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Eileen Neff: *Between us*, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, January - February 2009



Eileen Neff: *Over the hill*, 2007, C-print mounted on aluminum, 38 x 129.5 cm; courtesy the artist/ Locks Gallery/ RHA

As I enter the Eileen Neff exhibition in the RHA Ashford Gallery, the first thing that greets me is a nice, cheerful round of applause...or is it just a clatter of February hailstones on the window outside? Either way, it's good to be inside. *Between us* is an exhibition of recent work by this artist, which has been curated by Ingrid Shaffner, the Senior Curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Pennsylvania, and Patrick T Murphy, Director of the RHA. Neff was born in 1945 in Philadelphia. She studied literature, and then trained as a painter in the Philadelphia College of Art and the Tyler College of Art. Her practice has focused on the 'cutting and pasting' of photographs, and she has recently begun to work with digital images and methods.

The title of this show, *Between us* invites a number of possible interpretations: a block, something which frustrates, a communication, an invitation to conspire, the building of walls, the desire to break them down...

Rather than being schematic, the exhibition is a slightly disorienting experience for the viewer, with recurring themes creating loose narratives through the show. Held in the two rooms of the RHA's Gallagher Gallery, the works are divided into two parts: one room focusing on those that could be described as 'poetic' and structured, and the works which explore issues of seeing and experience through the making of highly focused, almost hyperreal, images.

Poetry and tradition

The first two works one encounters are quite different to the rest of the show. *Western wind II* and *Western wind III*, both 2000, are self-contained, Romantic worlds of their own. In *Western wind II*, a cloud hangs above a choppy sea; the cast

shadow suggests that it is not too far above the surface. In *Western wind III*, a similar cloud sits, somewhat incongruously, in an empty room; the slightly open window lends a note of humour to the work – one imagines the cloud squeezing in, getting stuck, out of puff on the floor. Both of these works are masterful exercises in composition and careful, almost baroque, chiaroscuro. The moving sea, stilled, is a virtuoso passage of light and shade on film, while the graduated shadows in *Western wind III* reveal tight compositional control, reminiscent of Hopper. One thinks of Hopper, perhaps, also because of the tone of loneliness and isolation in these works.

To my mind, these works are among the most 'poetic' in the exhibition – the artist translating the poet's ability, to create a well-forged, watertight expression through language, into a visual medium; 'watertight' in that the poem/ image produced could not be more articulate in any medium other than that in which it has been made. The artist foregrounds the importance she affords to formal language, and to understanding "how a poem [or an image] means", in her interview with Patrick T Murphy, which is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue.

Neff's work is often discussed as poetic, and she acknowledges her debt to American modernist poetry, especially Wallace Stevens, (1879 - 1955). The works are 'surreal' to the extent that they could not have existed, but the function of this 'surrealism' is very different to the work, for example, of de Chirico or Magritte, where disjunction, slipping and strange juxtapositions exist to discomfit the viewer. The combination of images in Neff's work works more as a poetic statement; the clouds and their milieu are symbols. In this way, they are diachronic rather than synchronic works of art, to be read and unravelled, rather than acting on the viewer through instant visual surprise or shock.



Eileen Neff, *Another bride*, 2001, pigmented Epson print, 104 x 182.8 cm; courtesy the artist/ Locks Gallery/ RHA

The three images entitled *Dickenson*, 2004, *Beckett*, 2004 and *Thoreau*, 2004 are from the period of time that Neff spent at MacDowall Colony in New Hampshire, where Neff identifies the space where she was creating with figures who have been a source of inspiration to her. The works, quite literally, depict the virtual artistic 'space' which she inhabits. Close looking at *Dickenson* reveals the joins where the

image has been fitted together and built, highlighting this sense of physical structuring, the 'slips' where this becomes visible reminiscent of the work of German photographer Thomas Demand. The unstable rhythm of the wainscoting, the framed (literally, interior) landscape, and the claustrophobic sense of the thick pink paint filling in the gaps between the slats of timber are visual counterparts, rather than mere illustration, to a Dickinson poem.

This idea of making the personal interior experience part of the expressed exterior is the central tenet of Expressionism. Neff states: "For an artist, one's subject is also one's sense of the world, something Wallace Stevens often wrote about, opening a space where the conventional duality of inside and outside collapses."

Speaking about her strong sense of the artistic terrain at the time, she cites the fact that each studio at McDowall had a 'tombstone', where all previous residents would carve their name. The relationship between tradition and innovation has been of huge concern to classical artists from the Renaissance onwards, and becomes central to modernist writers such as TS Eliot, who wrote that "no poet has his complete meaning alone...this historical sense which is a sense of the temporal and of the timeless, and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity." This dual condition of connection and separation is an apt description of Neff's positioning of her work within traditions of art-making.

The Language of landscape

This act of building with 'blocks' of images, to create work that is structured both formally and in terms of meaning, is further explored in *Anecdote of the tree*, 1999 – 2000, *Hedging*, 2000, *Another bride*, 2001 and *The field and the plane*, 2007, which are hung together. Neff has pointed to the importance of the formal composition of these images, and the decision to group them together here seems determined by their strong symmetry and horizontal and vertical emphases.

In particular, the centrality of the formal rigour of artists such as Barrett Newman and Land Artist Michael Heizer in Neff's work is highlighted in this group of images.

These works also introduce the artist's interrogation of the connection between seeing and landscape. "Landscape," Neff herself admits, is of "limited concern" nowadays. However, the art tradition that Neff is placing herself within, and using for its expressive potential, is a very complex one: that of the conflation of representation, landscape and control. As David H Solkin has written of the work of the eighteenth-century landscape painter Richard Wilson, "it has appropriated what counts for more than anything else: physical land and space." Neff is taking on this constellation of ideas in *Between us*, but her engagement is further complicated by the fact that the work takes on these ideas as they were refracted through the concerns of modernist painters. Control, seeing, landscape and representation became the tools through which the immediacy and the structure of experience are interpreted by Cézanne, a figure who seems to be something of an artistic north star for Neff. *Hedging* presents three levels of engagement: the landscape as trimmed

and organised by the person who has precisely cut the hedge, the landscape as photographed by the artist while passing by, and the landscape as digitally manipulated image. The initial photograph was taken by the artist while travelling on a train, and she has likened the blurring to expressionistic brushwork. Through the trees in the furthest plane of the work, the blurring seems to have stilled, and a 'real' landscape can be glimpsed. This taut image, with its uncompromising formal structure, precisely layered meaning and its deconstruction of experience is, again, an image to be unravelled and visually 'read'.



Eileen Neff, *Anecdote of the tree*, 1999-2000, C-print mounted on aluminum, edition of 5, 112 x 162.5 cm; courtesy the artist/ Locks Gallery/ RHA

In *Another bride*, Neff pokes fun at the pathetic need to 'get close' to nature, to try to have a full-body, sublime experience, often a motivation in landscape painting. Here, the cloud sidles up to an unrelenting formal, planned landscape, which is absolute in its rejection of the type of sappy engagement that is being attempted. *The Field and the plane* again builds upon the history of landscape as it has been experienced – the plane referencing an 'American' experience of the landscape as represented in late nineteenth - twentieth century painting and literature, the unbounded expanse, as opposed to the more domestically scaled 'field'. Formally simple and strong, this work is a tightly articulated exploration of humans in the landscape, when they feel small, but exhilarated by the presence of the infinite, or when they feel claustrophobic in the landscape they inhabit.

Slipping glimpse, 2006, is a beautiful, unforced reflection on both the tradition of abstract painting which begins with the natural world, and the expressionism of figures like Newman. This idea of experiencing from a remove, or a distance, is further emphasised by the medium of the works, digital photographs; 'removed' in the sense that the artist is experiencing the landscape through the lens, and furthermore, is not bound to the image as it is taken, but can manipulate it as she desires. The paradoxical formal presence of the work also reinforces this idea of a forced distance – the image of grass; wet, mucky, teeming, presented in a glossy, clean, precise, aluminium-mounted format.

The works in the second room of the Gallagher Gallery represent something of a departure in Neff's practice: The formal blocking is dissolved within the highly focused final image. (One can't help but think of the changing technique of Poussin; the landscapes in the middle of his career are always dependent on the forms of classical architecture for scale and structure, but in his later paintings their function becomes subsumed by the brushstroke, and they are no longer necessary.) The lushness of images such as *A Planet's encouragement*, 2007, is immediately striking, the sheer pleasure that the artist is taking in looking. The idea of visual excess is reiterated in *This and that*, 2001, where a landscape image has been printed as a mirror image on top of itself, abstracting it into a field of pure colour.

The intensity of focus of these works recalls Cézanne's attempts to create paintings that were heavy with experience and looking. *Getting lost*, 2007, a verdant, idyllic scene of weeping willows flanking a river, fails at its centre, and dissolves into pixels, as though the artist could not hold the concentration of focus. The inclusion of this expressive 'error' in a digital image is especially effective in highlighting the specific nature of photography in taking on this type of investigation.

Again, Neff mocks her own infatuations in *Moving (the couple)*, 2007, where a Claude-perfect tree seems to be moving softly in the breeze, until it seems to get more and more excited, then bursts into applause; a neat and funny take on the artist swooning at the sublime.

Between us explores Neff's examination of looking and experience. As stated above, there is an inherent paradox in the cold, precise formal presence of the works and the lushness of the images themselves; no ridges of paint or fast, urgent brushwork. To return again to the title of the exhibition, *Between us* seems to suggest a certain chasm between the artist and the type of engagement with landscape of the artists she references in her work. She is always at a remove, perhaps by choice, perhaps by necessity. In this light, *Between us* becomes a melancholy reflection on what was once possible, and is not any longer.

The RHA's presentation of *Between us* is a smaller one than that presented by the ICA in Philadelphia, with the result that some of her earlier work, which deepens the understanding of her oeuvre, is not included. However, the excellent catalogue does make up for this, to some extent, as do the thoughtful and illuminating essays within. The exhibition avoids an overly schematic presentation of the themes in Neff's works, with natural connections being drawn by the vistas created (for example, two of the most 'hyper-focused' works, *The Birds I* and *The Birds II*, both 2007, are aligned with the two most 'surreal', *Western wind III* and *Western wind III*. Certain works, such as *First star*, 2001, are somewhat lost because they do not fit comfortably into the themes being explored in the show, but overall, *Between us* reflects great sensitivity to Neff's work, and is a wonderful exploration of a very important artist.

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