

Layers beneath the iceberg's surface

Reviewed

The Essential Gesture, Rita Duffy, Ulster Museum, Belfast (048-90383000) and Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin (01-6777905)

Cian Donnelly and Joanna Kidney, Fenderesky Gallery until May 6 (048-90235245)

Artist Rita Duffy, who is showing at the Ulster Museum - *The Essential Gesture* - and also at Hillsboro Fine Art in Dublin, created a stir a while back when she proposed that towing an iceberg to Belfast might be an appropriate way to mark the anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. Even now, when the Belfast shipyards are a shadow of their former selves, the Titanic is still a significant marker of local identity. A memorial stands in the grounds of City Hall. Given its tragic fate, with its hubristic overtones, the Titanic has to be a distinctly ambiguous symbol, but it is still regarded with pride as being somehow representative of the virtues of the largely Protestant workers who built it.

It's understandable then, that some local observers detected an element of cruelty in the idea of waking up to find an iceberg, the instrument of the Titanic's tragic end, facing them down at the docks. Yet it would clearly be a very powerful statement. As it happens, Duffy went in search of an iceberg and filmed it, off Newfoundland, in 2003. It is a strangely anthropomorphic form, a mixture of graceful curves and jagged edges and, of course, the point about an iceberg is that the vast majority of its bulk, and its menace, lies invisibly beneath the surface.

From the artist's point of view, these qualities make it an interesting and



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provocative image in relation to Northern Ireland. Her paintings of the iceberg inevitably echoes Casper David Friedrich's celebrated painting of a ship crushed by Arctic ice, *The Sea of Ice*, which could be interpreted as a comment on hubris. Various of Northern Ireland's own historical icebergs have fatally collided with political Titans set adrift with the common aim of ensuring a peaceful and equitable future.

In some of her work Duffy certainly sees the iceberg as standing for the insidious, hidden legacy of The Troubles. The surfaces of the paintings in her series *Leadheads* mimic "plate metal. Each panel features an individual portrait head, and it is as if each head has a patch of metal sutured into the skull, suggestive of violence and healing. It could be that the subliminal image is that of a damaged vessel, and sure enough each head is accompanied by a diminutive painting of an iceberg. Still, we can conclude that the skulls are repairable.

The Titanic monument shares the grounds of City Hall with a statue of



Queen Victoria. In her studies of this statue, Duffy configures the white marble queen as a kind of iceberg herself. More overtly positive are views of Irish lighthouses, and it could be that *The Essential Gesture* is that made by Father Daly on Bloody Sunday, as he waved his white handkerchief in an appeal for safe passage. In the crumpled cloth - linen is also emblematic of Northern Ireland's industrial history - the iceberg becomes a token of peace.

Cian Donnelly's paintings, at the Fenderesky Gallery, are extraordinary objects. They are called *Slice Paintings* and each appears to be a dense, compacted sandwich of pure paint, built up in distinct layers of concentrated colour. That is, there is no conventional support such as paper or canvas. It is as if a painting has been reduced to its constituent portions of separated pigments and compacted into blocks. In a way these blocks, with their pleasing forms, attractive colours and textures, are like pieces of confectionery, or toys. There are also parallels with landscape to

In crumpled linen, the iceberg becomes a peace token: detail of *Paxies 1*, by Rita Duffy

them, though, in the way they are built up from compressed and subsequently faulted strata.

The faults - cracks and fissures - emerge in the drying process and are faults in the geological rather than the artistic sense. Donnelly says that he sets out to make bodies of paint that are "memories of themselves," referring to the way painting is a time-based process. A painting reflects and embodies the duration of its making. He has focused on this aspect of the medium and produced, as it happens, paintings that in several cases become sculptures. It's beautiful, accomplished work and is also conceptually rich.

In the Fenderesky's Gallery 2, Joanna Kidney's work accumulates myriad details to produce an harmonious composite. This *Speaking Place* comprises 123 tiny constituent panels arranged in a loose, lens-shaped pattern. She refers to the experience of noticing the "tiny tales and fragments" of nature while staying at Annaghmakerrig. Hence the evocation of numerous small shapes and events. Each panel is inscribed in an informal, understated way. The marks suggest such things as the movement of insects through the air, or the shimmer of a spider's web; small, insignificant details, it is true, in the general scheme of things.

Kidney is not even slightly sentimental about all this material, it should be said, and she has made a lovely piece of contemplative work. The same format is applied to her *Winter Lifeforce*, composed of a group of 23 monotypes, and it, too, is outstanding. Her method is perhaps more problematic on individually larger pieces, but in finding a way to evoke subtle, ephemeral traces against calmness she has done extremely well.

