

Christopher Clarke

Text for Island: New Art from Ireland Catalogue. Curated by Fiona Kearney for Palazzina dei Giardini, Modena Italy 2013

Damien Flood's paintings seem to hover on the edge of recognition. They are resolutely abstract in their loosely delineated marks and smeared patches of colour, yet, at the same time, these elements coalesce into the vaguely familiar objects or scenes – the horizon line of a domed landscape, the petals of a flower, an ephemeral, almost invisible 'smoke ring' - indicated by their titles. While grounded in Flood's research into early writings on philosophy, theology, alchemy and the natural sciences, he uses these ideas as a starting point for an exploration of the mutability of 'reality', and the ways in which factual knowledge becomes fiction.

This notion of the defunct belief system is particularly apt when it comes to painting. Flood's works readily acknowledge both the materiality and the history of the medium: its role in the depiction of the natural environment and as an exploration of form and colour. In *Dig*, for example, the title speaks of a physical excavation of pigment on the canvas itself as well as the layers of art history that inform every gesture, every brushstroke. For Flood, the process of painting is a balancing act between these different elements, between the intrinsic qualities of surface and material and the external influences and associations that become subsumed within the canvas.

The delicate ambiguity of his work also reveals what the artist calls a "tactic of incompleteness". Although originally coming out of a background in figurative painting, Flood's practice is an essentially reductive one, removing any extraneous information in order to create a sense of mystery or speculation, where what is missing is as essential to the picture as what remains. One is left unsure whether the image depicts the phenomenal or the transcendental, a microscopic view of surrounding reality or a partial glimpse of the macrocosmic. Again, this comes back to his research. In the same way that 17th Century theoreticians such as Athanasius Kirchner (one of the artist's inspirations) were forced to employ strained dialectical leaps in order to reconcile their findings with the prevailing orthodox Christianity, Flood asks the viewer to engage in a similar act of faith, to offer up any sense of certainty or preconception and submit to the interplay of light and shade, line and mass.

In this sense, Flood's works can't be said to be representational – although he uses elements of representation alongside those of abstraction. Instead, one might see

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them as evocative, in that they transmit his experience of painting to that of the viewer. The paintings speak of process: absorbing fragmentary pieces of text and arcana, transmuting them into recognizable objects and abstract forms, and letting go of the specific in favour of the ideal or the ambiguous. The artist's gesture transforms the abstract philosophical idea into transparent washes of colour, thickly rendered strokes and layered, textured fields; in other words, he turns thought into reality. Like the works of his forebears, it is a process of alchemy.