



# Horizons of Light

EMILY MARK FITZGERALD

examines a selection of paintings  
and watercolours from William  
McKeown's forthcoming  
exhibition at IMMA, all of which  
share a lightness of touch

**I**n May 1945 the celebrated American poet E E Cummings created a fictional encounter with a would-be reviewer of his painting, an activity which he pursued alongside poetry throughout his lifetime:

*Why do you paint? / For exactly the same reason I breathe. / That's not an answer. / There isn't any answer. / How long hasn't there been any answer? / As long as I can remember. / And how long have you written? / As long as I can remember. / I mean poetry. / So*

*do I. / Tell me, doesn't your painting interfere with your writing? / Quite the contrary: they love each other dearly. / They're very different. / Very: one is painting and one is writing. / But your poems are rather hard to understand, whereas your paintings are so easy. / Easy? / Of course--you paint flowers and girls and sunsets; things that everybody understands. / I never met him. / Who? / Everybody.<sup>1</sup>*

'Everybody', of course, 'gets' flowers, girls and sunsets: these everyday natural metaphors of joy and feeling, the essence of which

so many painters have pursued throughout the history of art. And yet how often the familiar recedes from us – as Cummings wryly observes, neither the ‘we’ nor the ‘it’ are so easily marked.

The ephemeral and elusive nature of flowers and sky – and the heightened awareness of self which accompanies our experience of them – likewise forms the ongoing concern of the Northern Irish painter William McKeown, whose latest work will be presented in a solo exhibition this autumn at the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Known for his spare, delicate canvases washed with thin layers of colour, McKeown’s work is rooted in a deeply personal and expressive natural philosophy, based on observation, emotion, and meditations on the borders between self, space, and experience.

Born in Co Tyrone in 1962, McKeown initially studied art history at University College London before switching to textile design at Central/St Martin’s School of Art & Design, London. Following a further MA in Design from the Glasgow School of Art, he returned to Ireland where he joined the staff of the newly-launched Kerlin Gallery in 1988. From 1993-4 McKeown studied for an MA in Fine Art at the University of Ulster, and has since worked primarily as a painter, exhibiting frequently at the Kerlin Gallery (in 1996, 1998, 2002 and 2006), in addition to shows at the Douglas Hyde Gallery (‘In an open room’, Dublin 2001), Ormeau Baths Gallery (‘The Sky Begins At Our Feet’, Belfast, 2002), Golden Thread Gallery (‘The Bright World’, Belfast, 2004), and the Project Arts Centre (‘The Room at the Horizon’, 2005). Nominated for the Glen Dimplex Award in 1997 and co-representing Northern Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 2005, McKeown’s meticulous and deceptively simple installations, paintings, and watercolours bear witness to a sustained interest in slow visual experiences which encourage patient looking and absorption.

The aesthetic of McKeown’s earlier watercolours of fragile flowers set against plain backgrounds (Fig 3) and his ‘Hope’ series of paintings and drawings have continued to inform the recent work at the heart of the IMMA show (Fig 1). McKeown’s luminous paintings of sunrise each connect to a particular moment of his own experience, often drawn from childhood, but such narratives are secondary to the extraordinary unfolding of feeling they seek to communicate. His graceful sequence of paintings gently evoke the ‘vibrating stillness’ of morning light, and bend towards a fundamental recognition of shared human feeling evoked by the dawning of the day:

‘...watching the sunrise triggers your very initial conscious thinking of the miraculous beauty and irrationality of the sun coming up... that kind of awe or excitement when you were a child and you first started to notice, think, and feel about things – that kind of connection’.<sup>2</sup>

Focusing on the sensual experience of space and light, recent works like *Waiting for the Corncrake* beautifully suggest the quiet anticipation of early dawn, its surface suffused in palest blue. Neither attempting a clinical minimalism nor resorting to the shock and awe of the Sublime, McKeown’s images (perhaps unfashionably) instead acknowledge the empathetic potential of beauty and colour: ‘I don’t want to be standing behind the work, I want to be standing in front of it with you. I think that you can

only have the potential to connect with another human being by saying exactly what you know – you can’t illustrate a generalisation, you can only say something as closely as you can for yourself, in the hope that somebody else will say ‘I know exactly what you mean’, or ‘I feel that too’. Which of course can never exactly be, but that’s the point: what is different in us and same in us’.

In their expressionist and softly glowing use of colour they bear some visual congruence with Mark Rothko, or thematically with James Turrell or the photography of Hiroshi Sugimoto (alongside whom his work has been exhibited). However if McKeown shares with these artists an interest in the mystic qualities of light, air and interiority, he shies away from imbuing his work with the weight of myth, and resists a reductive interpretation that might see his paintings as conceptually rigid or abstract exercises in form:

‘I don’t see them as an abstraction of anything. I actually see them as representational of particular skies and moments that are inside. It’s that moment when you lose a sense of your own containment, in order to absorb or be absorbed by a particular place or experience’.

For McKeown, the smaller of his sunrise paintings function as if single exhalations, bounded by the edges of the canvas: ‘like the air hitting the inside of the lungs in a breath – you need both, you need the containment and you need the space.’ Whilst these intimately scaled works resemble veiled and porous windows, in contrast the larger works in the series engage with notions of freedom and total immersion, compelling ‘a direct response to them; you don’t look through them in the same way: you look straight at them and they look back at you’. Nevertheless a sense of presence remains embodied in the viewer, not wrought through the physical dominance of the



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**1** WILLIAM MCKEOWN  
B. 1962 *Hope painting - The Light Inside* 2006 oil on linen 43 x 40.5cm  
Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

**2** *Painting No 291* 2008 oil on linen 40.5 x 40.5cm

**3** *Open drawing - Primrose 2*, 2003 colouring pencil on paper 28.5 x 26cm  
Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art



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**McKeown's experience as a weaver of linen damask on antique looms at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum presented a moment of conceptual insight he now relates to his painting practice**

large canvas – which retain, like their smaller and subtle variants, a distinct lightness of touch.

McKeown's love of textiles is evident in his choice of unprimed linen canvas as medium (Figs 4&5), and yet the technical challenges presented by this surface also mirror his interest in the immediacy of expression. The effortless appearance of paint washes absorbed by textured linen-like the stroke of a watercolour brush soaking into creamy paper – belies the complexity of this technique and the formal mastery necessary to produce such works. In another vein, McKeown's experience as a weaver of linen damask on antique looms at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum presented a moment of conceptual insight he now relates to his painting practice:

'When you lift the warp threads, just before you throw the shuttle across the weft threads, a space opens. I used to think that space was the present – it was actually now, it's the contemporary. And once you throw the shuttle across and the weft goes down and you weave it in, it becomes the past – it becomes structured, it becomes history. And to me that space is opaque and formless, constantly changing, and optimistic – it's that space that I try to paint.'

Writing in response to his show at the Ormeau Baths in 2002, Isabel Nolan observed that McKeown's paintings: 'remind us that the sky is not simply a good metaphor for our understanding of the "infinite" and "unconditional freedom": rather, that the sky is a very real, tangible, affective presence in all our lives. They remind us that the sky is the air... the sky, which is a uniquely trans-global entity, surrounds us, contains us and occasionally *if we allow it*, contributes to the sense that we are immersed in the world.'<sup>3</sup> For all its metaphysical reference to an expanded awareness of the air and sky, his work

retains a political significance connected to concepts of equality and emancipation: themes with clear resonance for an artist brought up within a divided society: 'Just as the surface refuses a division between ground and pigment, the space of the painting is a space which has no divisions or hierarchies within it, and you can therefore enter it however you are, and you don't have to change anything about yourself in order to enter it. That's why I see it as a concave space instead of a convex space: a convex space projects out and you're forced to either identify with the power or give into the power. This would be the opposite of that ... you can enter the painting as you are and it embraces you'.

If, as E E Cummings maintained, painting and poetry escape like a breath, boundless and yet tied to memory, McKeown's canvases offer an opportunity to look beyond and through the everyday into the space of the present moment, and present an

occasion for mindfulness that is at once corporeal and numinous: 'The sun doesn't come up in the morning, the sun doesn't go anywhere, we go around. Yet there's the feeling not only that the sun does come up, but that it comes up for you. It is not symbolic, it has nothing to do with the Sublime, it has nothing to do with transcendence, it's simply a feeling.'<sup>4</sup> ■

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William McKeown, IMMA, 5 November – 11 January 2009 . All images © The Artist.

- 1 E.E. Cummings, 'Foreword to an Exhibit II (1945)', in *A Miscellany*, ed. George J. Firmage, The Argophile Press: New York, 1958. p. 7-8.
- 2 Text in quotes drawn from William McKeown, in interview with the author.
- 3 Nolan, Isabel. *The Sky Begins at Our Feet*. Ormeau Baths Gallery: Belfast, 2002.
- 4 William McKeown, 'The Holiday Show', Royal Hibernian Academy: Dublin, 2002, p. 12

4 *Painting No. 322*  
2008 oil on linen  
43 x 43cm

5 *Painting No. 307*  
2008 oil on linen  
43 x 43cm

6 *Painting No. 287*  
2008 oil on linen  
40.5 x 40.5cm

7 *Painting No. 350*  
2008 oil on linen  
43 x 43cm



7