

Eithne Jordan, 'Mise en Scène, Part I'
Highlanes Gallery
27 August – 1 October 2022

THE FRENCH TERM *mise en scène* is most often associated with cinemaphotography, referring to whatever is purposefully placed – sets, props, actors, and so on – before the film camera. It's a term dedicated to the artifice of appearance, and the ways in which the world might be organised to tell a story. As a title for this exhibition of 16 oil paintings – with individual titles like *Display*, *Collection*, and *Museum* – it could refer to the situation of these objects within the distinctive gallery setting, as much as to the interior spaces depicted within the paintings themselves.

Occupying a former Catholic church, the Highlanes Gallery retains a sanctuary at one end, with ornate carvings and two light-lofting angels intact. There are corresponding figures within Jordan's canvases, carved and cast intermediaries in silent communion. This preponderance of inanimate figures, alongside the inevitable anachronisms of historical display, made me think of Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), a film whose half-dead ciphers reprise the myth of Orpheus in post-war Paris.¹ The film's atmosphere of tainted innocence, of seemingly benign surfaces haunted by death, finds many parallels in the studied equanimity of Jordan's careful compositions. In one memorable scene from the film, Jean Marais (playing Orpheus) dons rubber gloves to walk through a mirror and into the afterlife. Like the painter, he reaches beyond the seen world, but only so he can come back to it.

Jordan paints from her own photographs, taken, for the most part, in unidentified galleries and museums. Fixed in time, a photograph calls back to us from an increasingly distant past. Working within this poignant register, her recent paintings give account of how objects are gathered, preserved and re-presented, using recording and painterly methods that are themselves examples of these processes. Consider a painting like *Collection IV* (2022), a medium-sized work showing an oblique view of antiquities lined up against a wainscoted wall. At the centre of the wall, the loose folds of a heavy tapestry echo the cloak draping the outstretched arm of the Apollo Belvedere, standing before it. Not the real 'Apollo', but a smaller copy which, along with other ancient figures, makes up a cast of pale characters in the room. This deftly painted scene is thick with allusions to different materials and epochs, and most especially, to the enduring value of the hand. It's how each of these objects was fashioned, not least, the hand-made artifact of the painting itself.

In a further complication, the plinth supporting Apollo is painted to resemble marble, and this illusion of grandeur is redoubled by Jordan's subsequent rendering. In touching the surface of the linen support – and by reaching beyond it – the painter references numerous ideas of tactility. Though seemingly innocuous in their period setting, these figures enact a quiet frisson of touching. We might say they are aroused by light – and the artist has gorgeous control of this – but caught, like Orpheus, between two worlds, between warm-blooded life and what Rainer Maria Rilke calls, "the strange unfathomed mine of souls."²

Not directly represented in the paintings, the human figure appears by proxy, both as sculptural form and within the material traces of the paintings themselves. Jordan's world is sensuous, but archaic; tactile, yet untouchable. *Display 1* (2021) shows a life-sized statue of a figure hugging a cloak around herself. Though not named, for me, she is Eurydice, the wife of Orpheus, and like her, vulnerable to the overly determined gaze. In Rilke's poem, *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes* (1907), as Eurydice is halted along the path from the underworld and guided to go back, her cloak envelopes her completely, becoming an unambiguous shroud. In the painting, whether by happenstance or deliberate irony, the paused figure is surrounded by exit signs.

Jordan paints thinly. The brushmark is visible, but discreet, with little sign of revision or overworking. In



Eithne Jordan, 'Mise en scène: Part I', installation view, Highlanes Gallery; photograph by Eugene Langan courtesy the artist and Highlanes Gallery.



Eithne Jordan, *Museum XXV*, 2020, oil on linen; photograph courtesy of artist and Highlanes Gallery.

Anatomy Room V (2022) the ghostly presence is more visceral – discreetly sheeted bundles within the gently modulating whites and greys. Here and there, the cool palette is punctuated by yellow, the buckets and bins indispensable to the anatomist's trade. The columns in the painting play peek-a-boo with the supporting columns in the gallery. There are similar, pleasing correspondences throughout. Intelligently curated by Margarita Cappock, this presentation of the paintings brings their inner worlds and outer surroundings to life.

John Graham is an artist based in Dublin.

'Mise en Scène, Part I' was presented at Highlanes Gallery, while 'Mise en Scène, Part II'

continues at Crawford Art Gallery (9 September – 4 December).

highlanes.ie

¹ Jean Cocteau, *Orphée*, 1950, black and white film, 95 mins.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes*, first published in *New Poems: First Part* (Leipzig: Insel, 1907); quote from trans. J.P. Leishman, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).