

# IRISH NEWS

review by Jenny Lee

Watching the landscape of Donegal passing as he sped along on a motorbike was the inspiration for James May's later exhibition.

Jenny Lee talks to the Lisburn artist....

# Motorcycle Diaries

## James May

"It's like layers of life. If you scratch through something, you can bring life to it. Things are painted and then they are hidden. Then the process of painting again, rubbing back and scraping, brings something out"



A County full of shape, colour, texture, and character. That is what I took from James May's latest exhibition, Distillations Donegal. The background to this exhibition, currently running at Gormleys Fine Art, Belfast, is as colourful, as simple, and yet as complex as the paintings themselves.

A regular visitor to Ardara, Co. Donegal, to the traditional music. It is May's journeys by motorbike which form the subject of his creations. Rather than painting musicians, who he also sketches for fun, or stopping off to paint the landscape, it's his view and memories of the Donegal countryside from his motorcycle that have influenced his finished paintings.

Fields translate into shapes, trees and sheep become dots, with telegraph poles, fences and hedgerows stitching the landscape together. "My paintings evolve more from an effect of those experiences around me rather than the initial visible experience." May said.

May's use of the word 'distillation' in this exhibition is key to his work and development as an artist. He sees the distillation and reducing of ideas to their minimal as more personal with the greater length of experience. "Even your life is a distillation. It filters down and becomes refined." He said.

May works from sketches and memories. Working on a number of projects at once, it can take up to two years before a sketch evolves to become a finished painting.

"The paintings are nurtured so they take on a life of their own, rapid initial progress is separated often by long periods to achieve the experience rather than pure representation" he said

At the beginning of his career, May was influenced by the work of Colin Middleton. But marking his own style, the only thing that has firmly remained is that the paintings are always square. "You find as you go on in life, the influences become your own eventually." Another influence was the Spanish artist Tàpies. "He uses marble dust and things. I remember as a 16-year-old watching a television programme and being fascinated by his use of marble dust.

"Texture is a big part of what I do. Although this series is very colourful, the texture is the foundation part to them. A lot of time is spent getting them to a certain point before they are painted. They are collaged with materials." May uses a number of materials and layers in his work, bringing his paintings to life. These include marble dust, plaster and gesso. "You find after a while, you know how things react in a certain consistency. You can create cracks. It's like layers of life. If you scratch through something, you can bring life to it. Things are painted and then they are hidden. Then the process of painting again, rubbing back and scraping, brings something out."

While his art appears minimalist and loose, it is actually as considered as a detailed landscape and you need to take a step back from his paintings to fully appreciate this. May finds the experience of travelling by motorbike liberating. With no distraction of a radio, telephone or conversation like in a car, the solitary means of travelling allows him to focus on the road and land ahead. "You get to know the route – that's where distillation comes in. You pass the same place and the same spot and it formulates in your head and it's just shapes and figures. "For me the sparse features of man's presence, fence posts, telegraph poles, crumbling gable walls, illustrate for me now in middle-age the transition with time. Maybe it is a middle-age crisis for an artist." May said, reflecting on his career. The work has developed over the years to an abstraction with referential relationships, derived from these travelling glimpses. "While painting, I consciously do not try to think too much, rather make decisions from a sort of inner stillness. The state of inner stillness is simply consciousness without thought – a state that can be reached through meditation. The paintings are carried out in an automatic process where I feel as a conduit for the creativity. "I believe on viewing these paintings you will feel the warmth I get from the area." May said.

While many people may have memories of wet winter days in Donegal. May's colourful paintings make it feel like it has a tropical climate. "The colours come from within as a feeling that comes to me. It's not a true colour representation but that is not what it is meant to be." May said. *Summer Dream From a Barren Tree, When Gold Tracks Visited the Red Field, Across to the Torquoise and It Was Wrapped in the Gold of West Ireland* are just some of the beautiful titles of May's paintings. I asked him if it took much time to think up the titles of his paintings. "They are significant. As an artist you start to realise it's a whole process – it's not just painting. The part you like best is painting, but it's just one of the parts. "All I need in life is a bit of paper and a pencil and I'm happy. It's always been like that."

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