Features

C

Mary McIntyre
Reverie, 2005
Lightjet colour photographic print mounted on dibond (diptych), 80 x 100cm
courtesy the artist

Jacqui McIntosh

Mary McIntyre
Veil, 2006
Lightjet colour photographic print mounted on dibond (series), 80 x 100cm

Interview: Mary McIntyre

Mary McIntyre has exhibited extensively since the early 1990s. Her photographs, whether of deserted institutional spaces or nocturnal urban and suburban landscapes, often depict the familiar and banal. Through colour and use of available light, these scenes take on a heightened reality, appearing like empty stage sets. In recent photographs of landscapes, McIntyre has drawn on the influence of German Romanticism, with the inclusion of solitary figures contemplating the landscape around them, be it rural or man-made. McIntyre lives and works in Belfast where she is a lecturer in Fine Art at the University of Ulster.

In 2005, McIntyre was one of fourteen artists selected to represent Northern Ireland at the fifty-first Venice Biennale. The pavilion, curated by Hugh Mulholland, was Northern Ireland's first official presentation at the Biennale. The nature of things, exhibited in the galleries at the Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà throughout the Biennale, featured a diverse array of practices including painting, sculpture, installation, video and photography.

JM: What was your experience of the ***Venice Biennale***?
MM: I have to say that everything came together in a way that couldn't have been any better. The amount of people that came to see the exhibition was incredible. So many people who went to the ***Biennale*** said that they considered it one of the best shows. The overwhelming response to the exhibition really surprised me because I thought – it's Northern Ireland's first time, so we shouldn't expect too much at this point – but from the outset it was very well conceived, extremely well organised, really professionally presented and there was a real sense of camaraderie between all of the artists. I think it did demonstrate that art being made in Northern Ireland is worthy of being seen on an international platform. From the funders' point of view and the remit of Northern Irish art being seen outside of Ireland by a huge number of people, I think it is the most cost effective way that they could possibly ever do it.

In many of your photographs, we the viewer take on the viewpoint of yourself, the artist observing behind the lens. In works exhibited in Venice, such as ***Vantage point I*** (2005) and ***Reverie (2005)***, a new viewpoint is introduced through the inclusion of a figure through which we mediate the image. How did the figure begin to emerge in your work?
I'd made work based on the idea of starting to introduce the figure into the landscape. The works shown at Venice were an extension of that. I had been referencing German Romantic painting and notions of the sublime – using the figure's inclusion as a device to potentially embody some of the viewer's thoughts or feelings. In this work, the figure's relationship to the space is through architecture rather than landscape, but the principle is the same. I'd been working previously on allegory in terms of landscape painting, but in the new works I was exploring that further through the psychological character of the spaces or environments that the architecture had constructed – because what I was looking at was public space and how buildings, rooms and constructed environments make us feel or behave. As the viewer, we are not just taking on the role of onlooker, looking at the figure as just one element within the photograph, we may also be able to receive the image through the figure's eyes/ experience, so that even though we might not be able to see what that figure is looking at, because what they are viewing is off the picture plane, we can imagine it without being able to see it.

On one level, your photographs depict detailed portrayals of reality, but on another level they are images in which our imaginations and fantasies can take hold. They create a very psychological space within the viewer – an interplay between interior thought and exterior reality.
Well that's really what I think about the work. It's not that I have a particular meaning that I want people to interpret, but I think that there is a thread running throughout my work, particularly in a lot of the recent work, which is based around one's internal life, thoughts, feelings. That's why I often use titles like ***Reverie***, which convey that idea of being lost in one's own thoughts and the notion that a lot of the time when we should be concentrating on something in particular, we're not really seeing what is in front of us at all. Instead, we're actually caught up in our own thoughts. I think that has become a very strong element in the work. I would hope that there is space in my work for people to indulge their own particular viewpoint.

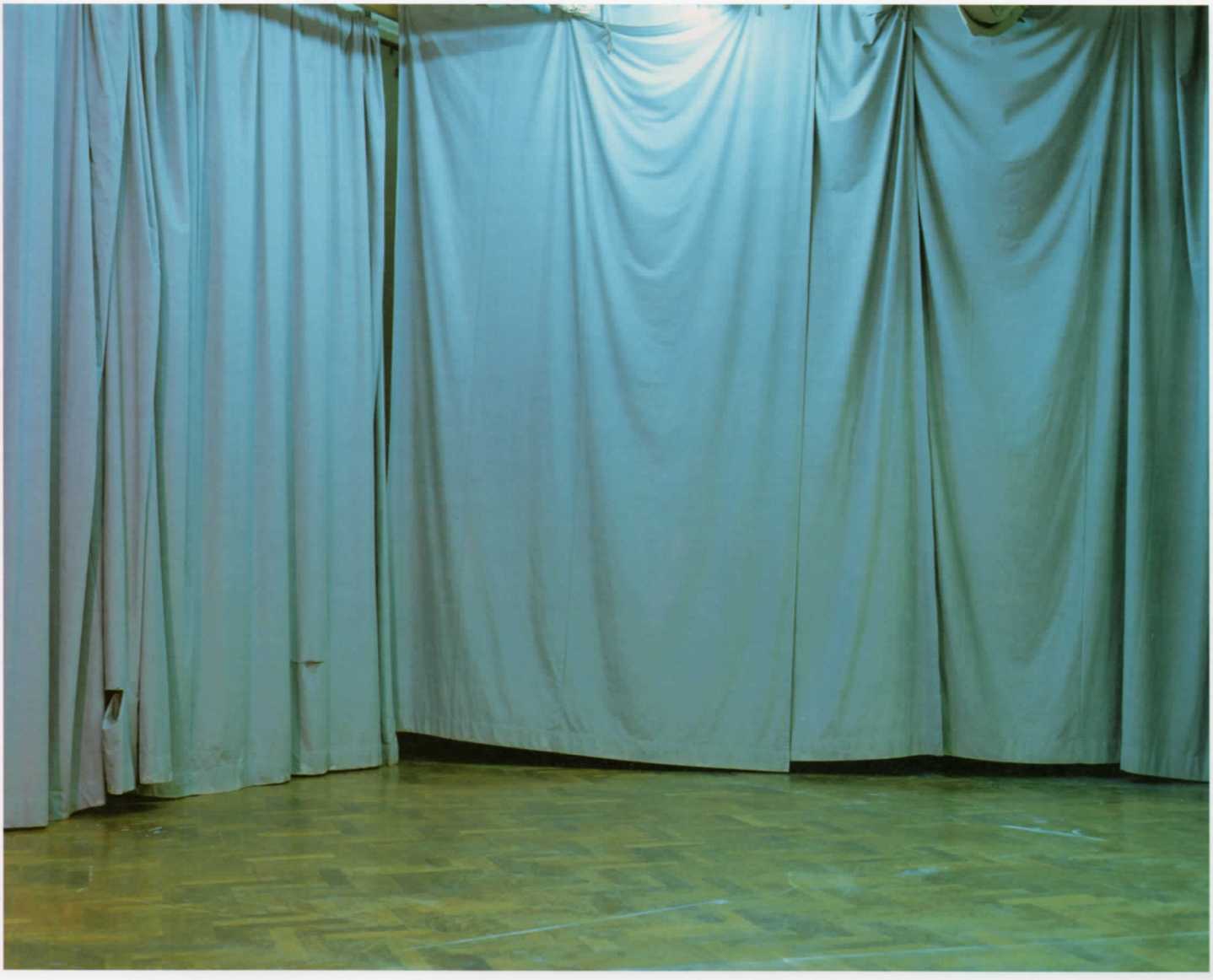
In 2000, McIntyre created a series of photographs of institutional spaces. These 'interior landscapes' depicted interior spaces in a state of transition: desolate and abandoned workplaces that were disused; schools that were about to be pulled down, or redeveloped. The diptych, Space of doubt (2000), photographed at this time, was recently exhibited at the Goethe Institut's Return Gallery in Dublin, as part of the Samuel Beckett Centenary celebrations.

How did the work ***Space of doubt*** come about?
I was in the process of taking photographs of institutional spaces and at the time I was photographing in a disused school. The assembly hall was one of the spaces that I photographed and later I made that diptych of the curtain images. I was unsure about why I was interested in them, but I was reacting instinctively to things, photographing something quite banal, but at the same time having faith in the instinct that something would come out of it. Afterwards, I began to think of the psychological dimension of the work or what that work could possibly mean. I think it had to do with the idea that these curtains perhaps represented a separation, something that divided one space from another. For me that work presented a sense of unease about what is behind that partition – and I don't mean that in a real physical sense of what is behind the curtains – but more in terms of consciousness or the subconscious. It's as if the image started to embody ideas about the division between different aspects of one's thought process, the thoughts we are conscious of or the thoughts we are less sure of or suppress. So that the curtains in the image acted as a shield or partition separating two opposing states, like the present and the future or the conscious and subconscious. I find that image unnervingly still. But maybe that is reflected in the spaces themselves, because when I was photographing those buildings, I would be alone in the space for periods of time. Sometimes people have commented that they find those photographs incredibly lonely or melancholic – and it's funny, because that is contrary to the experience I had in making the work. The spaces seemed to me very peaceful, very still. Even now that many of those buildings have been demolished, it feels almost as if those places still exist in some sort of parallel setting – but I think that it is because they have been recorded and now exist in the photographs and seem to be representative of a kind of psychological space.

In most of your works, even if they are devoid of human presence, it is implied in some way, whether in the representation of objects, traces of human activity, or through the feeling that somebody could walk into the scene. In ***Space of doubt*** (2000) and photographs from your recent ***Fog*** series (2006), that presence seems to have gone.
I think that in those images – although it wasn't intentional, as I wasn't looking at Caspar David Friedrich at the time that I was making ***Space of doubt*** – the viewer could become that person standing in front of the scene. Whether, as in Friedrich's ***Wanderer***, it is a landscape, or in my work it is fog or the curtains, it's about the viewer's relationship with what is being presented to them in the image. Although the view presented may be an external setting, it could actually signify for the viewer an internal view, introspection. It depends on the viewer's outlook. The work, I think, embodies contradictions and dualities. Maybe that's one reason why people have often linked my work to Beckett. Beckett's work seems full of words, but at the same time can seem emptied of meaning; it has that duality. To me it has always seemed to constantly fluctuate between something seeming mammoth and yet at the same time, diminutive, important and unimportant – and I think that has always been a characteristic of my work. It can appear banal, empty, full of nothingness, but at the same time it could also seem to be the opposite of that.

Photography is very good at that – of making us look closer at something normally ubiquitous and banal. Your night photographs of suburban spaces, for example ***Afterwards*** (2004), are places that seem very familiar, but at the same time our interaction with these spaces is altered by the concentration of our gaze.
That's something I hadn't really considered until I exhibited the work at the Arte Ricambi Gallery in Verona. There the work received an unexpected response because in my photographs of Irish suburban scenes, the houses, streets and street lights were different to those in Italy. Italian audiences almost seemed to consider our yellow street light as having an exotic quality to it, which I found a bit amusing. Certainly for audiences in the UK or Ireland, these images present the quality of the familiar – but at the same time they might seem slightly unfamiliar, because the atmosphere in the images is heightened due to the way that lighting can dramatise a location at night. Certainly the locations are very familiar to me; they are all close to where I live and work. Sometimes I have to see a thing a number of times before I think it's worthy of being photographed, so these locations are places I pass on a daily basis, maybe have even been passing for months. On some days these locations can seem incredibly photogenic and then at another times the exact same place can appear really uninteresting. During the day they are generic, incredibly mundane locations, but at night they become transformed.

Mary McIntyre
Space of doubt, 2000
C-type colour photographic print
(diptych), 128 x 154cm
courtesy the artist



Have you noticed a different response to how photography is perceived in other countries?
Absolutely. Particularly in commercial terms, which could be seen as a barometer for how photography is valued. In my experience, photography is taken seriously in other countries, and is purchased by collectors without question in a way which does not happen in Ireland unless you are an extremely well known artist, whose work has managed to transcend that narrowness about what is acceptable as an art form. My experience recently in Europe was of photography selling very well there, because they don't have the same misgivings about photography not being comparable to painting – their decision to purchase photography is based on whether or not they appreciate the work. I'm not saying that in all quarters of the Irish art scene photography is not taken seriously, but in terms of purchasing of work, there is a completely different attitude. I didn't realise that until I'd exhibited a lot in other galleries abroad and experienced the difference.

You seem to make very deliberate choices in the way that you display your work. For instance, in previous exhibitions you have used lightboxes to display your photographs, stapled large prints to the wall and leant framed photographs against the wall.
There are so many categories of photographer and I've always felt like a fine artist first and photographer second. I think that comes from my having worked in a sculptural, installation background at art college. I came to photography by an accidental route. It was a by-product of my working process at that time, so with that sensibility I would never be comfortable with the idea of having all my photographs made to exactly the same size, and displayed in exactly the same way. I've always been very aware, in every gallery space or site-specific location that I've shown in, of working with the dynamics of that particular space. Even though a gallery space might seem like a neutral white cube, to me they all have inherently different qualities and atmospheres.

What are you currently working on?
There are a number of different series of work ongoing, as I tend to have different series running simultaneously, so I might return to a previous idea or body of work after a period of time. Currently I'm working on about four different series – one set of images is related to the new *Fog* series, but I am also continuing to develop landscape images that relate more closely to painting. There are also the night-time images that I've been continuing to work on and I've recently started to take photographs of interior spaces again, but those works are at a very experimental stage. I'm photographing domestic interiors at night in complete darkness, using exposures that can last up to hours. These new images extend the work I've been doing on night time imagery, but push it much further, because I suppose in attempting to photograph a subject that is in total darkness I am trying to photograph things that you don't imagine you should be able to photograph. These images are almost in contrast to the *Fog* images, which are so pale, and full of light, whereas the interiors are intensely dark with just little areas of detail visible.

Your work, from your earliest photographs, has shown the influence of painting. What else has influenced you?
The two things that have influenced my work the most are painting and cinema. I'm not really influenced by many photographers. I find some photographer's work very interesting, like Jeff Wall, whose work I really enjoy, but the things that I would refer back to most are books that I've read, films that I've seen and definitely painting. Painting wasn't a conscious reference until recently. Like a lot of students in school, in the past I was quite dismissive of painting as being uninteresting and conservative. It's interesting to me now that it's almost like déjà vu, when at times I see something in my work and I think – what is that reminding me of? And then I realise that it is reminding me of a painting by Corot, or Jacob van Ruisdael, painting that I probably dismissed years ago when I was on a school trip, wandering, bored, through a museum. Cinema and literature, I've always been conscious of having influenced me, but the awareness of the impact that painting has on my work has crept up on me, and I now realise that it's been there in the work all the time.

Jacqui McIntosh is a visual-arts writer based in Dublin.

Mary McIntyre
The lough, 2006
Lightjet colour photographic
print mounted on dibond (series)
80 x 100cm
courtesy the artist