



Wreck | Oil and mixed media on paper, 2002

Donagh McCarthy | Select Paintings 1996–2002

Artist's Statement...

At the invitation of the Carlinn Gallery for their inaugural exhibition, and together for the first time in one place, are select paintings from two previous exhibitions (Seascapes | 1996) and (Wreck | 1999–2002). These pieces, selected for their subject matter and coastal feel, come together well thematically in the Louth seaside village of Carlingford. However, I confess I know Carlingford not from the sea but from the mountains. As such and as a frequent walker of Slieve Foy, which forms the dramatic backdrop to this village, I decided to complete this exhibition with the inclusion of one landscape painting from a recent series based on hills.

On revisiting the earlier paintings and re-reading some of the original notes, I found the work connected not just thematically but also by a study of that ethereal and transient quality to our lives. They stem from a concern with the temporality of things and are inspired by the same. Constantly changing seascapes and a disappearing shipwreck caught my eye and provided the focus to follow the tides, the vanishing distance and horizon, the encrustation and ruin, and the burning rust reds that contrast the cool browns and blues of beach and sky.

All these paintings started as sketches and photographs and then, through watercolours, onto the finished oil and mixed media on paper pieces that form this exhibition. I recall working on several pieces at once, moving detail from one to another, letting ideas collide and reveal themselves in natural resolutions and progression. The edges of the paintings are left visible, so too are the brushstrokes and the process of painting itself; what occasionally vanishes is the figurative motifs beneath the surface.

The Wreck paintings belong to a larger body of work that began, if only in inspiration, in 1999 and was intended to comment on the turn of the century. My idea was to observe the time, to stand witness and mark the change from one age to another. They are loosely based around the shipwreck *The Irish Trader*, which came to ground on Baltray beach on the east coast of Ireland early in 1974. This ship was due to dock in Drogheda port when high seas and engine failure saw it pulled past the mouth of the Boyne and lodged onto the beach. Attempts to re-float the ship failed and it was quickly set upon in a salvage operation.

The strange and captivating sight of a ship caught on the beach, as I recall seeing it – first as a boy brought out by his father on a February morning in 1974, and later throughout the years playing on it with friends – stays with me to this day. The feeling that first day was of witnessing something out of the ordinary, seeing the transition from ship to wreck, feeling the energy, life and purpose ebb away to be replaced by neglect and ruin. These memories and thoughts, now defined more clearly, came back to me as I walked the beach in 1999 and realised that in the wreck of *The Irish Trader* was an honest account of time.

Crucially, what is suggested in these works is the perennial contradiction: that which is evanescent and steadfast, that which is beyond us and indifferent, but that to which we belong. They allude to the fact that our thoughts too get stuck, plans wrecked, lives become something else in our daily transition and weathering. I know now that what I thought as a boy to be unusual is commonplace. Our physical and psychological landscape, like our coastline, is crowded with wrecks.

All paintings oil and mixed media on paper.

Donagh McCarthy | 2006

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