

## Ian Gordon, 'The September Paintings'

Regional Cultural Centre, Letterkenny  
23 October – 11 December 2021

A 'PLEIN AIR' painter' based in Dunlewey, County Donegal, Ian Gordon lifts his landscapes directly from the environment surrounding his studio. He has been described as the "best artist of the Donegal area" – an expression that ties in with the dedication, rigour and commitment he applies to the county's depiction. In every moment, he is Donegal; there is no text where he does not mention his relationship with looking, seeing, improvising in this world to find the "emotional certainty to pull together a resonant image."

For the month of September, Gordon battles salt, wind and rain, achieves triumph and victory to produce a tremendous body of work. The oil paintings hang chronologically, dated and framed, with certain boards centred in complimentary coloured backgrounds and other works framed directly at the edges. Accompanying Gordon's 'September Paintings' is a book of diary entries, responding to the experience of each day's work. The writing is printed with a typewriter font. Some pages have an accompanying image. These entries do much to inform the viewer of the hands-on, technical difficulties of creating paintings such as these. He talks about the trivial aspects of the everyday, infringing on his ability to work:

"Saturday 11 September: A small painting only this morning as there is a full agenda of shopping and meeting Annie from Boston off the bus from the airport." Another invites the viewer to witness the often-overlooked drama and comedy of the process, a Peter Sellers-style scenario in the menology: "Years ago I would have created a muddy painting. I would have stepped on my brushes and got paint on my face! Cursing out loud all the time ... it is what it is ... And strangely it's worked out fine."

There is a very important and personal reminder at the beginning and end of the journey: "Sometimes you have to lose the red tree" and "Consider the return to the studio with a canvas on which delicate paint like soft butter is vulnerable to any smudge, and a mischievous wind trying to fling it to the ground. That's the excitement!" There is a generosity of spirit

in Gordon's writing, showing not only his necessary travails but fascinating insights into his theories of composition, draughtsmanship, and colour theory.

In October 2006, Gordon undertook his first rigorous painting 'journey', when he tasked himself with making a painting each day for 31 days, outdoors in the Donegal landscape, to honour the centenary of Paul Cézanne's death. He wished to recognise the contributions Cézanne made to the development of abstraction and cubism but also to the field of painting itself. Upon first glance at Gordon's more recent exhibition, there are instant comparisons to Cézanne in the plane construct and the angular freneticism of stacked matter against calming walls of flat paint. Indeed, we are reminded of Cézanne's own writing on these matters: "The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness" or his aspiration to "SEE the odour" of the world.

There is red underpainting peeking through Gordon's boards, beautifully lit and arranged as they were by the gallery. The mild ballast holds us against some jagged stalactite of oil and colouration of Mount Errigal. It is crucial however to note that this is not some Cézanne impersonation. Whilst the paintings work in homage in some instances, Gordon is entirely present in this body. We see it in the unusually high inch of sea-sky horizon in a 'classic cliff location'; or in the charming, singular uprightness of the telegraph poles running through other landscapes. The single dictated scribble of a bright yellow oil bar under a forest awning denotes the writer.

The trees from 22 September are wilder than any French landscapes barring the Fauves. The persistent handled fluorescent blue of the rocks on Port Arthur beach are that of fresh, contemporary, twenty-first-century art. Gordon pulls off two feats with his project: painting outdoors daily in Donegal to create a huge body of painted and printed work; and adding to the canon a fresh, stylish and authentic exhibition – an answer to any question on the relevance of painting.

**Christina Mullen is an arts writer and researcher based in Donegal.**

## Patrick Graham, 'Taking Leave'

Hillsboro Fine Art, Dublin  
21 October – 20 November 2021



Patrick Graham, *Taking Leave (2)*, 2021, acrylic and mixed media on heavy paper, 84 x 102 cm; image courtesy the artist and Hillsboro Fine Art.

**WE LIVE IN** uncertain times, and nothing is as it used to be. We need a certificate to have a cup of coffee, a mask to get on a bus. A visit to an exhibition is not like any other.

Patrick Graham's 'Taking Leave' presents a series of 14 works in acrylic and ink on paper, each 84 x 102 cm. The predominant colour is a chalky, washed-out grey. A recurring motif is the figure of a bird, drawn in rough lines in paint (pink, brown, white). Another is the shape, again merely an outline, of a human figure – headless? head bent? – seated or reclined. Classical columns appear in several works, as does the phrase: "Somewhere Jerusalem". The most salient feature, however, is the letters, L, A, R, K, M, B, placed and often numbered in such a way as to leave no other reading possible than 'lark' and 'lamb'. Indeed the lark is frequently referenced elsewhere in quotes such as: "The lark in the morning she rises [from] her nest".

Encountering these elements for the first time is akin to being handed a page of text in which certain words have been redacted. To make sense, you have to fill in the blanks; to fill in the blanks, you need to know the language. In Graham's case, this is not a far-fetched analogy; indeed, art writer Jarrett Earnest has written of Graham's 'lexicon'. But making sense requires contextual knowledge and this is missing in this exhibition: there is no catalogue, there are no labels.

Why is this so? Well, it may be that Graham's status is such that no explanation is needed. One website alone provides the following encomiums: "Recognised by Ireland as a 'Living National Treasure'... Graham... can take his place among the great masters spanning the Renaissance to the present day"<sup>1</sup>. Those who have followed this trajectory over decades will be familiar with the tropes and themes of Graham's work, and will no doubt make contextual connections almost instinctively. Although even for the cognoscenti, there may be surprises. These works are much smaller than Graham's norm (180 x 350 cm) and he has used acrylic paint and ink – both factors determined to some extent by the constraints of lockdown.

A lack of overt contextual information, while unusual, certainly forces the viewer to take the works at face value, a process which has its own challenges. What am I looking at? What am I looking for? The latter question demands different answers, depending on the viewer's position. As an artist, I am often curious about the 'how' of a work; but as a gallery visitor, I may be more interested in the 'why'. What was discombobulating about this exhibition was that neither question really took hold – my curiosity was not sufficiently piqued. This surprised me, and raised a new question: Why not?

*The horse raced past the barn fell.* This sentence is known linguistically as a 'garden path sentence', in which one's initial expectation is not met, so it must be re-interpreted to get the correct meaning. And this is what 'Taking Leave' does. It confounds your expectations of an exhibition and requires you to re-view it from a different perspective.

This perspective suggests that the works are reflections of the artist's internal processes during a particular time. They are not seeking to communicate or engage with the viewer – an interpretation supported by the absence of any contextual information – but rather act as a record of the artist's thoughts, ideas, recurring tropes in no particular order or relationship, a stream of consciousness rendered onto paper. Viewing the works feels like coming across a personal journal left open on a table; you are not expressly invited to read, but nor are you asked not to. And if you do, you will not learn much more than you already know. The question you are then faced with is, do I want to know more? The answer, like so much in these bizarre times, may not be quite what you would expect.

**Mary Catherine Nolan is an artist, art writer, and occasional lecturer in linguistics.**

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Robbie Goodrich, 'Texas National 2013, Patrick Graham exhibition to open April 13', 25 March 2013, sfasu.edu



Ian Gordon, *30 Sept. The last painting. Bad weather means I take two days. So much to think about just with tree trunks. Leaves are a whole other story. I will be back for sure, 2021*; photograph by Regional Cultural Centre, image courtesy of the artist.