

Interview

Maria Hildrick

You have been previously published in *dotdotdash*. Have your themes/subjects/techniques changed at all in the time since, or has your practice evolved in any way?

For the last few years my work concentrated on the value we place on the objects we surround ourselves with. This was very much the central theme of the work featured in the *Jukebox* issue of *dotdotdash*. My focus has now shifted to exploring ideas of change, how we recognise it, and the meanings that can be found within it.

It is not only my subject matter that has changed though – change seems to be left, right and centre at the moment! The way in which I view my process has evolved. Apart from exploring ideas surrounding concepts of change, I am also working towards a group show with Claire Bushby, Claire Canham and William Wernham entitled *Beast for Thee*. We are exploring the different relationships we have with, and ways in which we treat, animals. Working from someone else's brief prompted me to explore it in a different way. I wanted to see how I would respond by consciously trying to step outside of my usual practice. In my work I often find ways to illustrate my idea by referencing old family photographs. Even when trying to move away from this I still found myself returning to these family photos and that they were the most effective way of illustrating my ideas.

The fact that these images illustrated what I was trying to say so beautifully, even when I attempted to move away from them, caused me to reflect on how this process can be read. Constantly referring back to images of my past parallels the way in which we as people repeatedly refer back, consciously or not, to our own early experiences in order to navigate our responses to the world around us. It was only through stepping away from this process that I realised how effective it is in illustrating my views and subjects.

How has the experience (of being published) benefited you and your practice?

Having to express in words what my work means to me and the ideas behind it helps me to clarify and understand it better myself, like thinking aloud. Also, I find painting can be quite an isolated experience, especially having moved here from the other side of the world, trying to find my feet again, etc. To be making contact with and have work feature alongside other creative people is stimulating.

You've said that photographs are a source of inspiration for your work. How did you begin drawing from photos and what prompted you to turn to painting?

I have painted and drawn all my life so I don't feel I ever turned to painting as it has always been a part of me. My current style began to develop during my final years of studying fine art at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. You can really see the beginnings of it in my early work, some of which can be seen on my website. During the first two years of college we were often given a brief as a starting point, although there were no restrictions on where we went with it. At times I worked from photos, but also ventured down other avenues and I experimented with a more abstract style of painting during that time. In third and fourth year our subject matter was more self-directed. Coming from a somewhat transient background, I went about exploring the value placed on objects, as it was always these objects, rather than places, that meant home to me. As I was working from personal experience I turned to our family photos as a source for these objects and started using them as a tool for expressing my ideas. I also went about finding objects that carried meaning unknown to me and in particular spent time collecting images of the objects people leave on gravesides. I also collected found objects, and objects from second-hand shops, that carry their own history and past meanings. This was the start of gathering images and using photographs of my past to express ideas and opinions in my present.

Tell me about your process.

Once I know my train of thought and what it is I wish to express, I go about finding images that will illustrate what I am trying to say. As I mentioned earlier, I work extensively from my own family photos. These depict the many places I lived as a child, times of distress and of happiness, faces once known, times before I was born, my parents' own childhoods ... I also constantly take photos of and collect things that interest or appeal to me in some way. Over the years it has become a vast visual reference library for me. I can then search through the folders of insects, seeds, family, birds, dead things, squashed things, etc and the appropriate imagery begins to come together. Sometimes it's photos I have taken years ago that have the element I now use to express my ideas.

Once I know what I'm working from, I create my composition. I draw on the canvas with pencil and ink, some being quite detailed areas of line drawing, and once I am happy with this stage I work with oil paint, building up layers and leaving areas of drawing and canvas exposed.

Are materials important to your practice? What attracted you to mixed media, and what challenges does it present?

I am very particular about the materials I use! I always stretch my own canvas on my own frames so I can have dimensions specific to what I'm working on. I prime canvas with transparent glue so the natural tone and texture of the canvas is visible in the areas of exposed ink and graphite drawings. Working from natural canvas is one of the most important factors to the production of my work. There is a paper-like quality to its tone and subtle verity in the grain that lends itself well to the areas of exposed canvas that so often feature in my work. Getting the tone of my colours just right is something I spend a lot of time on too. If what I am working on doesn't look quite right to me, too bright in colour or not the right movement in brush strokes, I scrape it back and try again. It can be scary scraping back, especially when there are areas that I am happy with, but it is always the right decision if I am having doubts at all. Every element has to work and feel right. Oil is very forgiving like that, though, and often it is through scraping and reworking the canvas that depth is built up. Layer by layer, a history emerges that echoes the pasts in my subject matter.

I started combining graphite, ink and oil because drawing is such a strong element in my practice. As with painting, I have drawn for as long as I can remember. I would work away quite intensely on these areas of the canvas and didn't want to use them only as ground work for the paint. I found it aesthetically pleasing but it also led me to depict people and objects and animals in ink and graphite in order to detach them from their painted surroundings.

Tell me about 'small change'. What is the inspiration behind the work and what feelings are you trying to evoke?

These paintings mark the beginning of my exploration into change, how it can be read and what it can represent. 'small change' is derived from two photographs, taken moments apart, of my sister Maggie and I amongst deer in the Phoenix Park, Dublin. In the images you can see that two little girls in the background cross from left to right to position themselves for the photo that their father was taking of them, just as Maggie and I were doing the very same thing. Somewhere

there exists images almost exactly the same as the photos we have of that day, but with those little girls central to the photograph.

The paintings represent a crossing of paths. They illustrate how much of life is common experience. My work refers so much to my own history, but these are also simply human experiences. It's a way people connect.

What are you working on at the moment?

At the moment I am working on one of my paintings for *Beast for Thee*, my upcoming show. I am working on a painting of a 'magpie funeral'.

While exploring the subject of birds I read a lot about the corvid family (this includes crows, ravens and magpies, among others). These are considered to be some of the most intelligent birds and have demonstrated self-awareness and tool-making ability. I read accounts of magpie funerals where they are witnessed singing a chorus around another dead magpie, others having seen magpies laying twigs and grasses beside the body. I found this imagery useful in illustrating the opinions I have formed through researching the subject.

Having never witnessed this ritual myself I have created my composition using photos of magpies singing in the early morning outside my house along with another image of a dead magpie I took about two years ago. I will be hanging this painting alongside a watercolour of one of our goldfish lying 'in state' on a small dish (tragically, Mr Fishey passing away following a short illness). Any time, now or in my childhood, when a pet has died we would hold a little funeral for them, bury them and mark the grave in some way.

I don't know what magpies think or feel, or to what extent. What I do believe though is that, along with other animals, they do think and feel. This human ritual for a pet alongside the magpie ritual for one of their own is used to illustrate that emotions don't have to be the same to be valid.

A deer rematerialises, and Maria follows it into a distant memory. You sit for a while, thinking. If you decide to remember when you were much younger, and much of the world was unlit to you, turn to page 76. If you decide to remember a vivid dream where you were tumbling in the night sky over wilderness, turn to page 50.