

Isabel Nolan

Kerlin Gallery

The title of 'On a Perilous Margin', Isabel Nolan's second solo exhibition at Kerlin Gallery, is taken from a passage in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–2) which advises that ethical decisions be guided by personal conscientiousness rather than blind servitude. Comprising almost 30 works in a variety of media, the liaisons between individual pieces were nothing if not unlawful – which is not to say that the exhibition was lawless. The young Irish artist's craftsmanship was adept and consistently visible throughout. Indeed, at the centre of 'On a Perilous Margin' lay an implicit and genuine harmony.

The majority of the works in the show were sculptural, mounted on plinths set at different heights, around which four paintings, two reliefs, a fabric hanging and embroidered table animated Kerlin's upper gallery. Formally, symbols from art history and the natural sciences are the embryos of every other one of the works (all 2009). Yet, despite this oscillation, they are all united by a candy-coloured palette and the delicate traces of the artist's hand (a thumb cast, hand stitching or brushstrokes).

Named after the healing process whereby white blood cells stick to vessel walls, *Margination* is a sculpture cast in polystyrene, balsa and jesmonite. Flat heptagonal modules are moulded into a series of four interconnected spheres which rise in diagonals from their base, calming in their light pink finish, unsettling in their bacterial appearance. Nearby, *A Terrible Aching for Silence* is a small spiral sculpture which loops back into itself after several unruly rotations, its spine hidden inside patchwork vessels made from grey silk. Balancing on its plinth's glossy black surface, the reflection's bold doodle seemed louder than its three-dimensional counterpart.

Something Special in Remembrance, 1881 is a small watercolour and oil on canvas of Edgar Degas' *Little Dancer* (1881). The work maintains the dancer's familiar posture while dissolving the outline with watered-down pinks, yellows and blues trickling towards and over its base. Two other small unframed paintings comprise familiar art-historical compositions but with referents and figures erased or obscured: *Sad Time, 1862* carries the sultry velvety surrounds of a medieval bedroom, blocked in shades of red and green, at the centre of which is a marked absence of a figure; in *Sad Time, 1439*, the imprint of a Renaissance 'Man of Sorrows' is etched within a mountainous landscape, his figure again

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abandoned by the artist. Inside each of Nolan's unframed paintings the subject's own plinth, frame or margin is rendered. These mise-en-abymes suggest that the moment of elevating or framing any work is only one point within a continuum of artistic endeavour. Relating back to Eliot, who saw her novels as 'experiments in life', and wished 'to trace the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional', Nolan's works flag up the importance of continuous making.

The Biting Acid Beauty of the Stars is a small fabric-covered table, its denim top embroidered with a pointillist starscape, multi-coloured silk threads radiating outwards. Nolan's titles, accentuated by her colour schemes, are unashamedly sentimental, and this can threaten to push her work beyond a perilous boundary. Sequestered in the lower gallery were nine small drawings, each titled with observational phrases executed in uneven hand-drawn letters, sometimes reflected by a symbol or image. In The transfer of Energy is Invisible, the work's title is jotted in yellow, with two parted hands outlined to the right of the caption, as though trying to grasp this vaporous element. The unsteady lettering's unpolished appearance spoils the gusto of these drawings' pompous titles – in fact, it's a shame that these satisfying little contradictions were not included upstairs, so as to ricochet off the other works' multifarious forms.

Nolan is amongst a growing (and diverse) troupe of artists – including Eva Berendes, Nicholas Byrne and Richard Wright – who are carefully employing the assiduous craftsmanship and geometric pattern-making of pre-modernity, replacing mathematical systems with a more open-ended spirit of investigation, and reinvestigating the importance of making. Nolan pitches familiar symbols from a range of disciplines against traditional ways of seeing – magnifying the microscopic, animating the serious, alleviating the grandiose – with a consistent and delicate sense of absurdity.

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Frieze

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