

Eamon O'Kane
Mobile Museum

Introduction

Inverting Conventions A Series of Four Exhibitions

Inverting: to turn something upside down or change the order of two things: opposite in relation to something else.

Convention: General agreement on or acceptance of certain practices or attitudes; a practice or procedure widely observed in a group, especially to facilitate social interaction; a custom: a widely used and accepted device or technique, as in drama, literature, or painting.

Millennium Court Arts Centre is proud to present 'The Mobile Museum: New Work by Eamon O'Kane', the second of four exhibitions in the series 'Inverting Conventions'.

'Inverting Conventions: A Series of Exhibitions Altering Perceptions' is a project of extraordinary measure. There are two major segments to the project—challenging people's perception about contemporary art and the intense creative development of Northern Irish artists.

The series brings five Northern Irish artists together to make weighty progress in 'altering perceptions' and 'developing creativity', challenging the viewers' notions about contemporary art, about Craigavon and about their creative self. Misconceptions of Craigavon and mid-Ulster have been that it is an area of weak arts infrastructure, without a developed audience for the arts and with, traditionally, few avenues for artistic expression and creative endeavour. In reality, however, MCAC has found that we have scratched the surface of local 'subversive creators and innovators'. With a catchment area that includes Portadown, Lurgan, Craigavon and Armagh in the first instance, the series has been



designed to be diverse, containing elements of the traditional and the contemporary, the challenging and the accessible in order to encourage viewers to see 'outside the box'.

The Project aims to 'invert' the idea of art 'conventions'—from landscape and animation to urban space, architecture, digital images and sound. Contemporary artists working today are 'turning upside-down' many of these standard art categories, concepts, movements and theories. They may be challenging viewers, but it may also be engaging to others. MCAC wants to take up the challenge of being a national leader for its innovative approaches to audience engagement with contemporary art.

Artists have been selected to underline the theme of 'inverting conventions' as well as being representative of the different disciplines/mediums developed and promoted at MCAC. Increasingly, this ability to link ideas from different disciplines and art forms is seen as a model for cultural institutions of the future.

An integral part of the Project is the artist-in-residency period of approximately 1-2 weeks. The MCAC artist-in-residency is a national studio programme

located at the Centre, providing a studio space for up to a two-month period for an artist working in visual arts, verbal arts or multi-media. Additionally, all of the exhibitions will have a public, site-specific element which 'invert' the viewer-participants' perceptions outside the 'convention' of what is a gallery space. This element of 'Inverting Conventions' underlines MCAC's aim to inspire and propel the creative potential of our community. By creating artwork that 'sits' outside the gallery space, the artists and MCAC will demonstrate extraordinary appeal in the community and become a vital force for bringing new visitors inside the MCAC and building new audiences for contemporary art.

The MCAC is a catalyst for the creative expression of artists and the active engagement of audiences. We examine the questions that shape and inspire us as individuals, cultures, and communities. MCAC is becoming an Art Factory, producing new creative work. As an Art Factory, MCAC's Inverting Conventions is also an important project in the development of creative process for visual/multimedia artists, in particular from or working in Northern Ireland. 'Developing creativity' is one of MCAC's

taglines. Our ambition is to promote artistic practice on a local level while simultaneously developing established and emerging artists on a national and international level. There are not many opportunities for artists to have a 'white box' in which they can create. MCAC prides itself on the ability to encourage the idea of 'anything goes and anything is possible' in creating artwork. MCAC houses two purpose-built galleries and has been described as one of the premiere art spaces of Northern Ireland. In addition to this the centre includes a verbal arts room with a visual and verbal archive library, a sound/audio studio, a multimedia suite equipped fully with video editing. Within the complex there is also a darkroom, a visual arts workshop and an artist-in-residency suite.

The creation of new work is complemented by the intense individual artistic development of the exhibiting artist. MCAC works closely with each artist to develop the exhibition, a catalogue and a marketing plan. The overall project encompasses a vision that is particularly appropriate to the Centre's space and regional area. With 'Inverting Conventions', MCAC is playing an instrumental role in the cultural development

and promotion of creative talent, not only within the local area, but nationally and internationally.

This project would not have occurred without the assistance of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Lottery Fund. MCAC is indebted to their support.

Megan Johnston
Arts Centre Manager, 2004



Mobile
Museum
2004
installation
view
MCAC

Art as Spatial Resistance

Architecture, known to the Ancient Greeks and many others since as the mother of all arts, is one of the principal means by which societies assert control over the natural world. The means by which nations are literally built, architectural forms may be the most persuasive of all constructions. Buildings can seduce us, as individuals, into their innermost chambers or deter us from even stepping across their threshold. They can present us or hide us, become the means by which we as communities are made or even undone. Their symbolism, physicality, textures, spaciousness, and even their appropriated iconography can pervade a society's values. From domestic holdings to the sites of judicial agency, architecture contains a representation of all that we hold in highest regard at any given moment.

Museums occupy a precious place within the terrain of architectural forms and functions. As containers for material culture that overtly seek to distil representations of the society in which museums reside, museum architecture is perhaps the most emblematic of all. Historically, with the advent of nineteenth century modernity, museums were seen to enter the lineage of the temple. They became first and foremost secular places of worship, where heritage is

made tangible so that it might tell us about ourselves and further about those that went before us: spaces where memory is ostensibly materialized. Traditionally museums are solid and immovable in their outer structure. While exhibitions may be, and increasingly are, transitory, the site of display is largely static. Art museums offer a further step on this esoteric journey of cultural representation. In the current climate of art practice, the sites of production of art and its display are contested, almost to the point of undermining art itself. Artists such as Marcel Broodthaers presented a critique through his art since the 1960s, while Thomas Hirschhorn is a more recent and persistent devotee of defying the modernist dream of a solid neutral temple for culture in which to contain art as artefact.

Back in the mainstream, both history and art museums are often viewed as sculptural works in themselves. The work of contemporary architects such as Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind moves unapologetically closer to art, as perceptible in either the aesthetic play of the former and the symbolic priorities of the latter. Despite Gehry's claim that the relationship between architecture and art is not necessarily one of succession, but one of inspiration (he suggests that



Mobile
Museum
2004
Installation
view
MCAC

painting is the highest form of art, one from which he draws creatively), his buildings are viewed as awe-inspiring sites in themselves – an experience usually reserved for the nature kept outside architecture's confines or for the art held within its walls. The notional distinction between art and architecture generally revolves around varying perceptions of spatial function and its ever-changing relation to form. The modernist ethos declared its conclusion through its promotion of the white cube, a triumph of architectural neutrality over nominal function, while the new architects having cleared the fence of this modernist desire to present pure functional form, now openly toy with the renewed tension between art and architecture. Evident in the use of a variety of materials for material's sake, the pleasure of visual manipulation for its own sake and an overt recognition of spatial symbolism, this amounts to an overall drive to well and truly see off the lonely limitations of a functionalist aesthetic.

Eamon O'Kane has chosen to re-look at the master buildings, and master not mistress they usually were, of a high modernist moment (for example, the Guggenheim, New York), and to commingle this view with recently transformed buildings (the Baltic, Newcastle), and

further to speculate on the new art-itecture (the Guggenheim, Bilbao). His endeavour attests to the fact that the culture of the present is always inclusive of an amalgamation of the past. The contemporary view includes all it can survey and it is with a knowing intention that O'Kane has reversed Gehry's one-way traffic of inspiration, choosing to draw creatively from architecture and its image for his art. In *The Mobile Museum*, O'Kane has developed an installation that penetrates the ideals of architecture, exploits the reproduced image of various buildings, and has generated a body of works that builds upon his curiosity regarding the notion of rupture between fact and fiction, experience and representation. To do this, O'Kane employs a range of media, and as with any artist of depth, he discloses a consistency in interrogative interests sustained from earlier work.

The idea of visual and material representation derived from secondary sources is one that challenges notions of truth in representation, as evident in O'Kane's series *A.K.A. (After Kafka's Amerika)*, 2000-02. For this he painted a fictional travel diary based on secondary sources such as travel brochures and guides to visualise a trip across United States of America before he went there, in a visual

parallel to Franz Kafka's research for his novel *Amerika*. In a related observation, O'Kane's collective term in 2003 for a number of works was *Fictionlands*, used as an umbrella title for an exhibition. An ongoing animation project was begun in 2002, called *die bildermacher, ani-mates*, and continues to comment on O'Kane's remarkable productivity as an artist. This is relayed through hilarious sequences of animation where small figures appear to make his paintings in stealth and account for the amassed output of an unrelentingly prolific artist. *The Studio in the Woods*, 2003, is a series of paintings, which betray in lush colour a sense of fantasy, taking a cue from reproduced images of renowned designed examples. These explore the desire to find the perfect space in which to work creatively: a place that is frustratingly impossible as the aura of that ideal can rarely translate into the quotidian requirements of an artist's studio.

This last area of fascination for O'Kane is developed in *The Mobile Museum* into a decidedly understated reflection on the imperatives that drive artists to consider how their work relates to the spaces it occupies at various points of its journey. The relationship between where the work is made, stored, displayed and the work's own sense of space is a common cause for

deliberation among artists. Often struggling to overtake architecture on a daily practical basis, artists attempt to reclaim the spaces they work in as distinctly their own and further do battle to overcome the atmosphere of the places where their work is revealed to the wider community. Artists generally agree that the size of a studio implicates the scale and concerns of the work, therein and thereafter. In Bristol, O'Kane works in a now defunct paper-bag factory and the industrial implications of this space echo throughout his recent work, even beyond the work actually made there.

Perhaps it was also O'Kane's proximity to the galleries at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, while on residency there during 2004, which propelled his work to increase in size. The very scale of the paintings in *The Mobile Museum* presents a way of looking that encourages the viewer to move through the gallery space: standing back at a distance from the work to incorporate its full view, and moving up close to see in detail the range of painted marks created within each one. This physical change was coupled with a newly restricted monotone palette. The use of black and white suggests the language of drawing, plans, the retrospective view of photography, and subtly



evokes a modernist aspiration to avoid the symbolic complications of colour.

The role of reproductions or secondary sources in cultural production is still to the fore of O'Kane's mind, as these images were based on reproductions in books and magazines. The architectural examples visually interrogated in *The Mobile Museum* are well known to the architecturally interested viewer. The power of spatial manipulation is just one way in which the 'master' buildings of both the present and the wider past can fascinate a visitor. The means by which such celebrated buildings are conveyed – their stature sensed and presence felt – without ever having physically stood in front of or in them is reliant upon the power and success of photography to capture that essence and subsequently enrapture the viewer. Indeed the museums and houses studied in *The Mobile Museum* are so familiar that they are perhaps more easily understood as emblematic structures than functional spaces.

As paintings, O'Kane's images also speak the language of paint itself. His idiomatic return to prioritizing painting seems indicative of a re-enchantment with the product of art-making. Never entirely

erased from his oeuvre to date, the product has been challenged through a rigorous practice of negotiating the implications of the reproduced image for the original, along with the suggestion that industry might supplant inspiration within systematic elements of productivity. As contemporary art seems to persistently challenge the limits of selection, hierarchy and materialism, O'Kane too has mused on this enthrallment to process but seems to contradict the notion that art must be by definition unresolved. Instead he presents in *The Mobile Museum* two distinct outcomes: one a preliminary conclusion (the paintings), the other indicative of an ongoing, non-definitive process (the crate-like mobile studio and its contents).

Nature too creeps into the frame of O'Kane's paintings, through an evocation of a classic cinematic shot. A building is seen surreptitiously through foliage, clearly the site of impending doom in the thriller genre. A voyeuristic ambience set out in the *Studio in the Woods*, O'Kane's large canvases of *The Mobile Museum* are similarly seen as frozen moments in a narrative yet to unfold. Or perhaps that narrative is already told, and what we see is a glance backwards, the retrospective gaze as the protagonist

departs the scene. Either way, the atmosphere of these images is undoubtedly one of reflection, of pause.

Underneath the strata of installation, mixed media and text, the process of painting itself has always been at the core of O'Kane's practice and is perhaps his primary subject. The tactility of paint and the process of making a painted image are clearly the link between what is of representational interest to O'Kane (such as the fantasy of ideal spaces to live, work and display art in) and his more abstract fascinations (such as the implications of the general art process and photographic reproduction for visual arts). The practice that produced these works is driven by in-depth textual, visual and spatial reflection, but most crucially has the heart to conclude with a synchronous meeting of visual imagination and its tangible relation to paint.

Bernard Tschumi writes of 'event architecture', the ever-changing interaction between form and function in architectural terms. This is clearly a concept of interest to O'Kane, both literally and metaphorically. The museum is an ideal transported internally and communicated outwardly through plans, maquettes,

models and finally realised in brick and mortar, titanium and steel. But place changes and spaces are transformed: factories and stables have been appropriated as artist's studios; prisons and hospitals have suited museum needs. O'Kane's mixed media work plays on these changing notions of space and the places where art is expected to be. Co-joining this exploration with an analysis of the process by which art is made and various media applied to reach a conclusion, *The Mobile Museum* sets out a spatial resistance to the venue in which it resides. By presenting alternative solutions to reflect his art, O'Kane instils awareness of how the work got here, it's storage and suggests the transience of its current location: the art will 'move on'.

The desire of artists, broadly, to find or create an idyllic workspace has been, modern times, the source of many works in different media. To imagine the studio in the woods or a room of one's own is to imagine possession of a place, for just a while, that can contain the artist's imagination. In galleries and museums spaces, the viewer can possess, if only for a moment, the work presented to them. The unpacking of one artist's ideas, an amalgamation of their dreams and vision may



Mobile
Museum
2004
Installation
view
MCAC

Building I
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm



Building II
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm

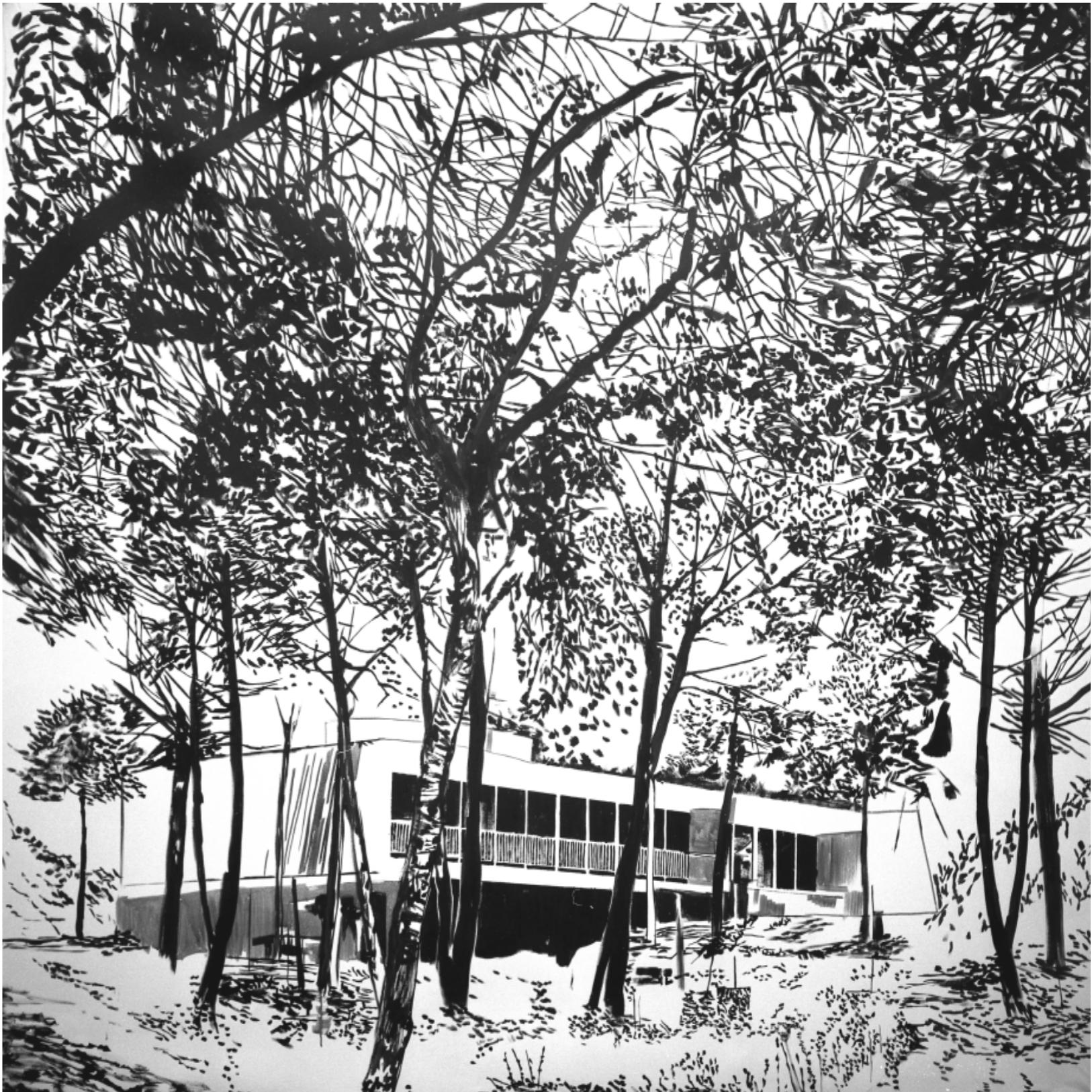




Building III
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm



Building IV
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm





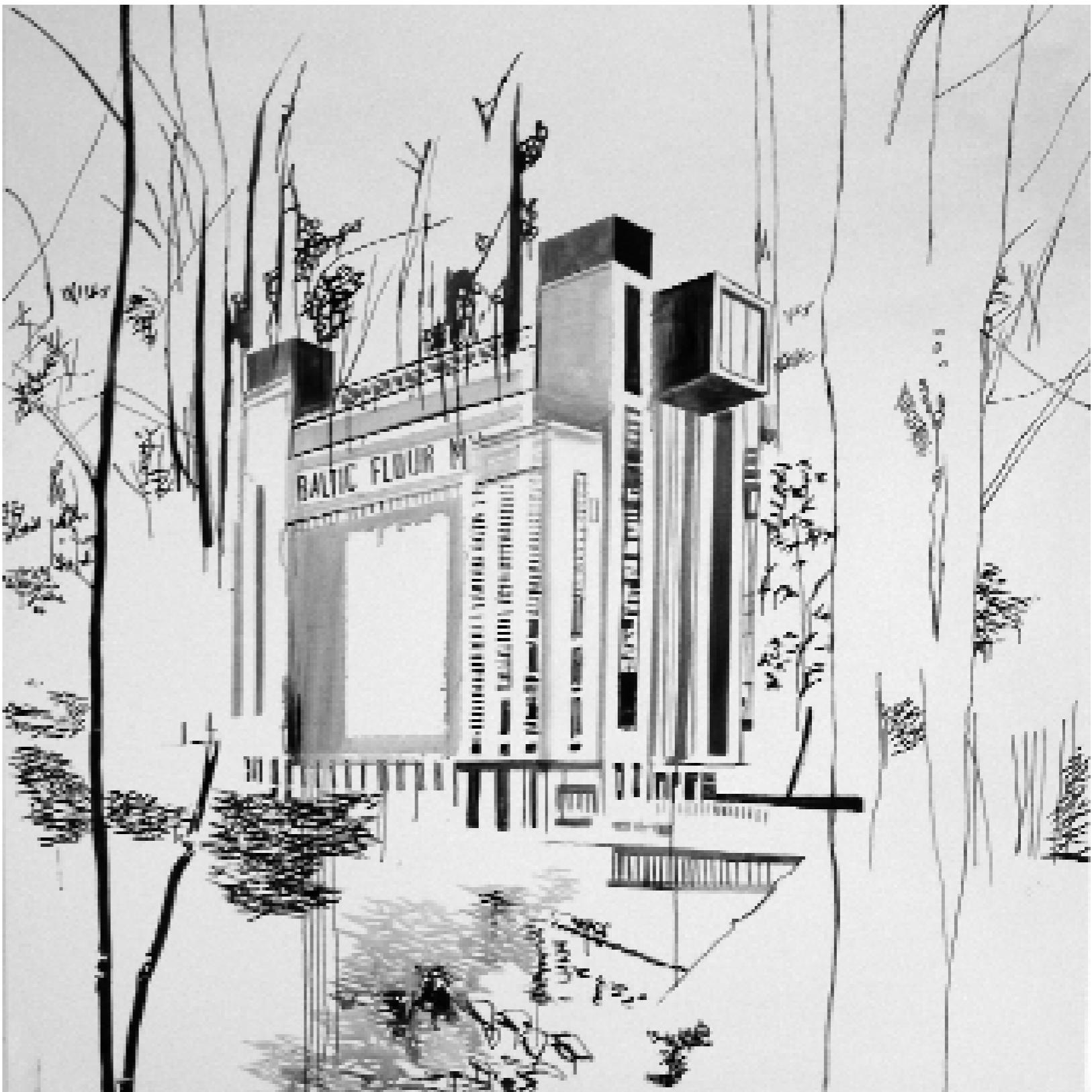
Building V
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm



Building VI
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm



Building VII
2004
Acrylic on can-
vas
210 x 220 cm





Studio I
2004
Lambda print
light box
36 x 36 cm



Mobile Museum

Their relationship is uneasy at best, and the distinctions between them are increasingly blurred: Eamon O'Kane and Gemma Tipton talk about art and architecture.

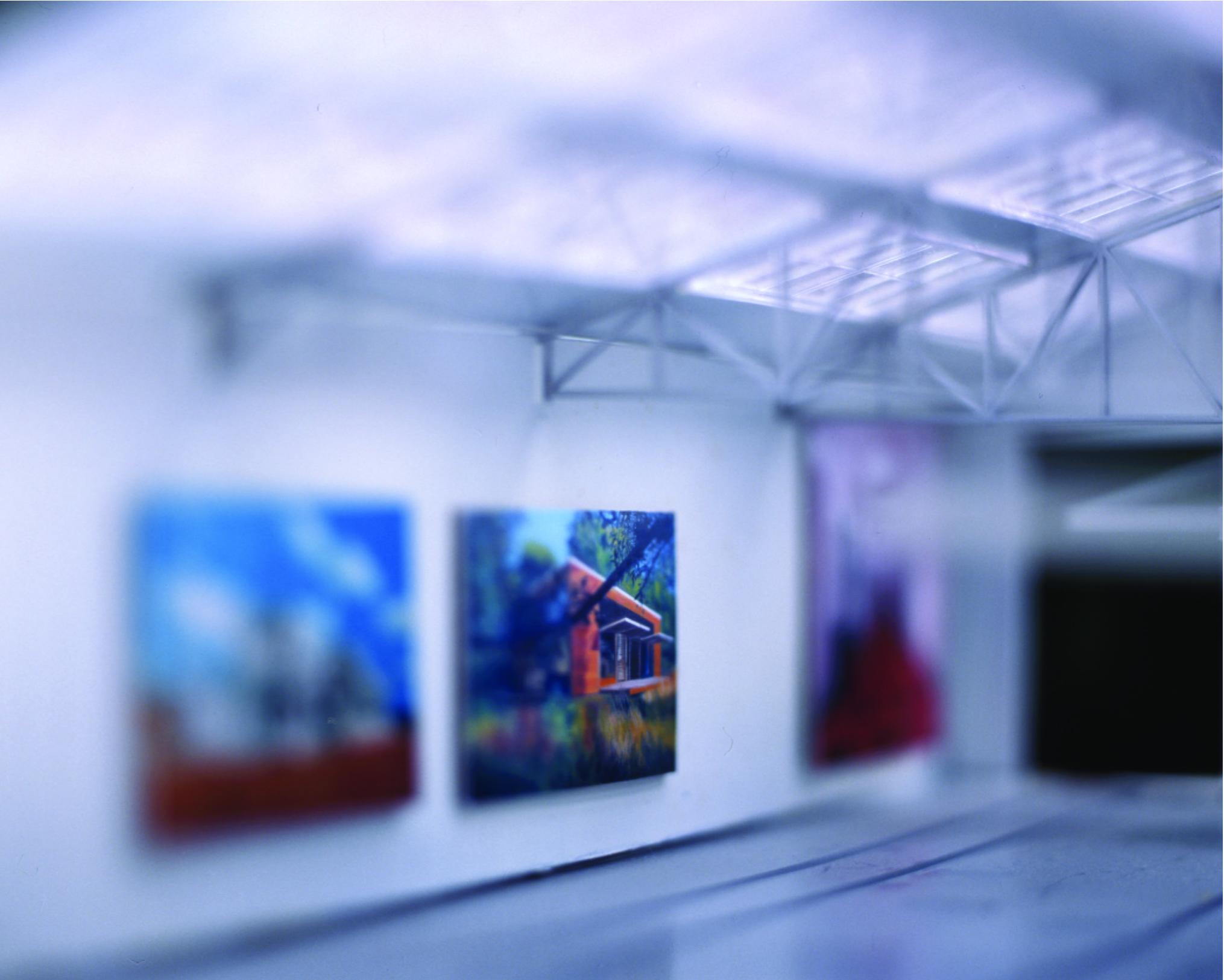
GT: Ideas about art and architecture have made a continuous thread running through your work, how do you see their relationship, and how did that interest arise?

E O'K: I formed an interest in looking at the two very early on, I grew up in Donegal, in a big old Plantation house that is Georgian in appearance, but which dates back to 1611. Those senses of context and space, of character and of history, made a deep impression. At one stage, my parents were doing some restoration work on part of the house. It was an old barn-type building that had trees growing out of it. The building had to be completely rebuilt, but it ended up being rebuilt in the style of the old one. I worked with the builder for the summer and, with hindsight, that introduced me to a lot of issues of scale and space, and also to the idea of the clash between the traditional and the modern. It made me really think about the character of a space.

I had planned to study architecture, but I also wanted to study art for a year. So I came to NCAD with the idea that I was going to go on to do architecture, then I got really into the process of making art, so I stayed on. Throughout my work I've always had this interest in context and place - whether it's landscape, or cityscape, or different realities, virtual realities, constructing realities - and an interest in architecture, in how buildings get into the city network or map and then how they function there, that's why I became so fascinated by the Panorama.

Perhaps then the divergence between the separate 'arts' of art and architecture begins at college. But there is still a cross over, how would you describe it?

There is certainly an evolving idea of spectacle in contemporary architecture, from architects like Frank Gehry, to the Acconci Studio, and Diller + Scofidio . They are all architects involved with pushing the boundaries, and I suppose that that is where the cross-over lies. Maybe there should be more of a breakdown of those boundaries. Instead, it seems that when an architect tries to do an installation at a museum or gallery, we end up with something that has been



Studio II
2004
Lambda print
light box
36 x 36 cm

done twenty years ago - by artists. And the exact same thing can happen with an artist trying to do a building, there's a lack of knowledge of context, of what has happened before. That can be positive sometimes. Rem Koolhaas has noted that too much knowledge of history can trap architects in to certain ways of looking and thinking.

The difference between art and architecture is also a difference of purpose, intent and responsibility. Architecture has a practical purpose. Taking the idea of the studio, art is made inside architecture. In terms of your own work, how do you think the conditions of making affect what is made? And what would be the ideal?

I'm presently working in a paper bag factory in Bristol and it's just a very raw warehouse-type space. It is great as a studio, but in terms of an ideal it's maybe a bit cold, a bit damp and it could have better access to the first floor... The Ideal Studio and Studio in the Woods series are engaged with that idea. Here, the spaces are the much more stereotypical, high modernist, minimalist buildings. They are pristine, almost like gallery or museum exhibition spaces, and from the outside, they also have a certain

sort of authority within the landscape.

And why do you think they are like that?

Because it's sort of a fantasy. And there's also the undercutting idea that they're not completely ideal. The work explores that myth of the artist working in creative isolation - which I also worked with in Overlook, a project based on Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*. Jack Nicholson thinks that all he needs is to get away from it all to write, but he doesn't realise that it's going to drive him mad.

In terms of the fantasy, there's also that idea with an Alvar Aalto house, or a place like Frank Lloyd's Falling Water that these spaces have authority, they are like autonomous objects with a certain character, and it's easier to extract a sense of the ideal from that.

In fact, the different 'characters' of those high modernist houses, the 'spectacular' buildings of Gehry and Koolhaas, and the industrial spaces, like your paper bag factory, seem to point to the different ways in which art is perceived at the moment: as spectacle, as something with a social or more practical purpose (like tourism), and as something autonomous,

perhaps even essentially 'pointless'.

I think that's part of a much bigger idea, which is where all the work is tending. Trying to work out a way of bringing together all those different ingredients and senses of art, and to find a way of working that is sustainable and expandable in terms of an art practice. The ideal studio is always one that is ideal for you, at a particular point in your practice. It's not going to be ideal for everyone. You can have a very clinical studio, or a very messy studio. I do think the studios that I have had have dictated what I have done, or I've had to work around them sometimes. For example in New York my studio wasn't big enough for the work I wanted to make, and I had to employ all sorts of weird support systems to work on the canvases I was using. That gave me a headache, but I wanted to make a certain body of work, and the way to do that was to fight against the architecture in a certain way.

If the studio only partially impacts on the work that is made there, how do you see the impact of the gallery space? Again we have the different models; the spectacular, the modernist, and the industrial, as well as the more historical spaces. In many cases, artists will be working

towards commissioned exhibitions, do you think that alters how work is made and then seen?

To some extent it does. On the other hand, there are some artists' works that seem to work in any space. There are also the touring shows that have to be flexible in terms of how they are going to fit into a variety of spaces. My work at the moment is divided between pieces that are made for specific commissions, and ones that I am developing separately from that. So the space is dictating there, and the exhibition can become an organic thing that changes, which is something I like. Then there are the spaces where you have to take work off the stretcher just to get it through the door... In those cases I always think I should have planned ahead.

Yes, but in those cases shouldn't the architects, or those converting the spaces for use as a gallery, also not have planned ahead? Which leads onto the question - do you think there is such a thing as the ideal gallery space?

If I had to give you an example, I would say that the ideal gallery is the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek, Denmark. It is a wonderful mixture of the old and the new. You've got this kind of additive architec-