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ARTIST -
RICHARD
HEARNS

interview Mazzy-Mae Green

Richard Hearn is not an intellectual painter. His work is bucolic, charming, and stocked up on love. At the age of 19, Richard began to progress from media to painting, moving steadily from recording his surroundings on his laptop, to drawing and then painting them. Years later, and Richard now fluctuates between observational work and abstraction. His most recent paintings prioritise natural response to the canvas, drawing not only from his rustic surroundings in Ireland but from his birth in Beirut at the height of the Lebanese Civil War—and perhaps from what he can discover of himself through these works. “With these paintings, I wish to disassociate with the quantifiable and the known, and I feel like the spiritual quality of the paint takes precedence in this work.” His latest project has proven popular, with his first solo show in London opening at Cadogan Contemporary on 17th September.

Today, Richard sits in his bright studio in the rugged and beautiful Burren National Park and—through a thick Irish accent—speaks candidly of his work.

I'd like to start by asking you about the abstraction in your recent work, which is very different from your figurative pieces from before 2013. What sparked this segmentation?
Well, it actually goes back quite a bit. I wrote my thesis on abstraction, and I endeavoured to use Freudian and Jungian theories of psychoanalysis as a means to interpret artworks. The thesis was a disaster, but I didn't lose my interest in abstraction. When in

museums or galleries, I found myself drawn to strong abstraction. It would pull me over to it. So I was always examining those works and large-scale formal paintings. I didn't know that I would end up making abstract paintings, because my background is in drawing and developing line work and draughtsmanship, but, in 2013, I took a leap. So that's how it happened.

Your current show at Cadogan Contemporary, “Journey”, is an exploration of how painting can depict the internal search for self-understanding. How does abstraction play into this?
These works move away from figuration, or any other sort of comprehension. So, even more than an expression of the internal, these paintings are a celebration of the stuff of paint: it's

allure and material essence. That's what draws me back to the studio now. That's what I've come to realise. With these paintings, I wish to disassociate with the quantifiable and the known, and I feel like the spiritual quality of the paint takes precedence in this work. So these paintings are all about gesture and about how I move in front of the canvas. It's a game of time and chance.

These abstract works remind me of rolling hillsides marked with warmth and fresh air. Do you plan this sensation, or does it arise at the production stage?
I definitely feel like the landscape could be coming through in my artworks. I live in an Irish national park that has a unique landscape, and I'm sure that my observation of nature there and my fairly limited understanding of the geology of



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the area does come through in the painting, because there are certain balances and colours that are part of the landscape. I don’t plan this, though; I just make the paintings and try to allow whatever comes through to come through.

What inspiration do you take from your Lebanese heritage?
I’m really interested in my heritage, but I know so little about it. My adopted father, my Irish dad, tells me that I have a lot of Lebanese traits. He spent a lot of time over there with the United Nations. He says that I have a lot of traits that are Lebanese, but I don’t fully understand these—they’re just the way I am. But I’m really interested in the Lebanese people and the Phoenicians and the merchants who traded there. The history of that part of the Middle East is really rich; it’s an incredible history. But I’m very much an Irishman. I was brought here when I was six weeks old.

Do you feel that Irish culture plays a large part in your work?
I think the Irish have a great literary community, but we don’t have a very strong visual arts culture because we were a poor nation. Writing and storytelling—like the Book of Kells or any of the illuminated manuscripts—were the ways that we were creative in Ireland because we couldn’t afford paint. Being on the periphery of York, we were so far from where those colours were found, and we didn’t have the money for that. We’re a very strong literary nation, and I’m inspired by literature and poetry. I do find that I have to go abroad to look at painting. The Irish have writing and storytelling in their blood, but the Spaniards have painting in their blood. It’s so natural to them. If you go all the way back to Velazquez and Goya, you can see that there is this beautiful culture of painting there. In Ireland, it’s a more literary culture.

So how did you come to discover painting?
I learnt about professional practice through trial and error. I never really painted in college—I always drew.

And the tutors always encouraged my drawing. I think it was through using notebooks to generate ideas for my videos that my drawing improved, and then developed into painting. As I travelled, my drawings became more colourful, and these coloured drawings became paintings. I think all that drawing in college was a foundation for my painting. And then when I started to travel more—at around the age of 19—I decided to leave the laptop at home. Instead, I recorded what I was seeing with this notebook. That was when I realised that I enjoyed the drawing process far more than the editing process, so the drawings became a concentration of reality for me. And then I began to paint.

You’re also actively involved in showing every aspect of the paintings, often through video, from creation to exhibition. Why?
I’ve always felt like using social media was like having an online archive. I love the videos. They’re little glimpses of the archival material, of which we have a lot. I work very closely with my videographer Owen Collins, and we’ve recorded a lot over the last few years. We also produce books of my work. I think of all this as archiving. It’s a platform to archive my work. I wrote a blog for years, starting back in around 2007. And I used to write a lot. The way that we digest information now is very different, and these social media platforms allow me to put across my work, and the books are a great way to underline that for friends, family, and collectors.

Do you often look back at these archives?
I do! If I scroll through my Instagram feed, I can see how the work is developing. I don’t see that day to day in the studio. It’s really interesting for me to see that. It’s lovely and accessible. It gives you something to strive for when you look back at work and you think: ‘I want to improve that. I want it to go in this direction.’ You can look back at your work and consider how to take another step to make it better. How do I apply the paint to make something different? What do I want to discover?

It struck me while reading your blog

that you are fascinated by the different influences that feed into an artist’s work. Who do you pull inspiration from?
I draw inspiration from all over: from science, literature, poetry, and even sport. I’ve often tried to create something from that bridge of knowledge. There are many different schools of painting that I’ve been interested in and dipped into. And this is the same for everything that I’m interested in. I’ll move away from something for a while, and then return to it. Just last week, I went back to my home in Claire, on the west coast, and I started a series of small still-life paintings. I had painted observational paintings for a few months, but this time I brought abstraction back into this figurative work. I enjoy oscillating between the two ideas and applications. I find they complement each other. I feel like there isn’t much evolution in one motif, so I’m always trying to push myself more in that sense.

You now live in the heart of Ireland’s Burren National Park. Why do artists move there?
I think it’s the space you’re afforded. When you’re in a city, you often have less space. There’s a freedom to the west of Ireland, because it’s not that heavily populated. You have time to think, and you can walk in areas where you might not see another person for miles. You can expand into that space.

You once said in an interview that you consider yourself to be ‘childlike.’ What makes you feel this way?
I don’t approach these abstract paintings from an intellectual standpoint. I’ve never identified with intellectual paintings. I want my work to be exploratory and fun, and I try not to engage with it in a cerebral way. I just want to express myself. That’s what the paintings are about.

(ends.)



RICHARD HEARNS in his studio. Courtesy of the artist and CADOGAN CONTEMPORARY