



# **The Architect's House**

Eamon O'Kane





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RARE Gallery, New York  
November 15 – December 20, 2008

## Introduction

In his first New York solo exhibition, entitled *The Architect's House*, Eamon O'Kane presents new large-scale oil paintings that explore his fascination with architecture and landscape. Created during his residency at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris from April to June 2008, these works recombine elements of Modernist masterpieces and set them in idyllic landscapes to give voice to a contemporary utopian ideal. At the same time, O'Kane's paintings reference the more subversive aspects of literature, cinema and design to demonstrate the impossibility of achieving this ideal.

In *Lloyd Wright's Dream* (2008), we are presented with an interior of a building by Frank Lloyd Wright that recently was completed, many years after his death. From the window of the room one can see the isolated, precariously perched "Vandamm House" from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, which was a fictional building imagined by the film's set designers but based on Wright's architectural style. Cinematic allusions continue through the exhibition in works such as *Casa Bo Bardi Midday Sunset Mix with Shining Carpet* (2008). Here O'Kane draws a parallel between the Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's movie *The Shining*, a structure which was built on a Native American burial

ground and consumes its main character in the film, and the house that plays such a vital role in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Hints of Poe's imagery also appear in *Wright, Le Corbusier, Mondrian Mix with Plants from Edgar Allan Poe's Garden* (2008), where creepy tendrils begin their choking crawl up the side of a hybridized Modernist structure.

O'Kane recognizes the dichotomy in his own paintings where he seems to offer the possibilities of hope, optimism and redemption with one hand while snatching them away with the other through his surreal, foreboding, and threatening allusions. According to the artist, "Society . . . traps us with our desires. Philip Johnson's 'Glass House' is like a cage while at the same time being a wonderful piece of architecture." So for O'Kane, a home is not just a home, and green rolling hills are not just green rolling hills -- they become symbols of a precarious scenario where utopia apparently is within reach but actually is on the verge of being obliterated by a disturbing presence that seems to be lurking just beneath the surface.

Jeff Lutonsky and Pete Surace



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**Casa Bo Bardi Midday Sunset Mix with Shining Carpet**  
oil on canvas  
84" x 60" (213 x 152cm)

2008



## REMIX

In an art world dominated for decades by conceptual work, painting continues to exert a fascination. And what is more quintessentially painterly than landscape? Yet, taking the historical view, landscape is a relatively recent development, having leapt from the background of religious and genre paintings to become the main object of the artist's attention only in the 18th century, as the Industrial Revolution gathered pace.

Painters' fascination with landscape is bound up with our growing distance from it in the modern world, so it is refreshing to find a group of young artists at a fashionable gallery exploring ways in which landscape can interact with modernity " either in the subject matter, its treatment, or both.

Eamon O'Kane's paintings place the angular forms of modern houses in woodland settings. The buildings are not merely modern: they are bold statements of Modernism. (One, seen through a spring-green haze, is actually Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater in

Pennsylvania.) Electric light spills out into the wooded depths, and although humans are absent, the paintings suggest the playing out of some enigmatic human narrative.

O'Kane is an artist not used to restricting himself to one medium. Painting, installation, photography, and drawing are all areas that he has worked widely in. Even within single works there is often a crossover between disciplines, with stop motion animated paintings projected onto sculptural objects and large scale installations that combine drawing, man made objects and organic materials. The themes that he returns to and continues to expand are concerned with the relationship between nature and civilization, our connection to place, to architecture, and the aspirations that we project onto those spaces. In his series of paintings, Studio in the Woods, O'Kane examined the utopic ideal of the isolated retreat. These imaginary studios, inspired by modernist structures, real and imagined, at first hold the allure of a secluded hide out away from the demands of the everyday. But O'Kane's paintings suggest that architecture will fail us, that the fantasy is just that,

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### **Philip Johnson Night and Day Remix**

(painted whilst listening to Gershwin's Rhapsody in blue)

oil on canvas

60" x 101" (152 x 244cm)

2008





and what's more, the reality may do us more harm than good.

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.

These particular paintings where the man-made meets with nature, the intellectual artifice intersects with the 'natural' world, reflect a growing maturity in his work. These works further draw out O'Kane's conceptual concerns considering these noble iconic architectural interventions from some of the world's leading architects including, Frank Lloyd Wright, Lacaton Vassal, Alvar Aalto and Elam & Bray.

In these meditations O'Kane appears to query ideas of space, connectivity and engagement with society and the environment that are suggested

in the paintings. It also brings forth ideas of the aestheticized space, the artist removed, alone. As the Irish Times critic Aidan Dunne commented "the remote, at times forbidding settings of these prototypical studios also raise the question of whether the artist is better placed in an ivory tower or in the midst of social space". These forms of engagement concern and perplex him – he employs an act of visual description using the traditional artistic tools, the quasi direct drawing and painting approach with its lineage of apparent perceptual honesty and responsiveness wrapped in the non-sureness of artistic subjectivity side-by-side with the post-modern awareness of the complexity and compromised nature of visual representation.

Every now and then we pause (or a writer, an artist, a filmmaker gives us pause) to look again, to try to find the reality that lies behind the way we live, behind the dreams we sell ourselves. And while some works of art and literature are pure escapism, others are like windows or refining lenses; drawing our attention to those things seen so often that we often forget to look at them properly at all. Eamon O'Kane's work

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### **Lloyd Wright's Dream**

(painted whilst listening to Nevermind by Nirvana)

oil on canvas

101" x 149" (256 x 378cm)

2008





has previously explored the realities behind some of the architectural and artistic myths of making, and of the dangers of trying to turn your dreams into reality, of believing in perfection. The Studio in the Woods series and Overlook draw out the idea that retreating to the ideal of the isolated studio, to the purity of the Modernist palace set in some rural refuge, might actually drive you mad. The slightly sinister nature of these paintings make the white walls of the studios seem like the perimeters of lurking brooding prisons, beautifully designed and elegantly executed perhaps, but prisons nonetheless. Here, alone with himself, the artist may discover disturbingly unexpected consequences.

It is this conjunction of isolated beauty and impending danger that lies at the heart of the work of Eamon O’Kane.

O’Kane recognises the forest or wood as a space which has been historically formulated as a place of mystery, outside culture, and thus, a figment of our imagination. Cultural theorists have long recognised the forest as a potent metaphor for the antithesis of civilisation. In Grimm’s Fairy Tales, it is the forbidden

territory. In Marx, it is the politically contested boundary between the lords and the common Volk. As A.S. Byatt recently suggested, “The fairy tale journey into the woods is a movement inward, into the lands of the soul. The dark path of the fairy tale forest lies in the shadows of our imagination, the depths of our unconscious. To travel to the wood, to face its dangers, is to emerge transformed by this experience... Italo Calvino has made the inevitable connection between storytelling and the forest... “He sees a light in the distance, he walks and walks; the fable unwinds from sentence to sentence, and where is it leading?”<sup>1</sup>

O’Kane’s series of large-scale oil paintings Studio in the Woods oscillate between this fiction and reality. The architectural visions of Wright, Alvar Aalto and Elam & Bray are glimpsed through the trees, the buildings’ lights flickering in the dim distance. Most recognizable is Frank Lloyd Wright’s Falling Water, an iconic American retreat, built in 1936 for Pittsburgh department store magnate, Edgar Kaufman Sr. Owned and now by Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (a US state-run version of the National

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### **Eames Psychedelic Seasons Remix**

(painted whilst listening to Forever Changes by Love)

oil on canvas

91” x 104” (231 x 264cm)

2008







Trust). The house is of course now dominated by tourists. In O’Kane’s vision, however, these real and invented buildings are devoid of occupants. His soft brushwork, the unnatural skies and picture-postcard framing serve to heighten the sense of the buildings as models or stage-sets, devoid of inhabitants and set outside society.

Since the founding of artists’ colonies in the 19th Century such as Barbizon in the Forest of Fontainebleau, the notion of Villegiature (literally meaning ‘deprived of the city’) has impelled artists and writers to seek out the rural idyll as a site of creativity. Worpswede can be understood as a sequel to Barbizon, as can the Academy Schloss Solitude: a Baroque castle which houses an academy on the edge of the Leonberg Forest. The association of rural isolation with creativity has persisted today with models such as the established Banff creative residencies in the Rocky Mountains and even the conversion of the Taransay pods from the BBC Castaway TV series into an artist retreat park.

Seen alongside his unnerving, video compositions and digital invocations of the uncanny, however,

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### **Fallingwater Seasons Remix**

(painted whilst listening to In Utero by Nirvana)

oil on canvas

88” x 108” (223 x 274cm)

2008

O’Kane’s paintings of the ‘ideal studios’ seem to resist the romanticism of the rural residency movement or artists’ colony. The forms of the architecture cut across the trees and vegetation suggesting an unwelcome and unyielding intervention. They recall that first glimpse of The Overlook Hotel: the brooding presence of an exterior, emptied of its human occupants.

As an accumulation of modernist propositions or hallucinations, the paintings (like O’Kane’s manic sequence of Monday Through Sunday) suggest the tension that underlies Jack Torrance’s own psychosis in The Shining. They reside at the uneasy encounter between artifice and nature. Far from being the ‘ideal studio’, such places are isolated from the social environment, suggesting a stymied creativity - the ultimate gothic nightmare of the unremitting writer’s block.

A remix of texts by Chris Schuler, Jacqui McIntosh, Mike Fitzpatrick, Claire Doherty, Aidan Dunne, Gemma Tipton and Niamh Ann Kelly

<sup>1</sup> A.S. Byatt, “Happy Ever After”, The Guardian, January 3 2004







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**Tower East View Midday**

oil on canvas

39.4 x 39.4 inches (100 x 100cm)

2008



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**Wright, Le Corbusier, Mondrian Mix with Plants from  
Edgar Allan Poe's Garden**

oil on canvas  
84" x 60" (213 x 152cm)

2008





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**Ideal Studio Complex III (after Bates Maher)**  
oil on canvas  
47.2 x 47.2 inches (120 x 120cm)

2008





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**Pool West View Morning (after Aalto)**  
oil on canvas  
47.2 x 59.1 inches (120 x 150cm)

2008





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**Studio 1 Evening Southwest View**

oil on canvas

84" x 60" (213 x 152cm)

2008

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**House morning east view**

oil on canvas

78" x 118" (200 x 300cm)

2008







Eamon O’Kane (b. 1974) is a practicing artist who has studied in Dublin, Belfast and New York. He has exhibited widely and is the recipient of many awards and scholarships including the Taylor Art Award, The Tony O’Malley Award and a Fulbright Award. He has shown in exhibitions curated by Dan Cameron, Lynne Cooke, Klaus Ottman, Salah M. Hassan, Jeremy Millar, Mike Fitzpatrick and Apinan Poshyananda. He has taken part in EV+A, Limerick, Ireland six times including 2005 when he received an EV+A open award from Dan Cameron. In 2006 he was short-listed for the AIB Prize and received a Pollock Krasner foundation grant. O’Kane has had over forty solo exhibitions including shows in Berlin, Frankfurt, Dublin, Zurich, New York, London and Copenhagen. He was short-listed for the Jerwood Drawing Prize in London in 2007. His artwork is in numerous public and private collections worldwide including Deutsche Bank; Burda Museum, Baden Baden, Germany; Sammlung Südhausbau, Munich; Limerick City Gallery; FORTIS; DUBLIN 98FM Radio Station; Microsoft; Bank of Ireland Collection; Irish Contemporary Arts Society; Country Bank, New York; Office of Public Works; P.M.P.A. and Guardian Insurance; Donegal County Library; UNIBANK, Denmark; NKT Denmark; HK, Denmark; Den Danske Bank, Denmark; Letterkenny Institute of Technology; University Of Ulster, Belfast; Aspen RE, London; Rugby Art Gallery and Museum Collection. Eamon completed a three month residency at Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris in 2008. O’Kane is currently Visiting Research Fellow in Fine Art at UWE in Bristol, UK.

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