



# The Last Wilderness

Michaële Cutaya looks forward to Cecilia Danell's solo show at the Galway Arts Centre drawn from time the artist spent in Sweden and Norway



One of Cecilia Danell's new paintings, *Rising and Falling*, depicts a timber cabin tucked away in the forest with dark evergreens in the background and leafless silver birch trunks in the foreground (Fig 3). Notions of Henry David Thoreau's dream of solitude and self-sufficiency comes to mind. And yet on closer inspection the paint's density seems to dissolve and the boldest brushstrokes are never far from a telltale drip. The entire scenery is on the verge of an abyss, the forest soil giving way to dripping paint and discrete areas of colour. The effect is two-fold, drawing our attention away from the illusion in pointing decidedly to the means involved: a painting is only a few brushstrokes away from the tubes from whence it came. The second effect is to undermine the reality that the cabin-in-the-wood's image conjures up.

Danell's solo show at the Galway Arts Centre, 'The Last

Wilderness', takes its name from the underlying idea the artist refers to as 'In a post-nature future, the unconscious mind will be the last wilderness'. The exhibition reflects Danell's multi-media practice, presenting along with her new paintings, a series of black and white photographs mounted on light boxes, a digitally transferred super 8 film and a forest cut out of plywood. Since graduating in painting from Galway Mayo Institute of Technology in 2008, Danell has worked with a variety of media in exploring how we dream and inhabit the world. If her early work took the false Utopianism of urbanisation for subject, over the past few years it is the Scandinavian forest of her childhood that has come back to haunt her. Danell relocated from Sweden to Galway in 2004, and the forest setting enables her to explore her own relationship to memory and place. Building an intimate relationship with the landscape is important to Danell; her walks are documented in a journal, noting weather conditions and changing seasons, and through photographs, reflecting her interest in psychogeography. She uses the photographs as a starting point for her painting and then allows memory and



1 CECILIA DANELL *BUILD YOUR OWN: SCANDINAVIAN LONELINESS* 2012 flat-pack model set (edition of 25), dimensions variable

2 Cecilia Danell

3 *RIISING AND FALLING* 2016 oil and acrylics on canvas 100x130cm

4 *HIDE NO. 2 201*, 20,000+ paper clips hooked onto netting with fabric backing, 150x130cm

5 *THE MOUNTAINS LOOMED* 2016 oil and acrylics on canvas 120x120cm

the painting process take over to develop their own momentum: 'When the encounter translates into a painting, drips and abstractions become as important a part of the finished image as the initial photograph.'

Paintings such as *The Mountains Loomed* (Fig 5) and the photographs presented in the exhibition were developed during a residency in early 2016 at the Nordic Artist's Centre Dale in Norway. There she encountered a different landscape, more mountainous than Ireland, and the residency allowed her to work directly after her walks, instead of having to wait to be back in her studio in Galway. A longing for authenticity is discernible in this body of work, but also a sense of alienation coupled with an awareness that this authenticity is constructed. Danell works with this sense of alienation in her new film, shot over the past few months in Sweden, in which she uses the forest as a theatre stage. The cut-out plywood forest in the gallery serves as a setting for the projection.

Models have long been part of her practice, creating delicate miniatures of wilderness. For one of her most tongue in cheek works, *Build Your Own: Scandinavian Loneliness* (Fig 1) she neatly packaged two staple Swedish commodi-

ties: the IKEA flatpack and the forested solitude. Danell has consistently explored our imaginary construction of wilderness in different media over the years. In 2012, as part of the work she developed with the Emerging Artist Award exhibited at the Wexford Arts Centre as 'Secretly, We Thirst for Reality', she

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made *Hide No 2*: a shimmering bear hide made up of approximately 20,000 paper clips hooked onto a netting (Fig 4). The work conjures the rather incongruous figure of an office-clerk hunter and plays with the lingering appeal of a life in the wild.

As transpires through recent political events, the yearning for authenticity and a return to mythic origins are increasingly attractive and yet works like Danell's are a necessary reminder that authenticity is perhaps the most artificial of all our constructs. ■

Cecilia Danell 'The Last Wilderness' Galway Arts Centre, 10 March – 19 April 2017.

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