



Good Morning Mr Turner

Separated by time, but united in their inspiration, Niall Naessens shows his work at this season's annual display of the Turner Collection, reports **David Lilburn**

Affirming the view that the best readings of art are art, and that art is also art criticism, the National Gallery of Ireland, to compliment the next annual display of the Henry Vaughan Bequest of works by Joseph Mallord William Turner in January 2018, has invited Irish master printmaker Niall Naessens to mount an exhibition. Showing no evidence of being overshadowed by his great exemplar, Naessens sets out to welcome and engage with his hero in his exhibition *Good Morning Mr Turner*. 'My work for this show' he writes 'is an homage to Turner. As an artist who works in the realm of landscape imagery I constantly revisit Turner's work and take note each time I do, he is the measure, the standard.' A theme running through the show is that of conversation; conversations between two artists and between an artist and the landscape. With Brandon Head as a backdrop, Naessens and Turner can be seen conversing in

the etching 'Artists Discussing Burke's Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of Sublime and Beautiful', referring to a treatise so influential to Turner and the Romantic movement (Fig 3). In many of the images, an artist, probably Mr Turner, possibly Mr Naessens – book under his arm, wearing a distinctive hat – prowls through the landscapes on the lookout for images and experiences.

In his exhibition there are many enjoyable 'quotes' and references to works by Turner, for example, the figure of Napoleon standing on a local Kerry beach before a blood red morning sky in 'Figures from a History Painting' and the octagonal image space in *Artist Observing Dawn, Sunrise over Caherconree*, (Fig 1). Both bring to mind Turner's *War. The Exile and the Rock Limpit* (Tate Britain).

Many artists who have developed a distinctive personal 'voice', started off making work 'after' their hero before ending up becoming more like themselves. In his show Naessens does not make 'Turners', he makes 'Naessenses'. The standard curatorial device of juxtaposition of these two exhibitions highlights just how different the two bodies of work are: in technique, in imagery, in temperament – unsurprisingly as the artists are from different places and from a different time.

But it also underlines a significant similarity – the works are landscapes which are imbued with a sense of presence, and in describing a view or an event express the experience of 'being there'.

Naessens' exhibition comprises drawings, coloured etchings and a charming 'artist's book' or 'box set' of thirteen small etchings entitled *Good Morning Mr Turner* with the subtitle *Indeed Sublime*, a reference to Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*. The coloured etchings are made by printing up to four plates, each containing drawn elements, in different colours in layers on the one piece of paper and then through a labour intensive process, persistently modifying the plates and proofing, over a period of time (days, weeks, even months) until the final resonant image is eventually brought into being.

The large airy drawings in the show are built up in a manner that is informed by the rigorous processes of printmaking: ruled horizontal graphite lines of varying weights, are overlaid with a layer of translucent etching ink and then over painted in gouache.

In the work Naessens employs a number of artistic devices and constraints; all the images are in a square format, viewpoints are stretched, scale is distorted, props added and moved around and he frequently uses events or marks representing for example rain, vegetation or insects and apertures of one sort or another in the foreground to interrupt and frame the scene.

To make a landscape it is important to continually re-look at the landscape and Naessens brings an impressive battery of

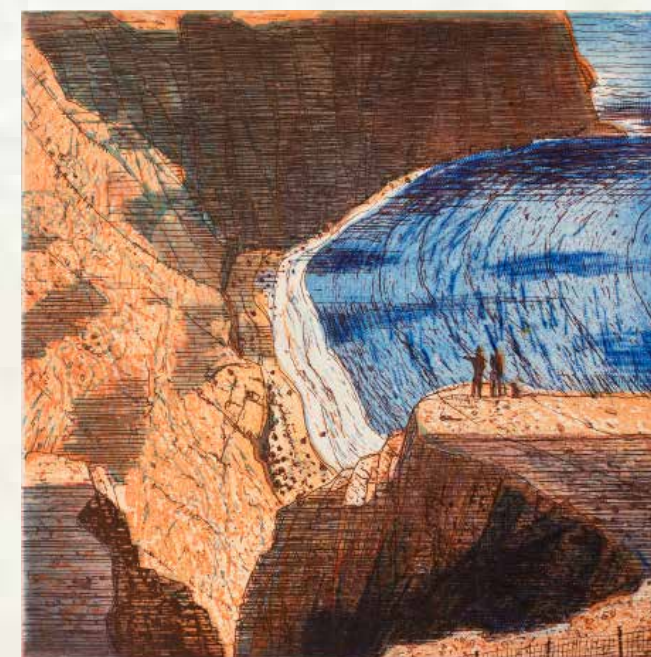
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stored information and skill to the task: drawings, photographs, memory, experience, spatial sensitivity, invention, a wariness of the literal. Simply looking out the window and assimilating what is there (he lives with his family in Lios na Caolbhai on the slopes of Mount Brandon, facing east) can contribute to the final composition and atmosphere of the work. He is concerned to avoid instant 'snapshot' souvenir images and as a result of his individual, but patient practice, he succeeds. His images resonate with a sense of space and time and light.

In the end, the making of memorable images comes down to the individual artist's unique way of looking, seeing and engaging with the world. Like Turner, who was obsessed with his work being kept and seen together, the better to validate his unique experience, Niall Naessens has created a coherent body of work; pictures that compliment each other, can be cross-referenced and which, when seen together, gain in meaning, and bear witness to his practice as an artist printmaker. ■

Niall Naessens' *Good Morning Mr Turner*. NGI, Dublin 1-31 January 2018.

David Lilburn is an artist, printmaker, designer and occasional publisher living in Limerick.



1 NIALL NAESENS (B. 1961) ARTIST OBSERVING DAWN, SUNRISE OVER CAHERCONREE etching 30x30cm

2 WILLIAM TURNER (1775-1851) OSTEND HARBOUR c.1840 watercolour with scraping out Henry Vaughan Bequest, 1900 Photo@NGI

3 ARTISTS DISCUSSING BURKE'S PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRIES INTO OUR IDEAS OF THE SUBLIME AND THE BEAUTIFUL 2017 etching 20x20cm