

Mining the landscape

Catherine Leen views Stephen Lawlor's new suite of paintings at Fred London and finds the printmaker revelling in the accidental possibilities of oil



Last Tuesday, the finest day that ever was, we went to the Dyke...perhaps the most grand & affecting natural landscape in the world – and consequently a scene the [sic] most unfit for a picture. It is the business of a painter not to contend with nature and put this scene (a valley filled with imagery 50 miles long) on a canvas of a few inches, but to make something out of nothing.'

John Constable's 1826 letter describing a visit to a famous beauty spot in Sussex could have been written as an introduction to

Stephen Lawlor's latest show of landscape paintings, 'Cu.' Early 20th-century landscape painting in Ireland was intimately associated with nationalism, so that the idealised portrayal of rural locales, particularly in the West, became part of an assertion of a unique cultural identity.¹ Irish landscape art has evolved dramatically since then, however, to become as much a reflection of the artist's engagement with the genre as a response to a particular place. The landscape paintings of Lawlor, an internationally renowned printmaker, are the result of an

intensely personal process of investigation and experimentation that began over a decade ago. When he decided to turn to painting, he spent many years studying the works of masters such as Raphael, Da Vinci and Constable. The influence of this engagement with art history is clear when one reviews his series of lushly coloured mono-prints of the Italian countryside, shown at the Graphic Studio Gallery in 1997, and even in the backdrops of his other prints, which often took details from the works of Romantic painters and reworked and combined them into his compositions.

He moved from piecing together imaginary landscapes inspired by masterworks to depicting real places in his first show of landscape paintings 'Three Rivers' (2006), which explored Dublin waterways in works that showcased his intuitive understanding of paint, light and colour. His next show of paintings, 'Hinterland' (2009), took him to the forests of Sweden, where his work took on an evocative, mysterious quality provided by the interplay of dark and light and expressive use of paint.

The fourteen hauntingly beautiful paintings in 'Cu' explore the seemingly unpromising subject of disused copper mines in Amlwch, Wales, and Avoca, Co Wicklow, which are linked geologically by the same seam of copper running under the Irish Sea. Lawlor was invited by Aidan Doyle of Newcastle University to visit the Amlwch mine, and he was stunned to find a panoramic landscape infused with jewel-like colours from mineral elements in the soil. Following Constable's dictum, both sites are transformed into something magical in his paintings. While the 'Iron Hat' series, inspired by Avoca (Figs 2&3), continues to place great importance on *chiaroscuro* and light, which the thickly applied paint seems

to both store and emit, they also strip down the Romantic vision of the landscape, abstracting and re-imagining it. Amlwch Anglesey 1 (Fig 4) reflects the vastness of the mine by depicting the skyline, pathways and valleys, though again the excitement in the piece comes less from landscape itself and more from the expressionistic use of paint and rich earth tones. Cleft, another work based in Amlwch, has a brooding atmosphere that comes from the use of darker tones and a dense application of paint that gives the surface a richly tactile quality. The swirling paint in all of the works suggests a sense of freedom in Lawlor's paintings. No longer constrained by the painstaking stage-by-stage layering of colour that characterises his intricate printmaking, he clearly revels in the immediacy and even the accidental possibilities offered by oil. His trademark mastery of colour, light and shade adds intensity and movement to the works, which seem to echo the drama of the lives of those who worked in this historically, sociologically and geologically significant landscape. When asked whether painting has superseded printmaking for him, his answer is unequivocal: 'I'm not just dabbling in a new medium – I'm a painter.' This confident statement is confirmed by the assurance of his latest works, which undoubtedly make an important contribution to the continuing evolution of Irish landscape art. ■

Stephen Lawlor 'Cu', Fred London Gallery, London, 7 January – 7 February 2010.

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Photography David O'Callaghan

Catherine Leen is an independent art critic

1 Ray Lambert, *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 104.

2 James Christen Steward, 'The Irishness of Irish Painting,' in *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland*, ed. by James Christen Steward (London: Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1998), p. 19.



1 STEPHEN LAWLOR b.1958
AMLWYCH, ANGLESEY 5
oil on canvas
30x25cm



2 IRON HAT, AVOCA 3
oil on canvas
30x25cm

3 IRON HAT, AVOCA 2
oil on canvas
30x25cm

4 AMLWYCH, ANGLESEY 1
oil on canvas
30x25cm

