

Stephen Loughman Catalogue Essay – Jacqui McIntosh 2006

Undercurrents: Beneath the surface of Stephen Loughman's *The Lake*

By Jacqui McIntosh

The lake is the territory of pulp fiction and the horror movie, of hard boiled detectives and bloated corpses. Reflections on the surface of the lake reveal partial truths; disturbances on the water turn the reflected world into patterns of colour and light. The lake's secrets lie waiting to be dredged up, they have nowhere to go. Stephen Loughman's series of paintings, *The Lake*, draw upon the common language of cinema. Through a sequence of nine paintings, a narrative unfolds that is guided by the artist, but that ultimately forms within the imagination of the viewer. In previous works, Loughman has depicted a diversity of subjects ranging from parklands and interiors to waxworks and museum exhibits. The viewer looks out onto scenes in which nothing seems to happen but which are filled with a sense of anticipation of the events that might unfold.

Earlier paintings by Loughman such as *Remember?* (2004) and *Stalker* (2005), call into play cinematic and painterly ideas of spectatorship, placing the viewer firmly in the gaze of an unseen internal spectator. In *Remember?* a wide staircase leads to a closed door in a dimly lit hall. As an external spectator we recognize that we are looking at a painting and that further movement is impossible; nevertheless the vantage point depicted is suggestive of further motion and that one more step will bring the top of the door into shot. Throughout cinematic history, notably film noir and films such as Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, the staircase has been used as a point of entry into danger. The assumption, formed through these cinematic associations, that trouble lies waiting for us at the top of Loughman's staircase adds to feelings of unease. The dramatic use of light and shade and the viewpoint that we are given, combine to create an image in which we find ourselves not merely an onlooker but active participant.

In *Stalker* (2005), the viewer becomes accomplice to a voyeuristic spectator. We look out through silhouetted shrubs and trees, to a brightly painted sitting room. The patio doors reflect the garden that Loughman's voyeur is crouching in but not their image. The lights and TV are on, suggesting that there is someone home and that they could walk into view at any moment. In films such as Hitchcock's *Rear Window* or David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, characters who attempt to satisfy their voyeuristic desires by entering the world that they are looking at face terrible consequences. For the moment Loughman's voyeur is content to look and wait, and as they look so do we.

Loughman's latest series of paintings, *The Lake*, develop ideas of spectatorship even further than before, giving the viewer a stronger sense of the identity of the character whose gaze they share. Richard Wollheim's concept of *central imagining*¹ describes the process of imagining an event from the point of view of a character within a dramatic scene. Wollheim asserts that the presence of an internal spectator should not merely represent a point of view but alter our understanding of the image. For the viewer to put themselves in a protagonist's shoes there must be an indication of the kind of person that character is and the experience that they are supposed to have in the virtual world presented.² *Voices*, the first painting in Loughman's *The Lake* depicts the interior of an Irish pub reflected in a mirror that we, the viewer, look directly into. The pub appears to be empty, so much so that the implication is that the voices are in the mind of Loughman's protagonist. Despite sharing their gaze, the mirror reflects everything but their or our presence. From this very first image it is implied that all is not as it should be. Throughout *The Lake*, Loughman gives clues to the state of mind of this character by use of imagery and to a lesser extent title. Two sequential images of woodland could indicate an obsession with place, or a character moving through a landscape. The large full moon, viewed through silhouetted trees in *Waiting* is reminiscent of scenes from classic *Hammer Horror* movies, where the moon indicates

¹ Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life*, (Cambridge (Mass); Harvard University Press, 1984), p.71-84

² Renee Van De Vall, *The Staging of Spectatorship, Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting: Art as Representation and Expression*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.182

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a physical transformation from man to beast. The meaning of Loughman's paintings, both individually and in relation to each other, is open to interpretation, the images triggering our imagination to fill in the gaps.

When watching a particularly good film, we can become absorbed in the story that unfolds on the screen, whilst recognising simultaneously that we exist outside of it. This also applies to painting and Loughman's use of reflections within his work draw the viewer's attention to the interplay between real and artificial. In previous paintings, such as *Painting No. 3* from the exhibition *2C Langdale Road (2001)*³, reflections have suggested a continuation of a virtual reality beyond the canvas or, as in *Dreamtime (2003)*, have literally turned our expectations of what is real upside down. In *The Lake*, reflections, whether in mirror, glass, or water, catch the viewer unawares, subtly undermining the initial reading of the image. The trees reflected on the surface of the water in Loughman's final image (Untitled) may imply a forest around the lake's perimeter, but it is one that extends only to the four corners of the canvas. In another image our awareness of a single pane of glass is alerted by the subtlest of reflections, causing us to look again more closely. In *Voices*, the absence of our own reflection in Loughman's mirror, reminds us that we are looking at a painting. The surface of the mirror, normally unperceivable to the human eye whose gaze focuses on the reflected scene, reveals itself in the marked surface of the canvas.

The most terrifying movies are not always the goriest. Films in which the horror slowly builds in the viewer's mind rather than on screen often are those that chill the viewer the most. Hitchcock's *Psycho* is often credited with being the, "scariest movie ever made", despite the fact that the violence in the film is no longer than a couple of minutes. As Stephen King asserts: "I recognise terror as the finest emotion", with, "horror below it, and lowest of all, the gag reflex of revulsion..."⁴ There is no horror in the imagery of Loughman's *The Lake*. Instead Loughman depicts seemingly ordinary Irish scenes that when viewed through the eyes of his unseen character are subtly destabilised. A sense of foreboding is conveyed through murky waters and disturbances on the surface of the lake. In *Wrong*, brightly coloured flowers appear to be infested with flies. Our understanding of the image changes as we look closer to discover that we are looking out through a window and that the flies are resting on the inside of the pane of glass. Something is literally rotten, be it the mind of Loughman's protagonist or something tangible. Whilst the painting of a newly born baby within the series depicts a happy and peaceful scene, when viewed in relation to subsequent images it begins to take on sinister undertones. Innocence is lost, but to what extent is decided by the leaps of imagination within the viewer's mind.

³ Full title of exhibition: *2C Langdale Road BN3 4HN*

⁴ Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, (Berkley Publishing Group, 1997), p.21-22