

# MIKEY CUDDIHY DÉCOR AND DECORUM

Mikey Cuddihy's paintings cross many perimeters. They are both abstract and figurative, yet curiously, neither description sits comfortably. They might be portraits or landscapes; they could be considered autobiographical but, at the same time, universal. Perhaps more than anything though, they are still lives or tableaux: incarcerations of time, evidence of objects, individuals, actions and events held in momentary stasis by paint, photocopier and the process of selection.

The layered construction of the work is an analogy for the construction of a life. The private world of emotions and details of real life are glimpsed on sheets of A4 scrawled with telephone doodles. Sediment of the artist's everyday thought processes – arrangements, hopes, preoccupations and abstract phrases with tenuous meanings – are photocopied and pasted in a repeating grid onto the canvas as the ground for each painting. It provides a hint of the bedrock of relationships, the passing flotsam and jetsam of acquaintances and perfect strangers, and the events that form networks of associations, keeping the private and the personal in elastic proximity. The paintings are depictions of life from the perspective of direct experience, not a fictionalised autobiography that has been mediated through the processes of literature.

On top of this thrum of communication, each painting features a particular shape or set of shapes, like actors in cameo roles about to deliver soliloquies or perform momentous events. They all come from the distinctive family of forms within Cuddihy's doodling. It is curious how we all develop our own species of doodles – cubes, flowers, faces, envelopes – which apparently speaks volumes about our psychology. Cuddihy isolates a single shape from

her own particularly baroque doodling vocabulary, which she practises over and over; it is then repainted at a larger scale, cut out and stuck onto the papered canvas. Black outlines establish a cartoonish quality, the colours and curlicues of these particular shapes in *James in Limbo* echo the anarchy of Dr Seuss. Scuttling crabs, an eighteenth-century aristocratic wig, pelvic bones, synapses and ribboning bows ingeniously act out their characteristics over the enigmatic backdrop. The colours are evocative, beyond the merely descriptive, as though they follow some archaic chromatic rules. A very particular colour gives rise to a very particular attribute: beige recedes as a secondary element in a pattern, purple steps boldly, almost arrogantly forward, brown takes on an unsentimental stance, turquoise somehow seems wipe-clean.

There is a capped decadence to Cuddihy's work: the modest elaboration of form, partial self-indulgence in the minutiae of life, a contained decorativeness. Throughout *Against Nature*, Joris-Karl Huysmans' quintessentially decadent novel of 1848, the hero Des Esseintes spends his time regarding his library and fitting out his house with 'sumptuous schemes of decoration'. He has a tortoise's shell gilded and studded with gems so that, by comparison, his new carpet doesn't look so gaudy. (The tortoise dies of asphyxiation almost immediately, just like the woman who was sprayed gold in the James Bond film *Goldfinger*.) He also explains his avoidance of certain colours due to their transformation by lamplight: a dark shade of blue turns black, a pale shade turns grey, turquoise looks lifeless, browns turn lethargic and cold, the effeminising character of tints of salmon, maize and rose would interfere with thoughts inspired by solitude, and so on. Cuddihy's colour specificity, though, is neither negative nor imperious. Her purple wig is incontrovertibly purple



and her crab shape unshakeably orange for the most intuitive, personal and probably quite incommunicable of reasons.

Paintings that develop from a backdrop of text and the grid might at first sound arid to the point of indigestibility. Cuddihy's text and grid, however, are overwhelmingly human and approachable, fallible even. A grid made up of ruled and hole punched A4 paper is familiar rather than rarefied or academic; Cuddihy's text is more tentative or chatty than declarative:

*slide lecture (prepare)*

*(Sandra) thanx 4 lvly day yesterday*

*you just make a will*

*Colin 52 – slim, fit, tall*

Often subconsciously coined or reiterated, the phrases represent the concentric rings of personal and social self-management, the administration of the psyche, the love life and the family home. Sometimes self-reflexive missives crop up:

*1 new message*

*1 missed call*

*07736 402 360*

This last message was the artist's own number, an aide mémoire, a miniature self-portrait within a self-portrait. This is definitely not the same turf as the text-based work of, say, Lawrence Weiner or Barbara Kruger. Hal Foster, in his essay *Subversive Signs*, 1982, described the work of artists such as Kruger and Jenny Holzer as being alike in their treatment of public space, social representation or artistic language as both a target and a weapon. Cuddihy, although superficially related through her gender and pervasive use of text, would never regard her subject matter as a tool of active, passive or accidental aggression. We are simply invited to regard the transformation of a life into a formal proposition, beyond any necessity to make judgements on the content. References to blind dates, the drawing up of wills, school runs and messages of gratitude are objectified by the mechanical reproduction of the photocopier. The repetition of something so personal or mundane tips it beyond the imaginable into the

realm of graphic design or, indeed, wallpaper, just like Warhol's electric chairs and car crashes.

The repeated, amorphous, almost muscular forms within Cuddihy's painting recall the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 1892 by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. A doctor's wife is confined to her room to 'cure' her, which inevitably leads to her final breakdown. Throughout the story she describes the wallpaper pattern with increasing alarm, as if it were a malevolent, unnatural force:

I lie here on this great immovable bed – it is nailed down, I believe – and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you... I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way, each breadth stands alone; the bloated curves and flourishes – a kind of 'debased Romanesque' with delirium tremens – go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

Perkins Gilman wrote in an attempt to question and realign the traditional role of women at the turn of the last century. Although, a hundred years on, simplistic connections might still be drawn between the feminine, the confessional and the decorative, there is a self-negation running throughout Cuddihy's work that undermines such an absolute reading. The paintings sit in an awkward position that is neither feminist nor post-feminist. Possibly they are simply feminine. There are allusions to nineteenth-century evocations of the hysteric in Cuddihy's womb-like shapes that warp neurotically across the paintings' surfaces. Yet these sometimes vexatious, sometimes ecstatic forms are engaged in a decidedly sensible conversation with one another as well as the whispering layer below. We also recognise in Cuddihy's note-taking echoes of our own rational, if fragmentary, thoughts. There are some universal idiosyncrasies that do not mean that we are all losing our grip – many of us read 'shoplifters' when we see a shopfitting van drive past, for instance. This simply illustrates that we all have the ability to slip, in an ultimately human way, between sound and flaky. As they say about eavesdropping, partial glimpses can be dangerously ambiguous.



Cuddihy's paintings do, however, have distinct undercurrents that can only be attributed to motherhood. In addition to the uterine forms, there is the constant, albeit fleeting, presence of her son James, who no doubt is as prevalent in her telephone conversations as he is in her life. The exhibition's title, *James in Limbo*, might refer to an adolescent caught in the gap between the richness of experience and the paucity of communication, which the paintings themselves mirror. That painful stretch when childhood slides into teenagehood is a typical liminal, inarticulate state. But even in adulthood, a dislike of talking on the telephone is not extraordinary; we are all frustrated to some degree by indirect modes of exchange. Jotting pad scribbles are a permanent visualisation of a fleeting moment in which the visual is missing, as fragments of a disembodied voice issuing from an unseen face are captured in pen and ink. The word 'limbo' evokes a telephone conversational non-place, an elephants' graveyard for facial expressions, hand gestures and interrupted points that have never reached their intended destination.

In his essay of 1946, *Beyond the Aesthetic*, Robert Motherwell described the function of the aesthetic as becoming 'that of a medium, a means for getting at the infinite background of feeling in order to condense it into an object of perception'. Motherwell's insistence that the content of art is 'feeling' perhaps sounds overly romantic, naive or simply dated. Although seeming to operate in a similar area in which 'passions are a kind of thirst, inexorable and intense, for certain or felt states', Cuddihy refers so directly to such passions, distractions and skittering personal moments that the danger of cloying generalisations safely passes. Forthright yet incomplete, the documentary element of the paintings eclipses any romantic schmaltz. As Motherwell also wrote:

It is natural to rearrange or invent in order to bring about states of feeling that we like, just as a new tenant furnishes a house.

Cuddihy, too, is finding a complex of qualities 'whose feeling is just right'. The pagination of her backgrounds, the contained chaos of the doodled forms and words and the deliberate shapes placed on top all indicate a composite of intuition and intention, of abstraction and figuration, design

and craft. It is possible to claim that these are paintings that have been both painted and decorated.

The derogatory connotations of the decorative in art – its superficiality or lack of intellectual rigour – can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century. But the previously derisive term 'wallpaper', which might have been such an insult to a modernist practice, is now far less injurious since, for instance, Andy Warhol's cows. In contrast to William Morris's attempt to disguise mechanical reproduction and mimic botanical organicism in his wallpaper, Warhol accentuated the artificial and made no attempt to emulate nature. Tangentially to either of these intentions, Cuddihy reproduces pattern with an off-centre wobble that accentuates the inconstancies of hand-produced imagery, but makes no attempt to align her formal interweaving with that of nature. These are self-portraits, in a sense, that identify the contemporary experience of one firmly on the anthropocentric side of the human/nature divide.

Ornamental sphincters (or 'designer vaginas' as Cuddihy titles one of her paintings), secrets out loud – it all seems so forthright. Yet the tone of the paintings is measured and steady in timbre; they quietly nod in recognition of their historical and social context rather than stomping around self-confidently. Failure seems a vital aspect of the work: the grid falters as theoretical scaffolding, the text neglects to tell us the whole story, the pasted paper often falls short of the canvas's edge, the painting drips and wavers without pressing its authority. Yet these shortcomings, which might signify a humility or reticence, are instantly called into question by their public staging. The paintings in *James in Limbo* remain a delicate anomaly, like incongruous lovers or the quiet girl bursting into song.

Sally O'Reilly