



Ghost stories

The shades of the Old Masters inform Stephen Lawlor's paintings — as does a true phantom who haunts him still, hears **John P O'Sullivan**

Stephen Lawlor doesn't seem the superstitious type. Too much of the trenchant Dub in him, you feel, to indulge the mystical side of life. It's a surprise to hear he's seen a ghost and is still disturbed by the experience.

"It doesn't leave you," he says. "It stays in your head."

The ghostly incident occurred in 2006 on a trip to Uttersberg, a tiny village a couple of hours north of Stockholm. The artist was there to open a Graphic Studio show at the Galleri Astley, and stayed in an 18th-century hunting lodge that had been converted into a small hotel.

He retired early and sober, determined to get a good night's

sleep before the event. After he had put down his book, about Elvis, he became aware of small circles of light at the foot of the bed "like grey smoke glowing". These gradually coalesced into cheek bones, ears, eyes and finally a female figure, dressed in old-fashioned apparel. The woman appeared angry and "then lunged at me savagely". Lawlor defended himself by means of the "Ringsend upper-

cut" — a kick to the crotch — and the apparition disappeared.

When he mentioned the experience to his landlady, he learnt that this cranky phantom made regular appearances in the house and had once put a trio of burly Swedish tradesmen to flight when she assailed them during renovation works. Lawlor was so impressed by this ghostly apparition that he returned with a film crew and made a short

film about the house and its seemingly haunted room. More significantly, the incident "has in a strange way subsequently affected my work". It's not a direct link, he maintains, "but I think subliminally there may be a connection".

Looking around his new show at the Oliver Sears Gallery in Dublin, you are inclined to agree. A large number of the works feature less than fully defined, almost ectoplasmic heads. There are several small cryptic portrait sculptures — some jet black, some painted. An artist who initially painted and sculpted stylised horses and atmospheric landscapes, Lawlor is continuing his recent focus on portraiture.

This tendency began with his *Beyond Carmen* show in 2012, in which his portraits were of friends and colleagues. Their features were blurred or obscured, giving them a strangely eerie otherworldly feel. Whatever supernatural influences, he readily acknowledges a debt to Francis Bacon. "Bacon had it down pretty well, to retain the character and not allow the visage to disappear," Lawlor says.

Most of the subjects in his latest show are women, some vaguely recognisable. Icon I contains hints of Leonardo's *Ginevra De' Benci*; one of the few males suggests Holbein's *Henry VIII*. These new works, both portraits and landscapes, are ghostly intimations of the past — but it's the history of art they represent rather than a bizarre incident in a Swedish hotel. The title of the show, *Some Untidy Spot*, is taken from WH Auden's 1938 poem *Musée de Beaux Arts*, which in turn was inspired by Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus*. Auden's poem celebrates the Old Masters: the "untidy spot" is where their great dramas took place, against a backdrop of mundanity, as ordinary people go about their daily chores.

The standout piece is *Veil*, based on Poussin's *Orpheus and Eurydice* — as seen through a veil, darkly. There's also an atmospheric version of Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral*. Those versed in art history will have fun spotting the connections between *Rendezvous* and Rubens's *The Brazen Serpent*, and between *Vignette* and Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi*. Mostly, you get

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8 ART Stephen Lawlor's fine Oliver Sears show is haunted by the painter's experiences, discovers John P O'Sullivan



Intimations and reverberations
Lawlor's Vignette
echoes Mantegna's
Adoration of the Magi

intimations and reverberations rather than direct quotations. Many of Lawlor's references are arcane, but that is irrelevant since the show stands or falls on the integrity of the images in themselves.

There was little in his family background to suggest Lawlor, now 56, would become an artist. He always liked to draw and remembers a substitute teacher at Westland Row, Michael Connaughton, who encouraged him.

"He said to me, 'Why don't you come along with me to the Grapevine Arts Centre?'" Lawlor recalls. After an initial rejection by the National College of Art and Design, Lawlor worked in an ad agency for four years before returning to the college to study visual communication. When an opportunity came up to transfer

to fine art, he spurned it because it would have meant going back to first year. "At that time a year seems for ever," he says.

You can sense he still regrets that impatient decision. "If I had, I would have engaged with painting earlier." There was also an issue of self-belief. "I didn't have the confidence to see myself as a fine artist."

However, his work load in visual communication was light, and he spent a goodly portion of his three years working on his drawing skills in the life room. A big influence was Roger Shackleton, whose effortless draughtsmanship Lawlor strove to emulate. After art college, and having no interest in graphic design, Lawlor took a series of mundane jobs until destiny took a hand. A romance with Jane Powers

brought him into the orbit of the Graphic Studio since her sister, Mary Farl Powers, was one of the founders. Finally, he was on the path towards creating art via the medium of print, and he quickly developed a reputation for small, exquisitely rendered etchings.

He also uncovered an entrepreneurial streak, realising he had to find a market for his work outside Dublin and the Graphic Studio Gallery. He developed a network of galleries around the country and subsequently in Sweden, America and Europe.

"In certain years I made more money in Sweden than I did in Ireland," he recalls. Lawlor eventually became chairman of the board of the Graphic Studio, during a seminal period in its evolution, and helped set it on a course to become a secure and

well-housed arts organisation.

In time, he began to itch against the constraints and sheer physical toil involved in printmaking. In the mid-1990s, he began to experiment with paint. He felt his commercial endeavours were interfering with his art, and so he dissolved business partnerships. The physical act of painting was very liberating.

His first show devoted exclusively to painting was Three Rivers at Hillsboro Fine Art in 2008. This was followed by more landscapes at the Fred in London in 2010. Beyond Carmen pointed in a new direction, towards portraiture. He has moved from depicting friends to finding inspiration in art history, having had "an interest going back for years in Old Masters' paintings". He used a series of works made

between 1400 and 1800 as raw material. "I started to dismember them or blur them and play with them," he explains. "What you are seeing is a remaking."

Lawlor doesn't feel fully part of the art establishment. One reason may be his origins, since "printmakers are seen as a lower form of life". It's a short-sighted view of a medium graced by Goya and Picasso. While he is a regular at the RHA's annual show, Lawlor has not been elected to Aosdana, the self-selecting academy of artists. You hope that his less than orthodox career route through NCAD is not a factor, or that a certain directness in his personality is not distracting members from doing the right thing. **□**

Some Untidy Spot, Oliver Sears