

THE SMART MONEY

# framed mounts

The Leopardstown evening tradition of Ireland's Cheltenham prospects galloping the course is as inspiring as the nation's art



There is an important racing event at Leopardstown in Ireland a week tomorrow. The Dublin track's National Hunt Finale, the last jumps meeting to take place there this season, will offer competitive sport, but the real highlight takes place after racing. That's when a phalanx of Ireland's top Cheltenham-bound prospects traditionally gallop on the course. And with the start of the Festival just over three weeks away, hundreds of passionate racing-lovers will stay behind to watch the action in the fading light.

That passion for the beauty and romance of horse racing is not exclusive to Ireland, but nowhere else is it expressed more lyrically, and that intensity of feeling is reflected in the nation's art. It's something I'm reminded of every time I'm in Dublin and drop into the Irish National Gallery on Merrion Square. I love the early work of Jack B Yeats, the poet's younger brother, especially his 1915 painting *Galway Races*, a richly atmospheric portrait of jockeys and their mounts before the start. It's the perfect accompaniment to the great WB Yeats poem *At Galway Races*, with its lines about "The riders upon the galloping horses" and "The crowd that closes in behind".

Another of my favourite Jack B Yeats works is the 1910 oil painting *The Last Corinthian*, which is a poignant depiction in subdued, almost sepia tones, of an ageing rake in evening dress remembering his youth as a sporting swell-about-town. *The Last Corinthian* was included in a fascinating exhibition that Dublin's Oliver Searns Gallery brought to London last October. The show at 6 Fitzroy Square - previewed in our online *Need To Now* column - featured a selection of both

Irish and non-Irish artists, sculptors, photographers and ceramicists, some well-established, some less so. I particularly liked two pieces by the Belfast-born equestrian artist Laurence Riddell, who had a solo show at the Oliver Searns Molesworth Street Gallery in Dublin last autumn, and whose work can still be seen there by appointment. Riddell, who works both in charcoal and oil, is apparently motivated by "a lifelong fascination with the horse". As a young man, he rode in races as an amateur and dreamt of becoming a jockey, before he realised he was too tall. He spent a year as artist-in-residence at Kildangan Stud in County Kildare and his horse portraits, partly drawn, he says, from memory, but with a fine grasp of anatomy, have a haunting, almost mythical quality in tune with Ireland's love affair with racing.

It would be fair to say that Irish punters have an intense relationship with gambling too, and at Leopardstown on Sunday week they will be looking for something to finance their annual pilgrimage to Cheltenham. Back in March 2006 I saw a grey horse called *Sky's The Limit* do an eye-catching piece of work there in the gathering dusk. I backed him to win the 30-runner Coral Cup at the Festival, and he came home in style at odds of 11-1. The horses to watch out for at Leopardstown this year will be the battalion of Cheltenham challengers trained by Ireland's champion Willie Mullins. Hopefully one of the gallopers confirming his wellbeing will be *Black Hercules* who is ridden by the trainer's eldest son Patrick. The seven-year-old gelding is strongly fancied to win the National Hunt Chase on March 15 at 4-1 on Betfair. **JAMIE REID**

THE GANNET

# sea and be seen

Aquatic-themed art by Hirst and Gehry is as dazzling as the piscine cuisine at this sexy new London hotspot



The Gannet, being a gluttonous old seabird, has applied many epithets to fish over the years: flavoursome, scaly, shimmering, slippery... feisty, even. But not sexy.

However, if you fill your restaurant with a 4m-long glossy black silicone crocodile designed by Frank Gehry, and 19 lustrous "fish" lamps by the same artist to hang from a towering ceiling over a glazed red lava-stone bar, then maybe you have earned the right to call the place *Sexy Fish* (pictured).

Which, at *Sexy Fish* on Berkeley Square, is what Richard Caring of Caprice Holdings has done, as well as installing two giant tanks in the basement filled with 15,000 litres of water and 100 species of exotic fish. In interior-design terms, he has thrown everything at *Sexy Fish* - it puts the kitsch into kitchen sink.

The bar also features cast-bronze mermaids by Damien Hirst, patinated in sea blue, at either end. Another mermaid cavorts with one of Hirst's

trademark sharks in a bronze relief panel that weighs in at 600kg.

Modern art in restaurants is not new - Hirst has previous form, at the now defunct Pharmacy in Notting Hill Gate, and Mark Hix's restaurants all feature works by (now not so) Young British Artists - but it is rare to see quite so much arty bling in one place.

At dinner, the ambience at *Sexy Fish* is of a party about to kick off. A

## Barbecue-glazed eel with frozen foie gras was smokily seductive

steady bass beat thumps from the speakers, the lights are low (maybe too low, but that - as several nearby diners discovered - is what the torch on an iPhone is for) and the open, corner-sited kitchen gleams like a newly landed spaceship.

The food has much to commend it. Tempura of Brussels sprouts with dashi broth may not be the best thing

I've ever eaten in batter, but it was probably the best way I've ever ingested a sprout, while barbecue-glazed eel with frozen foie gras was smokily seductive, almost - dare I say - sexy.

The menu is an amiable trawl through the fishy world, many of the dishes with an Asian accent: tartare of tuna belly with soy-cured egg yolk and lotus-root chips, for instance, or carpaccio of octopus with ginger, lime and pickled shallots. Committed carnivores have several upmarket steaks to keep them happy, as well as excellent skewers of duck hearts and maple-glazed pork belly.

In Victorian times, the hallmark of true artists was that they starved in garrets: the poet Thomas Chatterton, for instance, winsomely painted by the pre-Raphaelite Henry Wallis expiring gauntly in a London attic; by contrast, Messrs Hirst and Gehry, one suspects, do not lack for nourishment. If only poor old Chatterton had been able to book a table at *Sexy Fish*. **BILL KNOTT**

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