





# Fortune, Prowess and Alchemy

Like an orchestral conductor, the artist Genieve Figgis encourages and cajoles the passages of paint in her work, writes **Cian McLoughlin**

If you lay a canvas flat on the ground and pour out two pools of diluted paint side by side with edges touching, there is only so much you can predict will happen as the two colours collide and bleed one into the other. You can try to manipulate this chaotic process – tilting, mopping, brushing, adding, subtracting – but you’ll never be in full control of the delicious, flowing turmoil of wet paint applied in high volumes.

Fluid interactions like this are happening throughout the work of Irish artist Genieve Figgis. Like an orchestral conductor, she encourages and cajoles the passages of paint, sometimes allowing things to progress unedited in unpredictable ways and sometimes manipulating the surface to pick out a detail or describe a texture. Every gesture and mark is recorded in the surface. Each painting develops over a single, often lengthy, session during which the whole endeavour is under a real and constant threat of failure due to forces beyond the artist’s control. Rather than drying, her paintings slowly come to a stop and set. Like Robert Frost’s ambition to ‘make a poem like ice on a stove – riding on its own melting’, a Figgis painting, even when long completed, looks to be in perpetual motion. It seems miraculous that with all of these uncertainties and moving parts, both planned and unplanned, interacting at high speed, that she can marshal them to create such powerful, let alone coherent, works. It is a high-wire act with no safety net that requires bravery, skill and the painting gods to smile in your favour.

A graduate of the Gorey School of Art in 2006, Figgis went on to complete a Masters in Fine Art at NCAD in 2012. She has continued to live and work in Ireland but her work is most celebrated abroad, finding enthusiastic audiences in New York, showing with Half Gallery, and in London, Paris and Belgium where she is represented by Almine Rech Gallery.

It is well documented that social media played a significant

role in her early career. In her own words, she was ‘very lucky’ to be discovered online by Richard Prince via Twitter but that initial piece of luck, if that is what it was, has been backed up by several strong solo shows with work that doesn’t look at all out of place alongside her esteemed gallery stable mates that include Per Kirkeby, Jeff Koons, James Turrell and Richard Prince himself among others.

Like the historical works that inspire her – by Fragonard, Boucher, Teniers, Daumier, Gainsborough, Manet, Goya and Velázquez to name a few – her paintings are filled with ostentatious scenes: ornate interiors,

rural idylls, gentry wearing fine costumes and elaborate wigs. The people in them are often formally posed, sometimes theatrically so. In the past, these could be portraits of status and power, but look closely at a Figgis painting and things become more ambiguous, more unsettling, more frightening. Hers is a dark reimagining of a bygone world of luxury, like a Merchant Ivory film directed by George A Romero.

None of this is to suggest the work is mired in the past. On the contrary, though she is faithful to the sources, her work feels

entirely fresh. Art history undergoes a radical metamorphosis as she synthesises it with her distinct humour, melancholy, romance, eroticism, beauty, horror and high drama. Specific and yet dream-like, in her hands the strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes strange.

The resulting works are an inseparable marriage of technique and idea. The thin yellow veins of reticulated paint with their own sensual abstract quality transform, in our mind, into the ornate gold filigrees of the Rococo picture frame that they signify and back again. The image is the material and the material is the image. All the scaffolding falls away leaving a painted unity. ■

Genieve Figgis, Baldwin Gallery, Aspen, Colorado until 10 March; Group show, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, September 2019

Cian McLoughlin is a Dublin-based artist whose work is largely focused on portraiture and urban landscapes.



1 GENIEVE FIGGIS  
*WISH YOU WERE HERE* 2018 acrylic on canvas 100x100 x4cm Photo: Rebecca Fanuele Private Collection

2 *THE SWING (AFTER FRAGONARD)* 2018 acrylic on panel 60x50cm, Courtesy of the Artist and Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels. Photo: André Morin



