

The Persistence of Being.

To observe that Charles MacCarthy's work fall into three categories- still lifes, landscapes and interiors- is perhaps to state the mundane and obvious. Nevertheless it's worth doing so because the way in which his paintings diverge from the canon of these genres, as established by the Dutch and Flemish seventeenth century masters, opens a revealing perspective onto them. For this divergence, in the same way that the irregularities of a planet's orbit indicate the presence of an unknown star, points to something of true substance underlying the originality of his vision.

In Charles' recent work landscape is only hinted at. Apart from trees and bushes half-perceived in a window's blurred luminescence, no signs of organic life are to be found. Nature is markedly absent from these *natures mortes*. The mineral replaces the vegetable and the animal, and its quiet permanence supplants the sense of mortality implicit in luscious Flemish displays of the fruits of the earth, or explicit in the moral rhetoric of the Dutch 'vanities'. No regretted pleasures, no hidden potentialities, no menace of decay here; instead we are presented with a deeper truth. Everyday objects that nevertheless hint at archetypal forms: cups, vessels, crucibles, *containers*, are painted with an almost Cistercian renunciation of aesthetic effects, an uncompromising honesty of vision that pares its subject down to its ontological essence: all is well, beyond triumph and disaster, we remain, we exist.

Though Charles' palette, with its subtle chromatic modulations dominated by gentle greys and ochres, instill a sense of tranquillity and peace, there is something disquieting about this depiction of unadorned reality. The frontality of his recent compositions increases the demand for a concentration of the spirit. Our need for distraction, for titillation, is not indulged; the unquiet spirit is challenged, made aware of its 'intolerable neural itch', to borrow Auden's phrase. Yet at the same time, the tutelar cupboards, the closed drawers, the mysterious boxes that appear recurrently in Charles' interiors nevertheless hold the promise of a hidden reward.

Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all

But will, His negative inversion, be prodigal

Send to us power and light, a sovereign touch,

Curing the intolerable neural itch,

The exhaustion of weaning.....

Unlike the light in Dutch interiors, which tends to come from an invisible or oblique source, modelling the pictorial space, in these pictures it is often a central presence. The source is a window, sometimes veiled by a curtain made of some diaphanous material, that hovers ambiguously in the frontal plane like a numinous Rothkian oblong. The Italian critic and essayist Mario Praz once suggested that Alberto Giacometti's piece 'The Invisible Object', though stylistically anomalous, nevertheless held the key to his *oeuvre*: an unremitting quest to penetrate the mystery of identity. From the pictures in this exhibition a human presence is absent, but often the window, shimmering with a gentle opalescence, illuminates an empty chair placed at a table in front of it, evoking an invisible presence that invites us to share in its quiet persistence of being.