 'The Deeper Air', Lyndsey Ingram Gallery, London, 30 March–28 April.

Mike Fitzpatrick is Dean of TUS Limerick School of Art and Design.

1 Michael Canning

2 *THE GOOD LIFE IS OUT THERE* 2016–2022 oil and wax on canvas 150 x 213cm

Photos Matthew Gidney