

# The future is bright (or exists, at least)



Aidan Dunne

The latest RHA exhibition of younger artists who look to be going somewhere features anxiety, philosophical questions, Americana – and great promise

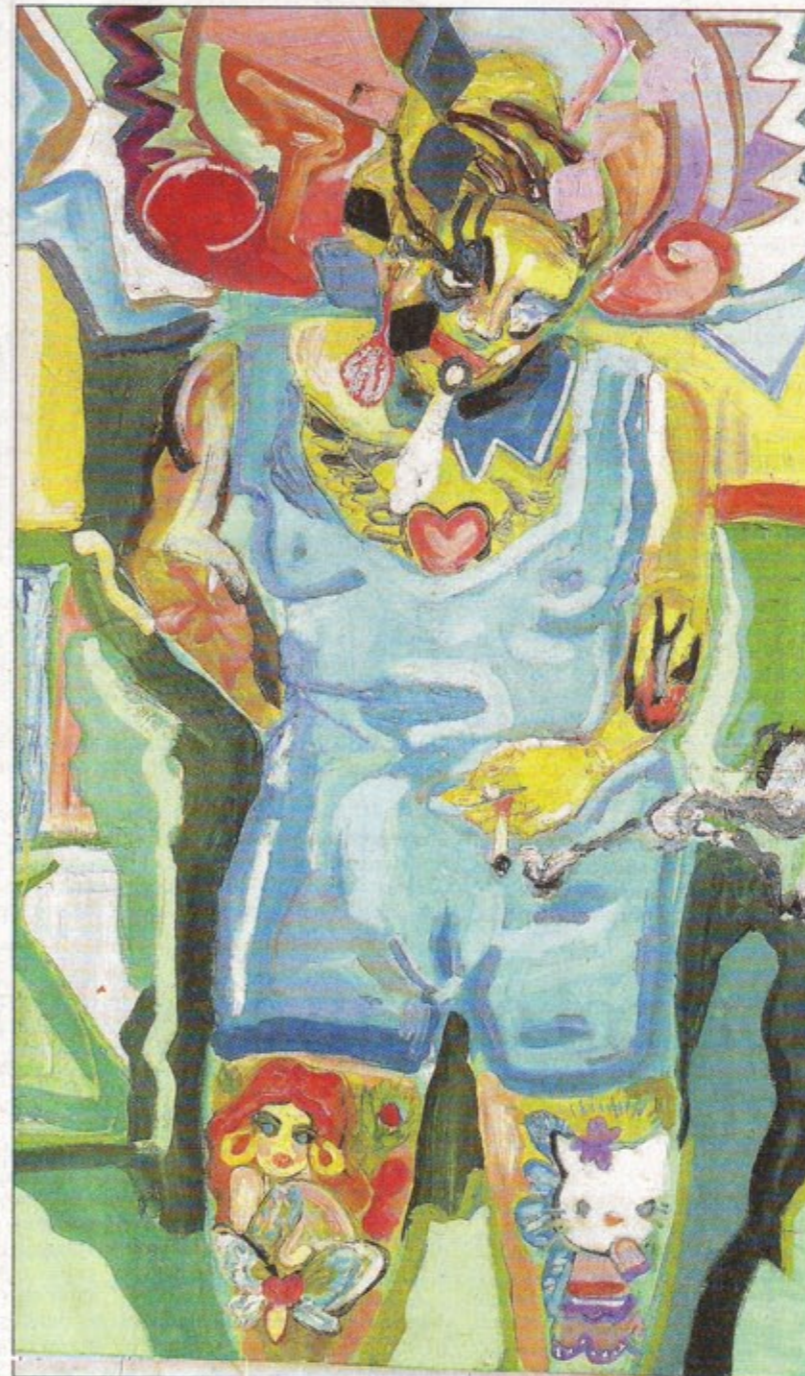
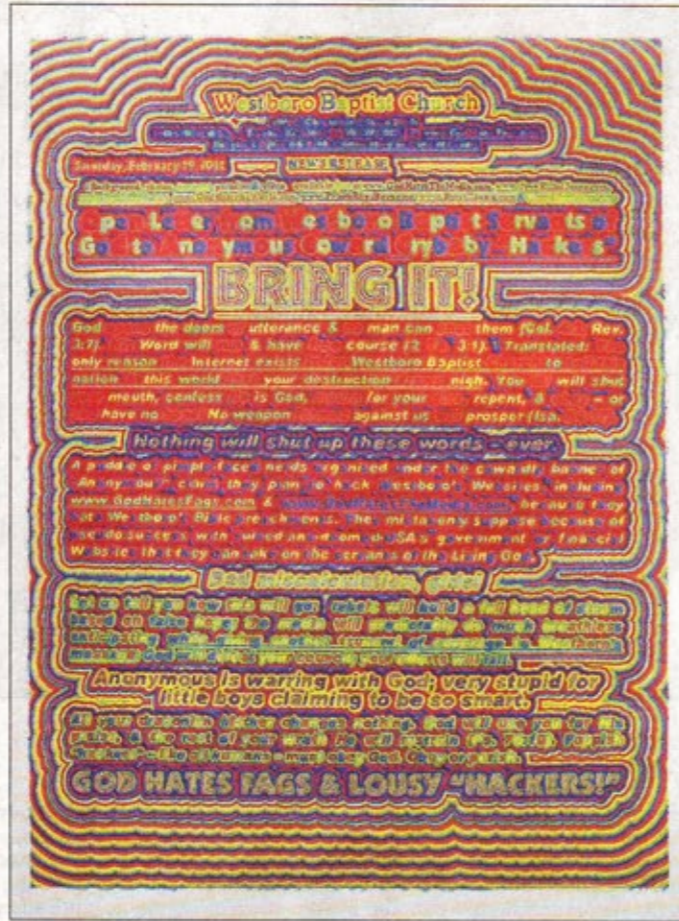
**E**VEN BY implying there is a future, *Futures II* at the Royal Hibernian Academy provides a note of cultural encouragement. This is the third instalment in the current incarnation of the series of annual exhibitions. The aim is to highlight each year a handful of younger artists “around whom exists a growing critical and curatorial consensus”. Artists, that is, who look as if they are getting somewhere or, as is more and more the case, going somewhere. Often, ensuring a future means building up a presence abroad, but without necessarily having recourse to the traditional stand-bys of emigration and exile.

Patrick T Murphy and Ruth Carroll of the RHA have chosen five artists and given them the biggest space at Ely Place HQ, Gallery 1. On balance, three of the five fare well in terms of the layout, two less so. It's striking that all have built up substantial exhibition and project CVs in a relatively short space of time, and there are many links and involvements with other countries. Whether by accident or design, most of the selected work displays some anxiety.

None more so that Alan Butler's frenetic, eclectic pieces. Hugely varied in form and media, cumulatively they come across as being representations or parodies of the kind of information overload and jumbled, cross-cultural hybrids characteristic of contemporary urban experience. Franz Ackermann, Pierre Huyghe and Jim Lambie are all good points of reference for what Butler sets out to do, which is to find a means of encompassing a cultural reality that has somehow managed to outpace and elude our conventional means of representation.

Though he was born in Dublin and attended NCAD, Butler's global view may well have been encouraged by his spell at LaSalle College of the Arts in Singapore, where he completed an MA in 2009. In some respects James Merrigan addresses the same globalised terrain and can be seen in relation to the same artists mentioned above. The exhibition notes don't specify his birthplace (probably the US) and perhaps, given the nature of his work, he likes a certain lack of context.

Since studying at Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art and Design and NCAD, he's been



exceptionally active working in video installation and writing (he's involved in art writing workshops at the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray). He makes ambitious installations that mix a DIY aesthetic – mass-produced, functional building materials such as corrugated tin and wood – with a battery of references to niche cultural forms including horror and science-fiction movies, Americana and more. All of which generates a feeling of dislocation and unease as the semi-familiarity of the material becomes untethered and puzzling. There's a distinct, perhaps intended feeling of all the half-built, anomalous infrastructure we're left with in the wake of the economic collapse.

Even in her graduation show at Dún Laoghaire Institute in 2006, German-born Vera Klute impressed as an exceptionally capable artist with a distinctive and – in the best sense – quirky take on things. The essence of her approach is to take a slice of everyday reality and then come up with an alternative, offbeat explanation of how the world works.

The underlying question is quite philosophical: how, within our own subjectivity, do we set about relating to a world we might presume to be external and real or, on the other hand, to be an extension of our own subjectivity, some form of mental construction? Klute addresses all this with a light touch. She's a bit like the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist – in mood, that is, rather than the form of her work. As with Rist, her work is usually very accessible. It's also technically sound and quietly ingenious. She is fond of augmenting straightforward representation, for example by adding actual three-dimensional elements, or by implying or using movement, or by blurring the line between the photographic and the drawn image.

There's some degree of overlap between Klute and Australian-born Barbara Knezevic, whose sculptures and installations employ “ordinary materials”, forms and objects in unexpected ways. The currency of the ordinary is transmuted into aesthetic gold by means of artistic alchemy. Which is a loose

description of the artistic process and to that extent Knezevic's work is about the artistic process, but also very much about our preconceptions about it.

That is so because, in her work, the transformation of materials always goes slightly awry, and deliberately so. It's as if the wizard cannot quite get the spell right. We are never allowed to roam freely in the realm of pure art because the mundane always intrudes uncomfortably or perplexingly. The one drawback is that one wishes for a little bit more. There is a certain tameness and predictability to the sculptures. She marshals a bunch of sharpened broom handles, bound by rubber pallet bands, for *Self-Supporting Object*, but one wishes she'd push the materials a little more.

**SHEILA RENNICK'S** curdled oil paintings are broadly satirical of everyday deluded personal worlds, of social conventions.

By juxtaposing the often grotesquely funny reality with the fondly imagined, and adding a

Clockwise from top left: *An Open Letter from Westboro Baptist Servants of God to Anonymous Coward Crybaby Hackers* by Alan Butler; *Camel Night* by Sheila Rennick; *Public Pool* by Vera Klute; a video still from *night-knight* by James Merrigan; and a re-animation object by Barbara Knezevic

note of allegorical fantasy – frequently using animals, for example, as anthropomorphic presences – she generates images that are relishable and somehow not quite cruel. Not quite because no one is quite immune from the disparities between real and imagined that she charts.

Her use of colour, involving pastel shades combined with sudden lurches into chromatic excess, is part and parcel of how she achieves her effects. Rennick, who was born in Galway and was latterly resident in Dublin, completed an MA at St Martin's in London and has recently returned to that city for a time. She and Knezevic are the two artists who suffer slightly from the installation design of *Futures II*, but don't let that put you off seeing an exhibition that has a great deal of substance and promise.

*Futures II* features Alan Butler, Vera Klute, Barbara Knezevic, Sheila Rennick and James Merrigan, and is at Royal Hibernian Academy, Gallagher Gallery until October 23, 01-6612558

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