



# UNSEEN

Eamon O'Kane



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**Eamon O'Kane**

**Cavanacor Gallery**

**1st March - 1st May 2008**



Ideal Studio (After Bates Maher)  
oil on canvas  
213 x 152cm  
2007

## Lingering with intent

The Paintings of Eamon O’Kane

The first thing that strikes you about the painter Eamon O’Kane is his prodigious output. Only 33 years old he has already had over 40 solo exhibitions and participated in a similar number of group shows since graduating with an MFA from Belfast in 1998. If that were all he did it would be impressive, but in addition, there is his teaching in Bristol, Limerick and Cheltenham, his residencies at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Irish Culture Centre in Paris, and the British School in Rome, his Fulbright scholarship and his many awards and prizes. O’Kane spreads himself over a range of media also, moving freely between painting, large wall drawings, film and animation and installation work. Profiles such as that are rare in art unless you go down the sensationalist route of artists like Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas, but O’Kane eschews sensationalism. Amazingly in the light of these artistic achievements his first ambition was to be an architect. It is just that he allowed himself to linger at art college for a year first and got hooked.

It sounds as if that was the last opportunity he had to linger. The worry is that an artist who spreads himself over so much at such an early stage in his career will not be able to do more than skim the surface of his chosen profession and will produce work that is

little more than robotic. The Welsh poet W.H. Davies, called on people to stand back from the rush of progress and to be more like cows or sheep. He asked;

*‘What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare?’<sup>1</sup>*

Davies knew what he was talking about. He spent many years as a vagrant and a hobo in the United States in order to protect his mindspace for poetry. But where does that leave Eamon O’Kane? It would appear that O’Kane can look, and linger and think with a brush or a stick of charcoal when the rest of us have to concentrate on one thing at a time, without ever arriving at his destination. When he was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to go to the United States O’Kane painted a series of images of what he imagined America to be like. That kind of imaginative engagement is the hallmark of his successful output. He saw America clearly enough to paint dozens of images of it before ever he went there, training his eye, sharpening his receptors for the actual, testing his imagination, so that there is nothing passive about the before and after images. What we are talking about is active knowledge, of painting as a means of enquiry. This process also required a particular kind of engagement with other people’s perceptions of America so that he not only became familiar with the country before ever he set foot there, he also grew to know the work of many of the great writers and film-makers who had already engaged with it. His journey through painting has followed a similar route.



The Collector's Bedroom  
oil on canvas  
200 x 200cm  
2007

It is often said that Clement Greenberg taught people to see painting by playing down the content of the artwork, and discussing those elements of the work that appear to be closest to the essence of the painting process. Renaissance artists on the other hand, would have had us believe that what we saw when we looked at one of their paintings was less a picture than a view through a window onto the world of their subject. They persuaded the viewer to look beyond the work to a wider world made visible for us by their painterly skill. Post-Modern artists, of whom Eamon O’Kane is definitely one, have a heightened consciousness of these two positions. While they are fully aware of the emphasis on the academic skills that the classical, academic tradition imposed, they are equally intelligent in their critique of Greenberg’s navel-gazing formalism. Sooner rather than later both artist and viewer feel the need to re-associate with the world beyond the canvas. Post-modernists recognise the elitism of Greenberg’s position as well as the impossibility and undesirability of segregating art from experience, making art instead from a position that can engage with both of the perspectives described.

O’Kane plays on the notions of the ideal; the ideal studio, the ideal art collection, the ideal museum in his work. The concept, for O’Kane as for Plato, the philosopher most deeply associated with it, clearly indicates the impossibility of its existence, in any thing other than an imagined or spiritual sense. So O’Kane’s work posits an imaginary world against which to experience the real one. In a very personal way he draws together some of the icons of art history, contemporary

as well as historic, that inevitably impacted on his practice and his thinking as a young artist. Coming from a generation profoundly informed by the writing of Freud and Barthes, O’Kane knows that it is impossible for any of us to acknowledge all the sources of our creativity, since many are deeply embedded in unconscious memory. He opts for open revelation instead of pretending, as so many artists have done, that they achieved what they did single-handedly.

*‘I am interested in painting other peoples art work because I see it on several levels: first of all as becoming an incomplete (and perhaps impossible to complete) archive of my influences and a sort of patchwork quilt that has contributed to the construction of me as an artist. Nobody is without influence, especially in today’s image heavy society and especially in the art world. Artists look at other artists, both contemporary and historical, to find a path forward for themselves, and this series is showing all my cards in a way....by painting all the works – whether they are sculptures, photographs, installations, videos or paintings – in the same scale and in quite flat acrylic, they are all forced into the same parameters, which allows them to be scrutinized in a different way to looking at them in books and magazines.’*

The process of painting the work of another artist, even in a very different medium, brings you inside the work in an entirely different way to the experience of simply looking at it. You become an ‘insider’ in the work, a partner now in every choice and every decision that led to the original image,



< The Collector's View  
> The Architect's View  
oil on canvas  
200 x 200cm  
2007







The Collector's Plant, The Architect's Plant, Bird Cage  
oil on canvas  
100 x 100cm  
2007

albeit in a different context. The decision to replicate all that art history in postcard scale further imposes a measure of equality on the works and the artists that art criticism and museums steadfastly refuse to enable. As Walter Benjamin pointed out the reproduction becomes a leveller enabling us to bring things together that have been carefully segregated in their temples and treasure houses. It allows us to draw them into our domestic or studio spaces and to relate them to our lives and practices, to give them a meaning that works for us.

If the small pictures offer a homage to the sources of his art, the ideal studio pictures and the Museum paintings investigate the spaces for art. Brian O'Doherty critiqued the notion of the segregation of art from life in *The White Cube*. In O'Kane's paintings the ideal studio, whether aka Aalto, Jahn or Bates and Maher is mediated against a background of trees and weather, just as his Daniel-Buren-like striped paintings are seen through the foliage of the imaginary collector's or even the architect's house plants. Even in their rarefied environments nature or life imposes itself on the artwork. It is inescapable. In O'Kane's other work, painting and personal experience are always paired, even if sometimes obliquely. In a recent solo show at the Regional Cultural Centre in Letterkenny, *The House and the Tree*, O'Kane re-created an attic from his family home into which he placed a short film recording the vernacular architecture of Co. Donegal which is accompanied by a soundtrack of proverbs in the Gaelic language. The installation is completed by a large-scale wall drawing of an oak tree that once sheltered King James II,

also from his homeplace, together with the sawn up trunk of the tree which was killed by lightning. In other words the personal and the public, past and present, royalist and peasant, the real and its representation, nature and culture are all combined in this single installation, through the accomplished use of new and traditional media.

The Double-Portrait Series continues this approach. By taking well-known portraits by artists from the past such as the Van Eyck, Bellini and Vermeer and combining parts of them with equally iconic passages from portraits by Gerhard Richter, Cindy Sherman and Thomas Ruff, Eamon O'Kane creates a new kind of art history. What they add up to is a self-portrait of the artist, not someone who sprang from Mount Olympus, armed only with his genius, but as one who is prepared to acknowledge the impact of history and his connections to the world beyond the studio.

Catherine Marshall, February 2008

<sup>1</sup> W.H.Davies, *Leisure*, undated, early 20th century, various anthologies.

<sup>2</sup> Eamon O'Kane in conversation with Roy Voss, *The Museum Collection*, Galerie Schuster, 2005

<sup>3</sup> Brian O'Doherty, series of essays on the modern art gallery, in *Artforum* 1976 - 1986, and published collectively and in expanded form, in *Inside the White Cube*, University of California Press, 1999



< The Architect's House  
> The End of The Fair  
oil on canvas  
200 x 300cm  
2007



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< How Soon Is Now (Burda Museum) Studies  
> The Queen Is Dead Remix (MOMA Queens)  
oil on canvas  
40 x 50cm  
200 x 200cm  
2005-2007





< Love will tear us apart (Contemporary Art Museum, Rio)  
> Disintegration (National Gallery, Washington D.C.)  
oil on canvas  
122 x 244cm  
2005







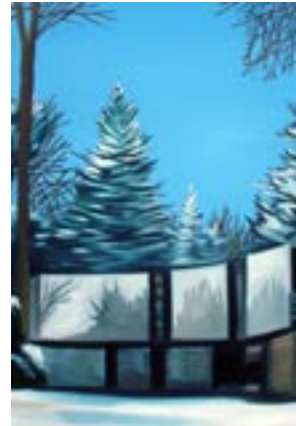
< Forest (Des moines Art Centre, Iowa)  
> Disintegration Remix (National Gallery, Washington D.C.)  
oil on canvas  
122 x 152cm  
100 x 100cm  
2005





< Ideal Studio Retreat  
> Ideal Studio (After Helmut Jahn)  
oil on canvas  
170 x 260cm  
2004





< Ideal Studio in Snow study I + II  
> Ideal Studio study (After Alvar Aalto)  
oil on canvas  
various dimensions  
2004





< Cinema Studios  
> Hotel  
oil on canvas  
200 x 200cm  
2006







< Ideal Collection (Installation View)  
> Ideal Collection (Detail)  
acrylic on board,  
each 20.5 x 15cm  
2005-2007





Double Portraits  
oil on canvas  
100 x 100cm  
2007





Double Portraits  
oil on canvas  
100 x 100cm  
2007





< Cloth II  
> The Godot Machine (Study)  
oil on canvas  
213 x 213cm  
100 x 150cm  
2007







Eamon O’Kane (b. 1974) studied in Dublin, Belfast and New York. He has exhibited widely and is the recipient of many awards and scholarships including the Taylor Art Award, The Tony O’Malley Award and a Fulbright Award. He has shown in exhibitions curated by Dan Cameron, Lynne Cooke, Klaus Ottman, Salah M. Hassan, Jeremy Millar, Mike Fitzpatrick and Apinan Poshyananda. He has taken part in EV+A, Limerick six times including 2005 when he received an EV+A open award from Dan Cameron. In 2006 he was short-listed for the AIB Prize and received a Pollock Krasner foundation grant. O’Kane has had over forty solo exhibitions including shows in Berlin, Frankfurt, Dublin, Zurich, New York, London and Copenhagen. He was short-listed for the Jerwood Drawing Prize in London in 2007. His artwork is in numerous public and private collections worldwide including Deutsche Bank; Burda Museum, Baden Baden, Germany; Limerick City Gallery; FORTIS; DUBLIN 98FM Radio Station; Microsoft; Bank of Ireland Collection; Irish Contemporary Arts Society; Country Bank, New York; Office of Public Works; P.M.P.A. and Guardian Insurance; Donegal County Library; UNIBANK, Denmark; NKT Denmark; HK, Denmark; Den Danske Bank, Denmark; Letterkenny Institute of Technology. O’Kane is currently Visiting Research Fellow in Fine Art at UWE in Bristol, UK.



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