

The secret sci-fi life of plants

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VISUAL ART:THE AMERICAN artist Eve Stockton, whose *Evolutionary Landscapes II* is currently showing at the Wexford Arts Centre, originally trained as an architect, and there is a strong feeling of order and structure to her coloured woodcuts.

Their subject, though, is the natural rather than the architectural environment. The title work sets the tone: it's a big, expansive, wide-angled composition in which stems sprout from a mass of circular, pod-like forms in water, mushrooming out into a vegetative canopy above. This much we can tell but not because the plants are familiar – they're not, in fact they look distinctly sci-fi.

We can read the image, though, because we know how habitats work. Plants grow and compete, colonising their environment as best they can. Beyond the momentary appearance of things, Stockton is interested in the idea of underlying structural patterns in both space and time. That is, the physical structure of the plant, from the macro to the micro scale, and the rhythm of its life cycle. Add all these elements together and you have an open-ended, dynamic process, and this is what the prints set out to reflect.

Her exhibition is a virtual forest extending as far as the eye can see. Other groups of prints evoke the way organisms manage to make the most of the available space, sending out shoots to occupy every square centimetre and producing intricate tangles of stems and leaves, or proliferating as cellular forms or blossoms.

Often the even-tempered, densely patterned compositions recall the playful geometry of MC Escher's graphics, with a similar interplay between abstraction and representation and a fascination with symmetry. Stockton is very good at layering and combining colours and forms, producing attractive surfaces that charm you into engaging with their underlying ideas.

In the art centre's other gallery you will find an extraordinary spiral staircase in the middle of the room, ascending all the way to the high ceiling. Life-size, it's been painstakingly constructed by Mark Swords. Look closely and you'll see that he's used lollipop sticks as the main constituent material, so you'd be ill-advised to try and climb it. But it is a graceful structure with a wonderful, magical lightness to it, like the beanstalk offering access to risk and riches for Jack in the fairytale.

Swords's show is titled *Perennial*, which is related to the contradiction between utility and fragility in the staircase. The perennial in question is a sage plant in the artist's garden. He was, he notes, touched to notice the emergence of tiny new green shoots from the dark tangle of last year's plant. It occurred to him that its tentative, vulnerable rebirth was a subtle indication of remarkable strength.

There's something obsessive about choosing to make a staircase in the way that he has done, and that obsessiveness is characteristic of his work in general, as is the way we can clearly see the way the staircase is put together: he doesn't try to disguise the process, leaving a certain roughness of finish despite the precision and intricacy of his scheme. Other pieces also feature lollipop sticks, including *Loom*, which is noteworthy because he seems to be consistently interested in finely detailed craft skills such as weaving.

He particularly likes undoing some ordinary thing, such as a piece of carpet, and remaking it in quite a different vein – art as a process of magical transformation through careful, incremental steps.

Swords graduated from NCAD in 2004, and he has gone on to produce a thoughtful, reflective, introspective body of work since then. You never know what form or material he is going to employ next, though it's interesting to note that he has from the first been a really fine painter, as witness *Curtains* in this show, a little gem which is nothing less than a meditation on how patterns in domestic furnishings can serve as portals into dream worlds.

THERE IS A LOT to enjoy in the Dublin Painting and Sketching Club's 132nd Annual Exhibition at the Concourse in Dún Laoghaire County Hall. The Club was established in 1874 and over the years its membership, currently standing at 79, has included many prominent artists. As the title indicates, it's a fairly relaxed organisation, a loose affiliation of diverse talents with a leaning towards the traditional, even the conservative: a sizeable proportion of the more than 250 exhibits are bids to create still lifes conforming to a

strict and, it must be said, rather dull template. There's nothing wrong with still life, but it calls for a bit of wit and creativity no matter how conventional you're trying to be, as witnessed by Thomas Wilson's two lively paintings, made with the most ordinary of subject matter, or Maureen Phelan's exuberant floral display, *Tulips Red 'n' White*.

In fact, botanical or botanically themed work fares better, with a couple of really outstanding exemplars. They include Yanny Petters long established but painting beautifully, her small-scale studies of fruit and plants augmented with a tremendous, much larger work Common Reed, a fine painting by any measure. Printmaker Pamela Leonard's expertise is also long recognised, and her Irises is particularly noteworthy in this show. Mona Walsh's watercolours are not quite in the same league but strong enough.

Among the landscapes that stand out are Nancy Larchet's perfectly pitched topographical watercolour studies of several Dublin locations, Marie Fallon's panoramic view of Bulloch Harbour, Edward Freaney's technically polished, almost photographic compositions and Pauline Scott's muted studies of locations in the West of Ireland. Bee Syms's tiny oils have a nicely atmospheric quality to them, as do Maura Earley's landscapes (and her small image of Sean O'Casey is the best portrait in the show despite some close competition). Philip Shipman, Brid Clarke, John Woodfull, George Oakley, Valerie Syms Martin, Brenda Malley, Michael McWilliams, Thomas Ryan, Tom Scott, John Woodfull and Pam Bowie should also be mentioned as being well worth seeking out.

Both Bridget Flinn and Nuala Clarke abstract from elements of the landscape in different, equally effective ways. Enterprising picture-makers ranging across several genres include Jim Doolan, Richard McEvoy and Kay Doyle. Not a bad haul, in all, with a lot of serious works on sale at reasonable and, in some cases, positively low prices.

Evolutionary Landscapes II/ Perennial, Wexford Arts Centre, Cornmarket, Wexford Until May 18 091-23764; Dublin Painting and Sketching Club 132nd Annual Exhibition; County Hall, Dún Laoghaire Until April 25

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