

Niall De Buitlear

'Out of Order'

The Lab, Dublin

8 July – 19 August 2011

FROM afar, on a window, the drawing looks like a tribal pattern of circles and white contour lines. It is so smooth it could be a transfer or a large window sticker. When I come up close I can see that it was not made by a machine – as I had initially thought – but by hand with an ordinary white paint marker. Thus begins my experience of Niall the Buitlear's show 'Out of Order' at the LAB in Dublin; an exhibition that presents a body of work that operates on two levels: from a distance and up close and personal.

Entering the main gallery I encounter what feels like the heart of the exhibition, a series of dark small-scale sculptures, carefully displayed inside three glass vitrines. They seem like solid, heavy objects, perhaps made of clay or ash and perfectly geometric, though with slight variations in height, shape or width. They resemble miniature buildings, slightly alien, with expertly twisted turrets and towers, or a series of experiments of someone trying to build a new contraption.

Viewing these works at close quarters, one can see traces of the artist everywhere, in the silver working lines of a pencil or on a small edge where one strand of paper (for they are made of ordinary black paper) meets the next. It's enjoyable to see this indication of process, the slight irregularities. De Buitlear has stated that, "the [works] are not perfect or geometric, that is not their purpose. If they were, that would be something a computer could do"⁽¹⁾.

The other work downstairs consists of a series of framed drawings with white lines on the same black paper. At a distance they look like ground plans or maps and at the same time remind me of Mayan or Aboriginal art, the primitive patterns evoking something mysterious. On closer inspection the lines are slightly transparent and not so rigid. It is hard to gain access to the meaning behind this work, because it is so focused on the surface, as if the artist was totally absorbed in the process of making.

On the walls in the upstairs gallery hang another set of drawings, black ink on white paper in the shape of cartoon speech bubbles. They are based on a misreading of a photograph of a three-dimensional sculpture, pictured from above so that,

to the artist, it appeared to be a drawing.

From afar the drawings look almost tangible yet after zooming in they become interesting in their unevenness, the overlap of marker on marker, the slight quiver of a line. I've started to look for these marks now, minuscule signals of the artist.

In an interview conducted after I'd seen the exhibition Niall and I briefly spoke about the type of art some men make, 'macho' art, the art of biennales – shows of power and might. This work isn't about making grand, sweeping statements. It doesn't talk about war, poverty, sex, love, lust or desire. All the works in his show are small, quiet, refined even, a continuation of previous work. Niall didn't want to make large works with a 'wow' factor, the kind of work people enjoy purely because of its scale or complexity.

I asked Niall if he avoids direct references. He stated there are no obvious reference points, rather, there is an elemental aspect to this work that could relate to a number of things: minimalism, aspects of craft, design and utilitarian objects. But also symbolism, the occult, Neolithic stone engravings, ancient Irish mark-making – "The process is to discover something rather than to project something out, so it's bound to hit on similarities to other things."⁽²⁾

The works in this show focus on the act of making – so much so that the materials, unlike some of Niall's earlier work, cease to talk about the outside world. They become tools of expression and of process, functional and formal, as if they exist only to give shape to drawings and sculptures. Niall agreed, "now it's just about materials from an art shop, so that the other elements can take over"⁽³⁾.

This work is undoubtedly about process – and it is highly personal; the artist followed a nearly instinctive and subjective path, each piece referencing a specific thing, an earlier work perhaps, or a chance encounter. It might have been a challenge for some visitors (who didn't get the chance to interview the artist after seeing the show) to fully experience these nuances in the work – to get into them, so to speak. What remained for the viewer were marks, traces, echoes of the artist's physical presence on the outside surface of works that describe an inner world.

Alissa Kleist

Notes

1. In conversation with the artist.
2. Ibid
3. Ibid