

David Eager Maher, 'Pinked'
 Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin
 18 November 2021 – 28 January 2022

DAVID EAGER MAHER'S 'Pinked', at the Oliver Sears Gallery, provides welcome respite from the deprivations brought by COVID-19, with its abundant colour, texture and visual intrigue. Displayed along a mid-height ledge that traces the perimeter of the gallery, each of the eight featured works comprises an oil composition on panel, mounted against a coloured background within a painted frame. Motifs and patterns decorate the latter, 'pinking' the periphery – which refers to cloth cut with a scalloped or zigzag edge.

The integrated unity of the painting, backdrop and frame, and the richness of their form and content, invoke the aura of the precious art object. Colour has long been a vital element of Eager Maher's visual language, and while it seems, here, to be amplified and its impact is immediate, the overall effect sidesteps being garish. Surfaces are sensitively modulated with often unexpected juxtapositions of tone.

On each support, a neon hue (most often pink) has been streakily applied to form a semi-transparent ground that peeps through rough edges and heavier paint layers. Sometimes this is used to establish formal contours; one part of what reads as a carefully prescribed lexicon. Another recurring element is a contrived use of shadows that lend depth to otherwise planar spatial constructs. Together, these set up tensions and establish rules that can be broken, as the artist works through relationships of similarity and difference.

In *All Day in the Morning*, a blue-orange sequence of triangles and diamonds wraps around from the side of the frame to land as black-green patterning at the front. Its composition, as in many of the works, adopts a two-thirds/one-third format, the lower part a muted arrangement of tessellated stars and crosses. Above this, an animated pattern forms the backdrop to two flattened classical objects, a neatly decorated Greek black-figure pot and a bust rendered in a maelstrom of diluted green and brown. The latter evokes the undoing of an iconic ordered form, while overall linear/painterly contrasts echo art-historical vacillations between the stable and the chaotic.

Similar classical iconography is repeated in all but three of the remaining paintings where,

compared to other works, their contextual settings are pared back. Some are destabilised by a vertical or horizontal 'slicing' (divided in two, their parts skewed), and most are portrayed in wan monochromatic tones that align with the long-held but mistaken belief that their ancient referents were intended to remain as unadulterated marble. In turn, what were later discovered to have been often polychrome finishes resonate with the exhibited works' overall presentation.

The genre-mingling in *All is Falling* sees a stylised landscape – anchored by an 'irradiated' orange tree – combine with a tiny still life featuring fruit, while two floral paintings, *Gloaming Folding* and *In his dream he thought to himself, I must remember this* are opulent workings of cool blues and purples. In the first, dense blossoms formed from impasto daubs emerge from a flat patterned vase, while sculptural depth is conveyed in the second by the incongruous addition of congealed palette scrapings.

This collaged element adheres to an obliquely inset 'painting-within-a-painting', which features a fragment of a classical arcade and recalls the uncanny perspectival play of Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical period. The looming influence of Matisse is readily acknowledged, and most evident in *Hotel Regina*, which has been named for one of the French artist's homes. It recreates in paint the lively cut-outs Matisse made in his later years, and these embellish both the frame and the main composition.

Passing through the National Gallery after viewing 'Pinked', aspects of David Eager Maher's works seemed to leap from the walls: the use of complementary reds and greens in Roderic O'Connor's *Bretagne*, the spatial distortion and patterning in Pierre Bonnard's *Le Déjeuner*, the impasto blooms, patterned vase and shadow in William Nicholson's *Flowers and Gloves*, and the decorative motifs in Picasso's *Still Life with a Mandolin*. Given his clear interest in the art of the past, it is possible some of these examples rank among his influences. If so, they have been processed not as a hodge-podge of appropriation, but as visual cues for what comes across as a thoughtful and art-historically engaged practice.

Susan Campbell is a visual arts writer and researcher.

John Kennedy, 'Edgelands'
 South Tipperary Arts Centre
 14 January – 19 February 2022



John Kennedy, *Road to Norilsk*, 2021, oil, mixed media on linen; photograph by John Kennedy, courtesy of the artist and South Tipperary Arts Centre

THE ROAD HAS long held appeal for writers and artists. The modern motorway throws up such powerful imagery, as it cleaves through the countryside, that an artist might dismiss it as a subject. But it is this everyday familiarity, underpinned by the metaphorical weight of the journey, that makes Kennedy's latest group of paintings, 'Edgelands', so appealing.

Everybody recognises a road trip. Most of us have known bleak landscapes.

And they are bleak – watery skies hover over black roads edged with dirty slush; potholed, puddled tarmac disintegrates; black trees bristle in snow-covered fields. Across these expanses, trucks travel, headlights faint in a spatter of snow, billboards loom, an overpass is silhouetted black against the dusk. These spare, industrial shapes, cut-outs on muted landscapes, create tension which is given body by the shallow perspectives that tilt a nod at the picture plane. Perhaps because of this, the billboard pieces, like *Kino Fahren* or *Skärm*, where the shapes are simplest and sharp-edged, are most effective.

Kennedy's work, extending the perspective to the canvas edge – the road, the trucks – introduces movement, which, while sacrificing some tension, suggests narrative and draws in the viewer as it evokes the low hum of continuous traffic, the thunder and thump of ever-turning wheels.

It's not just perspective that gives Kennedy's work heft. The artist's use of a clear varnish that dapples the surfaces of most works, giving life to tarmac, snow, metal, adds weight too. The texture is not uniform across each work, or even across a canvas, the artist manipulating it by degrees, creating regular and irregular patterns, sanding it back to create a heaviness, as in *Union Dusk*, or allowing the texture to stand proud, to throw tiny shadows which in *Passive Attack* imbues the petrol blue of the billboard with a metallic presence and suggests an imminent clearance. The muted tones are likewise enhanced by the varnish and allows richer colours – umber, cerulean, gold – to burn through where the paint thins, as in *War Against the Poor*.

This texture also serves to bring the view-

er closer by implying the presence of a windscreen marbled with rain. In *The Secret's Secret*, where the double arc of the windscreen wiper's path is visible on the canvas surface, this device is perhaps over done but Kennedy manages to get away with it, because the work is more let down by the painted dashboard which seems undecided in style, lying somewhere between photorealistic and naïve. Indeed, anywhere man-made shapes are less emphatic, less certain – in the wobbly streetlamps in *Towards All Thresholds* or the not quite convincing car in *Niva* – the tension loosens to a large degree. More satisfying are the works where the painter, instead of exposing his hand, stops short before the bottom edge or side of the canvas, revealing the drips and dribbles of the process.

The last two works, *The Trees Weren't There* and *Military Alphabet*, are a departure, so to speak, from the road theme. The viewer's nose is no longer pressed against a windscreen. Instead, we gaze across a dark empty space at the bright trees and the sky outside, framed in the grid of an industrial window. The contrast between the organic and the manmade is recalibrated here, the trees closer, the sky more contained. The window frames, drawn at an angle within the canvas, like the billboards, create some interesting illusions but again where the artist ventures from the rigidity of the shape – introducing open windows – the tension is broken. Perhaps this is intentional, and these works feel like a striking out. The very elements that weaken them, as with the previous work, add to the sense of a journey being attempted, rather than objects produced, and this only adds to the show's appeal.

With the road as a theme, an artist always risks a blow-out, but Kennedy's considered use of a limited range of colour, shape and media, and his willingness to allow the subject matter to speak for itself, reflects a refreshing thoughtfulness and honesty. 'Edgelands' was worth the trip.

Clare Scott is an artist, writer and researcher based in the southeast.



David Eager Maher in his studio; photograph Simon Lazewski, image courtesy of the Oliver Sears Gallery