

Mark Swords 'Tribuna'

RHA Gallery 1

26 November 2021 – 23 January 2022

I'D SAY THAT Mark Swords's paintings are good examples of paintings that never quite settle down. I'd say that, except I don't think Swords's paintings are good examples of anything. As physical objects, and as mechanisms for carrying images and signs, his paintings can seem at war with themselves and also, perhaps, with some unspoken authority. Refusing to do what they're told, declining to become this or that, Swords's paintings set more bad example than good. They are often brash, yet difficult to define; materially insistent, but sometimes with a thrown together look that might as easily fall apart. Individual works refuse to coalesce, seeming, instead, to be in constant chatter with their surroundings. Disobedient and distracted, like the titular 'Brian' in a well-known Monty Python film, Swords's paintings are "very naughty boys".

Perhaps in response to this unruliness, 'Tribuna' is a self-contained structure at the centre of the RHA's vast expanse. The wooden, octagonal form is stoutly buttressed, as though armed against pressures from within. Unlike the closed-off 'Tribuna' in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence – upon which the installation is loosely modelled – this crucible is open, a single doorway leading into a wraparound space, with banks of bright lights burning overhead. The interior walls and floor are made of reflective silver insulation panels, complimented, here and there, by panels of chalky pink and pistachio green. Splatterings of paint suggest some of the floor has been transplanted from a messy studio. Blasted by the reflected wattage all round, this compact cynosure causes you to spin.

Turning quickly at first, then more slowly as the centrifugal force subsides, the viewer will also find paintings here. Static objects of various sizes, hung high and low, salon style, though

the overall effect is more carnivalesque. There is no list, no way of identifying individual works, except, of course, by sight. There is a painting with scissored palm fronds sprouting from a dense bricolage. Its dark background hosts filigrees and swirls of stuck-on flowers, the entire assemblage bordered by painted arabesques. Teeming with life, this garden of earthly delights is also dead, like black felt pinned with a collection of exotic butterflies. Turning again – the viewer is the hub – a more heavily painted work contains assorted planets and a dinosaur, a disordered cosmos, the tangible weight of paint and the irrefutable weight of stars. Further rotating and glancing upwards to one's right, there is a painting of submerged chevrons, with a small motif near the top that looks curiously like a key. Turning the key, we are in *The Red Studio*, 1911, but Matisse's suburban atelier has become distinctly *en plein air*. One extraordinary painting appears whited out, its dense foliage of multi-hued marks laboriously obscured and adulterated. Drained and leeching, its anaemic colours seem pressed against the white sheet of a furiously embattled ghost.

In previous exhibitions, the artist's evident curiosity has drawn him towards figures as diverse as James Joyce and Hank Williams. As a painter, his thoughtful informality suggests unlikely combinations too; the patterned sensitivities of Édouard Vuillard, for example, and the space-candy hubris of the American painter, Chris Martin. A tall painting, with patches of fluorescent yellow and a constellation of wonky stars, is bordered by a pound-shop mosaic. I imagined the Danish artist, Tal R, incongruously spliced with the romantic symbolist, Gustav Klimt.¹ All of these artists make their own worlds, and Swords is a world-builder too. In

an early exhibition, 'Mosaic' at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery (31 July – 4 August 2012), a work called *Shed* (2010-12) conflated the sites of manufacture and display. Later on, in his exhibition at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, 'The Living and the Dead' (14 April – 17 June 2017), his instinct for staging expanded to take in the exhibition space as a whole. Entirely draped, gallery walls became enormous paintings, their populations of smaller, individual works bursting with theatrical motifs.

It feels appropriate that Swords should appear so powerfully here at the RHA. Not because of an affinity, but on the contrary, because his work speaks so eloquently against any notions of academy. It does so without resource to satire

or any form of critique, but by force of its own personality, and without need of validation for what it is not.

John Graham is an artist based in Dublin.

Notes:

¹ This painting is called, *Quelle Etoile* (2020) and along with one or two others, appeared previously in 'Portico', a two-person exhibition with Mark Swords and Tanad Aaron at The Complex, Dublin (14 – 28 May 2021).



Mark Swords, 'Tribuna', installation view, The RHA; photographs by Ros Kavanagh, courtesy the artist and The RHA.



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