

I Wanted To Write a Review

Poet Seán Kiely speaks to Emerging Visual Artist award winner Jonathan Mayhew about his exhibition *I Wanted To Write A Poem*, currently showing in Wexford Arts Centre.

“To suggest is to create; to describe is to destroy.”

Robert Doisneau

It's true, I really did want to write a review of Jonathan Mayhew's exhibition.

I had wanted to describe, question, and anatomise each extraordinary, puzzling piece. For example, the large clock without hands on the wall above reception, black as the iris of an all seeing eye—why no hands, why above reception, is it actually watching us? Or the upright vases scattered about the Pillar Room floor, each with its own usb stick teasing from its inner lip, daring you not to accidentally knock them over as you contemplate the photographs on the wall, the book in the corner— what information is on the usb sticks, are the vases a nod to dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's notorious Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn?

I had hoped to convey the cathedral-like reverence in the upstairs video installation—how I'd observed people sit absolutely still for five minutes as slowly spiralling smoke, poetry and quotes were projected onto a black screen. How afterward each of them stood quietly and walked outside, lost in thought; you could say in a trance.

But then I met the artist and listened, with great interest, to what he had to say.

And I changed my mind.

Jonathan Mayhew introduced himself with a handshake and a warm smile. Dressed casually in jeans and a black T-shirt bearing the legend, "don't laugh, you're here too" in large white letters, he exuded an energy that was somehow both confident and sensitive. And in the same way, with a shock of greying hair combed back from his forehead and a simi-

larly greying viking beard on his chin he seemed both older and younger than his mid thirties. And he spoke softly, but with a deep intelligence and lucidity.

We decided to retreat from the hustle and bustle of Wexford Arts Centre where his exhibition was being installed, to a quiet corner of nearby Whites Hotel; all the better to hear one another speak.

After we had settled in and coffee had been served, we started to talk about his life as an artist. The word “evolution” came to mind as he described the various transformations he has made over the years, beginning with his enrolment at the National College of Art and Design in 2001.

“Originally in college I was interested in film, but I realised art gave me more freedom. I like working quickly,” he said, smiling. “Then, for years I used to be a painter and there are certain things you can’t do with paint, you have to use objects, so there’s certainly been a change over the last decade of my work.”

Can you give me an example?

“Well, last year, for example, I did a piece with tears. I was trying to show a way of time passing. I had tears in a glass and over the length of time of the exhibition they evaporated slowly - that was called When This Is Over, I will Have Forgotten And You Will Have Seen The Future.”

“And for years I’ve been in and out of bands - and I’ve been DJ-ing. I still

do some improvised music. Teresa Gillespie, Karl Burke (both previous winners of the EVA award) , Suzanne Walsh (originally from Wexford), we get together and make noise with objects, electronics, laptops.”

Given the title of his latest exhibition, I had to ask.

So you write poetry too?

“The last two things I did before this show were writing based. Rebecca O’Dwyer, the Wexford based art writer, invited me last year to contribute a thousand words to her website www.responsetoarequest.com. The piece before that was for the online arts magazine, Critical Bastards. They were kind of poems, but I don't want to say that I am a writer - I’m playing with words and my work. I wrote a piece for them called Five Poems Read By Machines, with computer generated voices reading the poems. Two of the poems are humming sounds, one at 50mhz, the other at 60mhz.”

In an introduction to his Wexford exhibition Jonathan Mayhew wrote that the title of the current exhibition is borrowed from a collection of interviews with poet William Carlos Williams. Williams did not elaborate on how he wrote his poems, their meanings or in which context they stand as he did not want to spoil the way people read his work. Similarly, the works in this exhibition, like brief conversations, are left for people to find, eavesdrop in and engage with. Asking, not what are you looking at, rather, what is it you’re seeing or not?

“My fear,” Jonathan explained, “is telling people too much. I’ve talked through works to the point where it’s no longer worth making them because they no longer involve any imagination.”

There is certainly no danger of the viewer’s imagination being stifled here. One work, simply titled *It Took The Night*, consists of two large sheets of photographic paper. The first sheet was exposed to the light of the sun on the 14th of November last year; the second sheet was exposed to the light of the moon when night fell later. Neither of the sheets has been treated, so they continue to draw and contain light, even as you stand in front of them in the gallery today.

I couldn’t help myself: I probed Jonathan about the meaning of this work. His answer was immediate and heartfelt.

“I’m interested in things you can’t see—where you’re told that this thing exists but you can’t see it—where you have to imagine it. It feels like imagination is one of those things people lose when they grow up—people don’t like to imagine anymore. I worked in a museum for a long time and everyone just wanted to know exactly what the work on show was about - but with art there isn’t a yes or no answer, it is about your own experience with the work.”

And finally I got it. I had wanted to write a review, to define this exhibition’s meaning for anyone who would set out to see it, even before they had made their journey. But that is not the point.

This artist's work asks each of us to engage with it on our own terms, to imagine. There is no yes or no.

And so, I am happy to say--there will be no review.