

**Chris Campbell-Palmer****'Softening the Stone'**

Platform Arts, Belfast, 4 September – 24 October



Installation view of 'Softening the Stone' image courtesy of Platform Arts

'SOFTENING the Stone', a solo exhibition of work by London-based Chris Campbell-Palmer (b. Belfast, 1990), marks an exciting time in the career of the artist and in the evolution of Platform Arts as an exhibition space.

Founded in 2009 as a studio group for contemporary practitioners, Platform's ambitious approach to the development of their exhibition programme is highly impressive, as is this presentation of new work by Campbell-Palmer. The exhibition marks the launch of Platform's reconfigured gallery layout, which has seen the venue transformed from an expansive 3000-square-foot gallery into two distinct, and arguably more manageable, exhibition spaces. Despite the reduction in size of Platform's main exhibition space, it by no means feels like a compromise in terms of scale, and the gallery remains capacious and industrial – an ideal setting for Campbell-Palmer's sculptural and relief works.

Upon entering the gallery through a new, dedicated reception area, Campbell-Palmer's uncanny sculptural works immediately promote visual pleasure and intrigue with their sugary-sweet yet muted colour palette of pastel pinks, oranges, blues and purples. The artist has been successful in his masterful manipulation of recognisable forms – including flowers, a cupboard, and a hand-propelled wheel cart – as their scale and colour play with their familiarity and confuse our relationship with them. Other objects within the space are less recognisable, and we struggle to determine their manipulated forms, searching for something familiar. Not only are we often left wondering what specific objects are supposed to be, but the materials from which they have been created are also somewhat alien. Campbell-Palmer utilises a plethora of materials including Plastidip, Flintex and Herculite to produce these obtuse stylisations.

In the accompanying exhibition text, Campbell-Palmer references the "Disneyfication of archaeology", through which small reminiscences develop into extravagant fictions in the generation of artificial sceneries. This reference to Disney is an important one, as the sculptural works on display have similarities with the props that furnish Disney's theme parks – physical recreations of those originally found in animated worlds. Shape and form are familiar yet exaggerated, colours aren't quite true to life, and the softening of hard edges gives everything a cartoon-like aesthetic. In fact, what immediately came to mind upon navigating the space was the opening marketplace scene from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as

if filtered through a highly imaginative contemporary-art practice.

Throughout the gallery, large stone-like bottles are placed on textured rubber mats, their cork tops ineffective at capping the liquid within, as fluorescent ooze leaks down their sides. To the rear of the space, oversized, seemingly-malleable nails have been hammered clumsily into the wall, some lying misshapen on the gallery floor. This evokes a strange fusion of Claes Oldenburg's sculptures and Natascha Sadr Haghghian's *I Can't Work Like This* (2007), wherein the scale of domestic objects is exaggerated (Oldenburg) and common tools of installation are heightened to become the art object itself (Sadr Haghghian).

The exhibition's single video work is also of note, projected floor-to-ceiling against an entire wall of the gallery. Aesthetically distinct from the other works presented, this subtle and captivating piece repeatedly attracts our attention, its presence continuously felt but not dominating the space. Without this video work, the exhibition would not feel lacking, but its inclusion demonstrates Campbell-Palmer's acute understanding of the potential to display seemingly very different works alongside each other, building a multi-layered and immersive environment rather than one of discord.

At its core, Campbell-Palmer's work is about experimentation – working with new materials and concepts in a way that is both playful and rewarding. He utilises liquid processes to produce set forms (often not knowing what the result will be), and the same could be said of Platform Arts as an organisation. Its fluid approach to its studios and gallery spaces since its inception has been a similarly successful experimentation: trying things out, pushing boundaries, seeing what works and what doesn't. The maturation of Platform Arts has been a pleasure to witness over the past few years in particular, and its refreshing programme of exhibitions has set it apart from many galleries and artist-run venues in Belfast.

'Softening the Stone' is one of those rare moments when artist and venue achieve a moment of perfect balance, poised at equally exciting times in their development. The debut of this new exhibition space is a significant new chapter in the growth of Platform Arts (simultaneously looking forward with ambition and building on past successes), with Campbell-Palmer's meticulous presentation of work setting a very high standard.

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**'Diaspora'****Eoin Mac Lochlainn**

Olivier Cornet Gallery, Dublin, 13 September – 11 October

WHAT is the point of a gallery exhibition? In this digital age, it is easy not only to display artwork online but also to sell it there, which is surely the aim of any artist trying to make a living from their practice. And then there's the commission – anything from 30 to 60 percent of the price – which could be saved if they cut out the middle man or woman. Of course, the gallery owner will point out, rightly in most cases, that they earn that commission. They take over the administration, the organisation, the publicity and the promotion, all those aspects of making a living that most artists would prefer to avoid. What's more, they have more esoteric knowledge, such as whose work will appeal to whom or what prices will be acceptable in which market.

But if the gallery owner is necessary, is the actual gallery? Does the artist need the physical space to show their work? Does the viewer need it to see the work? A visit to Eoin Mac Lochlainn's current exhibition, 'Diaspora', at the Olivier Cornet Gallery in Dublin, elicits an emphatic answer: yes.

This exhibition, inspired by Cathal Ó Searcaigh's poem *Na Bailte Bánaithe* ('The Depopulated Towns'), consists of 17 works, of which almost half are titled *Tinteán Tréigthe* ('Abandoned Hearths'). Even if you don't understand the Irish phrase, you will understand the concept, as these are representational pieces of old, disused fireplaces in dilapidated surroundings – not the most prepossessing of topics, but Mac Lochlainn's strong brushwork and confident palette give the subject matter dignity. These are poignant, arresting pieces.

The remaining works are in many ways the complete opposite. Their palette is limited to greys and blues, and the brushwork seems tentative. They have no visible subject matter; indeed, they are on the cusp of abstraction in style, though they have titles that fix them in time, such as *Lá Samhraidh* ('Summer's Day') or *Lá Geimhridh* ('Winter's Day'), or in moment; five are titled *Ceo* ('Fog'). At first glance, they seem out of place, both in relation to the overall theme of the exhibition (diaspora)

and in relation to the *Tinteán Tréigthe* series.

But this is where the physical space comes into play. It allows the curator, the artist, the two together, to create something greater than the sum of the exhibition's parts. Works can be put side by side that complement each other or contrast with each other. In the case of Mac Lochlainn's show, the juxtaposition of the two series of paintings goes even further, creating a dissonance that serves to underline the overall theme of dispersion through emigration and the resulting disruption to people's lives.

This also forces you to view the works collectively, not just as a series of individual items. One *Tinteán Tréigthe* is a powerful piece in its own right, but when you see eight of these dispersed around a room, the message of abandonment is more forcefully communicated. And following on from that, the deliberate vagueness of the *Ceo* series and the other pieces seems more meaningful. Is this how the future looks for those who have left the hearths and homes behind? Uncertain, colourless, indeterminate?

If Mac Lochlainn's work had been presented online, the viewer would have had to depend on his artist's statement to achieve much of this reading of the exhibition (though they would find him more optimistic, seeing the "empty skies ... as possibilities and promise of a new life"). But because of the way in which the physical space has been called into the service of the work, the visitor to the Olivier Cornet Gallery doesn't need to be able to read anything, in English or in Irish, to comprehend what is being conveyed. The works speak for themselves, not just individually but also in series, and not just as series but also as a juxtaposition of series. Online, there would be just a dictionary, a set of images grouped under a general classification, but judicious use of a physical space can create a grammar, a combination of structure and meaning, which makes more eloquent communication possible. That is why we still need galleries.

**Mary Catherine Nolan is a Dublin-based artist with a background in linguistics.**

Eoin Mac Lochlainn, *Tinteán no.13*