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 and Falling 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 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 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 Thurst for Reality’, she 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.

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