

Life & Culture

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A study of nature and the limitations of control



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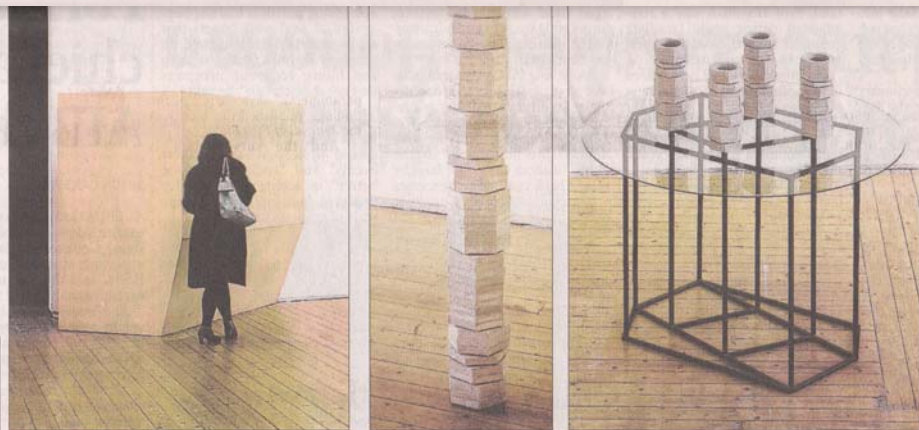
The experimental work of Dennis McNulty draws on sculpture, video, photography, found objects and sound in a provocative attempt to persuade us to engage critically with our surroundings

The Driver and the Passenger Mixed media works by Dennis McNulty. Green on Red Gallery, 26-28 Lombard Street East, Dublin 2. Until November 6

IT'S FAIR to describe Dennis McNulty, whose exhibition *The Driver and the Passenger* is currently showing at the Green on Red Gallery, as an experimental artist. In one sense, of course, all artists are experimental, because they are trying to make something that doesn't exist until they create it or rearrange it or maybe just think it. But McNulty is experimental in that he doesn't seem to adapt any one consistent, established artistic language. He's a visual artist but he also has a background in musical composition and performance, having spent 10 years or so as one half of the electronic music duo Decal. Now his work draws on elements of three-dimensional sculpture, of photography and video, of found objects and of audio, and combines some or all of them in an edgy, exploratory way.

Francis Bacon said that one of the things you need to be an artist is a subject matter that fascinates you. McNulty comes across as being fascinated by the involved, fragmentary experience of contemporary life, especially within the architectural framework of urban life. The press release describes the exhibition aptly enough as "a kind of speculative fiction", addressing "the complexity of the contemporary moment". McNulty is attentive to the nuances of the moment, from the factors that shape the physical spaces we occupy and negotiate to our partial, fragile understanding of the world outside of ourselves.

The locations that feature in the diverse body of works in his show extend from the mundane urban fabric encountered in the rhythm of the daily commute (in the digital photographic sequence *Factory Prices Guaranteed*) to the under-sea catastrophe that ensued in the Gulf of Mexico when an



Living space: *The Driver and the Passenger*, main photograph. Above, left to right: *Box with the sound of our unmaking*; *Alternative proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #1)*; and *Alternative Proposal for Collingwood (Moffett #2)*. Photographs: Ros Kavanagh

oil-drilling platform was hit by an explosion last April (in the video loops of *Deepwater Horizon*). There's a continuity between the two subjects, McNulty implies, in the way our world is organised. Similarly the physical fabric of our local environment is based on underlying architectural vision.

The idea of the modern city as a work in progress, continually under construction (referred to in pieces such as *Transportable Framework*), is given an added twist by the collapse of the Irish property market. Several works evoke hidden spaces screened by plywood hoardings, the urban soundtrack of cacophonous protest (as in *Box With the Sound of our Unmaking*) and nature's reclamation of abandoned building sites. On one such site, next to a busy street, in an almost idyllic pastoral scene, an expansive pool of rainwater nurtures a wealth of plant life.

This striking image provides a stepping stone to a wider treatment of culture and nature in a video made at the iconic Philip Johnson Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. Johnson (1906-2005) was responsible for coining the term "the International Style" and was instrumental in the introduction of European modernist architecture to the US. His Glass House, begun in 1949 and now open to the public, is a dazzling, uncompromising modernist statement, with minimalist, steel-framed walls of glass offering unimpeded prospects of woodland in every direction. Nature provides the walls.

The house has been plausibly described as the most beautiful and least functional house ever built. In his video McNulty concentrates on the way natural irregularity has a way of intruding, not only in the form of controlled views of lush vegetation but also in uncontrolled ways, in joins and gaps and the limitations of control. In fact the limitations of control emerges, cumulatively, as a guiding theme of the show.

It's there in references to the work of the Cork-born modernist architect and teacher Noel Moffett. Moffett's London projects featured experimental methods and materials characteristic of the time, which were prone to long-term problems, McNulty notes Moffett's use of hexagonal prefabricated

structural sections, recalling the basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway.

Another work is a record of driving through the anomalous "unincorporated" town of Breezewood in Pennsylvania, a place that has somehow anarchically managed to slip between the orderly grid of the highway network, although it links two main routes.

This is a lively, provocative exhibition which throws up many ideas and encourages us to engage critically and actively with our surroundings. While McNulty doesn't advertise his musical experience, it is surely evident in his approach to form and material, his use of rhythmic repetition and variation. His interest in spatial structures recalls the structure of music in time, which is, in fact, close to one of Philip Johnson's definitions of architecture.

All three areas of interest – art, architecture and music – come together in a live event, *Ghosts of the Garden City*, at the Green on Red Gallery this evening at 9pm. The event evolved out of conversations between McNulty and architectural historian Ellen Rowley, and will feature images discovered in the course of her research into mid-20th-century public housing in Dublin. Her commentary is accompanied by musician David Donohoe on a Yamaha DX7 synthesizer, a quintessential instrument of the 1980s.

Ghosts of the Garden City is a free event. To attend, contact Jeremie or Mary at 01-671 3414 or e-mail info@greenonredgallery.com

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