JOHN LONG
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3rd – 21st November 2009

JORGENSEN FINE ART
16 Herbert Street, Dublin 2.
Telephone: 00 353 1 66 19 758/9  Fax: 00 353 1 67 63 008
E-mail: info@jorgensenfineart.com  Website: www.jorgensenfineart.com

Opening Hours: Monday–Friday 9.00 a.m.–5.30 p.m.
Saturdays by Appointment
Foreword

John Long’s one-time mentor, the late Euan Uglow, has been described as ‘priestly’ in his attitude to his work. His pupil, I suggest, tends more to the judicial. He observes his subject, bears witness to it and proceeds to present the viewer with his evidence. He lays the subject bare for our consideration. Like an anatomist stripping down through the flesh and muscle to reveal the nervous system, he gives us the benefit of his experimenting. His scalpels take the form of light and colour. It is not the dialogue between light and shade which takes centre-stage but the wielding of these to promote the objects. We are looking at a staged set: everything of importance is highlighted as in a performance. Finding the universal in the particular, he is a poet yielding us the essence, the Aristotelian *what it was to be* of the thing. And, like Aristotle, he is ruthless in his methods of investigation: first defining the subject matter, then weighing up the difficulties involved by reference to earlier artists’ take on that subject, and finally presenting his own solutions.

Scrupulous in his search for the truth, like Velázquez before him and Piraikos before him, he is a painter who does not shy from depicting the mundane and the trivial. Like Chardin and Cézanne, he has a passion for little things and an inclination to save them from dismissal. Because, like Chardin, he ‘uses colours, but paints with feeling’. Of all his avowed influences, the contemplative spirit of his work is most reminiscent of Velázquez’s early *bodegones* or kitchen still-lifes. Almost in a state of trance, Long’s figures are oblivious of any observer, existing only for themselves and their thoughts. Whilst Velázquez presented groups of figures, Long focuses on a single or a double figure, on a concentrated presence undiluted by others. There is no eye-contact between the model and her fellow sitter, or the artist/viewer and so no engagement. The spare starkness of the still life elements produces great immediacy, great intensity. His dark grounds emphasise the relief of the figures and objects, focussing our full attention on them.

Again like Velázquez, Long paints figures in a landscape form: hence the hunched poses at tables. Let us compare, for instance, *Girl Sleeping* with the Spaniard’s *Two Young Men at a Humble Table*. The latter, a typical *bodegon*, presents two men hunched over to fit the space. They are accompanied by a disposition of objects, which, though natural-looking, are yet very carefully positioned, each thing having precisely the form, colour, light, weight and position necessary to animate and balance the

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*Diego Velázquez, Two Young Men at a Humble Table, 1618, Wellington Museum, Apsley House, London.*
different parts of the whole. Widely considered one of his most successful paintings from a compositional point of view, *Two Young Men at a Humble Table* displays many correspondences: the orange with the man’s head, the pile of plates with his collar, the pestle and his belt. Long too, disposes his objects naturally yet carefully: the girl’s head is echoed in the loaf of bread, her ear in the lemon, her arm in the knife, the bowl in the label, the chair in the frame; the whole embrasure of her shoulder to hand cushioning her head finds echoes in the relationship between the bottle and the pieces of food. The distribution of the light tones in Velázquez’s work leading from the mortar, through the plates and the napkin to the collar of the man on the right follows the same sinuous curve as that in Long’s: from the shoulder-blade to the shoulder and on through to the arm and hand before sweeping to the bowl and up into the label on the bottle. ‘Nothing’, wrote Velázquez’s master, Francisco Pachecho in his treatise, *Arte de la pintura*, ‘is more fraught with difficulty than contour. It is in this that the giants themselves must struggle throughout their careers, unable to lay down their arms even for a second.’

There is a separateness, an anguish and a longing for unrealised experiences in John Long’s work which calls out to the 21st-century viewer. His figures are locked away in their private, silent worlds. Introspective and self-absorbed, unaware of the world around them, they are frozen in that moment, with that particular gesture and that particular stance. There is more than a hint of the Beckettian in their somewhat bewildered dignity, all slow and quiet and preoccupied. Stripped to their bare essentials, Long’s protagonists, like Beckett’s characters, bear witness to the lack of meaning in post-modern life. Communication having failed us, we are locked away within our own silence.

…” before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.

*Molloy*, Samuel Beckett

*Síle Connaughton-Deeny 2009*
Necessary Laws

‘... when they had asked him for perfect solutions, guaranteed to eliminate all risks, he would reply:

“Experience will establish the necessary laws. The proper understanding of laws never precedes experience.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, Night Fight / Vol de Nuit, 1931

John Long’s art requires and commands descriptive cadences, in which a range of visual interrelationships are explored inquisitorially, from intellectual and emotional positions. In it can be found cast shadow, stark contrasts of light-to-dark, warm-to-cool colours, and, alongside these, symmetry. There have never been quick fixes in Long’s work, and so it should be unsurprising to learn that his subjects have a history; that they have always been roughly the same since his earliest paintings. The strict analysis of his chosen subjects are traceable to his early years at the Slade, but the postures and arrangements of his figures come from an older visual source, pre-dating Gower Street: from the world of the art book, discovered in childhood, and from the world of Velázquez in particular. The latter’s bodegones, the wine shop habitués who people so many of his paintings, and which Long first discovered some distance from any gallery wall, remain the sources of many of his figure studies, not simply in the poses they strike, but in the strict geometry of the arrangements within which they exist. It seems that Long, like his Spanish mentor-by-extension, has remained as much interested in the formal interrelationships between figures, as in their narrative qualities. Each new series of his paintings not only reconnects him with his earliest use of the human figure, but also with seemingly incidental objects, his props, the bowls and vases that regularly reappear in these images. These were made by Long’s father, and have featured again and again for more than twenty years, in different settings. For Long, each painting is restorative, a reconnection between the temporal present and the timeless: nothing here strictly represents Time at a standstill. For us, his audience, we see what we may, and in most cases, he himself acts as Master of Ceremonies, prompting our involvement in different ways.

The late Euan Uglow presided over Long’s studies at the Slade, and, as with many other master-pupil associations, it is best for audiences to set that fact aside. The measuring marks that characterised the paintings of Uglow and those of William Coldstream will probably forever recur in Long’s work, and not simply because they own a peculiar and meaningful rationale: even a glance determines that the merest form of visual engagement with these works ensures that the
eye quickly ceases to skate across their picture planes. And from *Fennel* to *Nocturnes*, from the smallest to the largest, there is no question but that Long’s pictures are entirely his own.

There’s an argument that promotes chamber music to a level of incisive, cerebral achievement at which it is said that it can frequently supercede the expansive qualities of a major orchestral work, and there are paintings by Long that might echo that notion. *Fennel*, one of the earliest paintings in this show, establishes the basis for a sonic equivalence, with a palette that immediately demonstrates upper and lower spatial and formal tones, and a trademark brushstroke whose delicacy delivers crispness, sharpness of subject outline, and bodily form, in the globular jug-ness of the vegetable itself. A similar execution characterises *Two Cuttings* and *Daisy*, very different paintings whose subtleties of light and tone result from small brushstrokes that reflect the artist’s minute examinations of each subject. But if this is chamber music, it’s Aarvo Pärt rather than Schubert: sinew rather than muscle. Long’s approach to his smaller subjects has altered in recent years. His treatment of such images has become more substantial, as shown in *Two Quinces*, where the drawing and laying on of colour creates a delicately fruity equipoise in a setting whose colour, light and structure suggest the craquelure of classical wall painting. His control of these smaller observations remains unchanged. As Long himself says, they are more contained: it’s the bigger pictures that he finds more challenging.

For a painter to introduce such a concept is not so strange, but in the context of Long’s work, the word ‘bigger’ is interestingly relative. It doesn’t refer to the area of the picture plane but to the visual and technical demands of any pictorial arrangement, to the active or passive elements, and in the placement of figures and objects. In Long’s oeuvre, ‘bigger’ is usually as much about *sturm und drang*, daring, will and determination, as it is about size. *Night Studio* and its study prove the point, not least because the study is in many ways as sound a painting as its successor, with an entirely satisfactory and self-supporting geometry that is only challenged by the later work. But both these pictures are jumping-off points for more recent activity. *Night Studio* itself contains several of Long’s signature figure arrangements: outstretched arms, averted heads, and the sensation of weariness or remorse, complemented by an array of objects that appears busy, despite itself. Since then, his larger pictures have increased in their complexity, his colour has intensified, and real contrasts have been introduced. *Girl with Two Tables* sees a major development in Long’s world’s eye view. The picture’s active narrative marks a change in his process: the open door is symbolic as a technical announcement at least, and the marks, spatial considerations, and an accessible iconographical acknowledgement, in the form of the Cézannesque napkin are changed or new. This progression continues in *Villa of the Mysteries*, probably the most complex painting of his in recent
years. In ways hitherto unseen in Long’s work static elements that by themselves might appear muted or subdued suddenly come alive. Several different interrelationships are employed through extremes of hue, the blue bowl, the pink drape, the tactile qualities of the reds and the hard/soft contrasts of colour and shape. Through these, and the associations to be had from an external engagement with the painting, emotional and narrative finality is suspended.

One painting key to this stage in Long’s work, and to some extent to the newest Nocturne pictures, is Mask – Studio, the splendidly and darkly austere interior in which arrested motion enters one of his otherwise customarily contemplative arrangements. The tonal extremes here are very different from those encountered earlier in his oeuvre. The mask on the back wall is frozen like a comet along its trajectory, and though the tabletop promotes stability, neither the isolation of the small fruit or its opposing bottle do much to secure that sense. These tensions and the increased spatial depth, in the Nocturnes and in other smaller paintings, seem to herald an important and awaited dimension in Long’s work which are capable of introducing transformative possibilities, until recently only latent. It is perhaps most instructive to see such tendencies as summarised in the most misleadingly informal paintings in this collection, landscapes executed as exercises or for pleasure, as if somehow these were of less importance than the hard-fought studio compositions. The distances depicted in these small paintings contrast acutely with the constraints of the studio, and call into questions once again that issue of ‘bigger’. What are some of these views if not bigger pictures, enjoyed for their panoramic possibilities, and painted for the same reasons? The artist makes no special claims for them other than affectionate ones, but they should not be seen as lesser objects in any overview of his work. Certainly, some are as important as the discarded napkin in Girl with Two Tables because they ponder older ideas, and deliver new responses, in much the same way as Long repeatedly turns to older themes, and to old props to inform his work. Such a cyclical approach does not inhibit the orbit from a shift in axis, and in this new collection, Long proves emphatically that, in the past few years, he has moved steadily on, and outwards with his work, not once but several times, employing and requiring new vocabularies in both paint and text.

Julian Freeman 2009
Paintings
1. Still Life with Loaf and Lemon, 1999
   oil on canvas, 14 x 14 inches
2. Girl Sleeping, 2005
   oil on canvas, 10 x 14 inches
3. Napkin Folded in a Bowl, 2005
oil on canvas, 15 x 13 inches
4. Two Cuttings, 2003
   oil on canvas, laid on panel, 8 1/2 x 10 inches
5. Fennel, 2002
oil on canvas, 12 x 10 inches
6. Study for Night Studio, 2005
oil on canvas, 9\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 14 inches
7. Sleeping Woman, 2003-04
oil on canvas, 32 x 48 inches
8. Dreaming Girl, 2005
oil on canvas, 22⅓ x 37 inches
9. Night Studio, 2005-06
oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches
10. Red Tree, Chilham, 2004
    oil on panel, 7 x 8 inches
11. Greek Seascape, 2003
    oil on panel, 7 1/2 x 15 inches
12. Italian Landscape, 2004
  oil on panel, $9\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{3}{4}$ inches
oil on panel, 8 x 10 3/4 inches
oil on panel, 9 x 12 inches
15. Studio Interior, 2004
   oil on panel, 8¾ x 11 inches
oil on canvas, 14\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 9\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches
17. Daisy in a Bottle, 2007
oil on panel, 10 x 8 \(\frac{1}{4}\) inches
18. Daisy, 2005
oil on panel, $13\frac{1}{4} \times 9\frac{3}{4}$ inches
19. Camellia, 2009
oil on panel, 11 x 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches
oil on canvas, 12 x 8 inches
21. Two Quinces, 2007
oil on canvas, 9\(\frac{1}{4}\) x 10 inches
22. Camellia Flower, 2008
oil on canvas, 9 3/4 x 5 3/4 inches
23. Yellow Gourd, 2007-08
oil on canvas, 8 x 6 inches
24. Girl with Two Tables, 2007
oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches
    oil on canvas, 15 x 18 inches
26. Girl with Red Table, 2006
oil on canvas, 15 1/4 x 20 inches
27. Nocturne, 2007-08
oil on canvas, 17\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 17 inches
oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
oil on canvas, 21\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 17\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches
## Catalogue

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</table>

* Private Collection
John Long

1964 Born Portadown

Academic Qualifications
1990-91 Artist in Residence, Byam Shaw School of Art
1988-90 Higher Diploma in Painting, Slade School of Fine Art
1984-88 B.A. Degree in Painting, Slade School of Fine Art
1983-84 Foundation Course in Art and Design, Belfast

Awards
2001 Year of the Artist, South East Arts
1998 Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, Canada
1995 Elected Associate Member, Royal Hibernian Academy
1994 Arts Council of Northern Ireland
1993 Taylor de Vere, Dublin
1993 Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Teaching Experience
2002 Visiting Lecturer, Taichung Academy of Fine Art, Taiwan
1998-2005 Part-Time Lecturer in Painting, Canterbury Christchurch University
2005-Present Senior Lecturer in Painting, Canterbury Christchurch University
1994 Part-Time Teaching, National College of Art and Design, Dublin
1993 Part-Time Teaching, Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design

Publications
ISBN: 9780-904722-42-0
British Art by Julian Freeman, South Bank Publishing, 2006
A Dictionary of Artists in Britain since 1945 by David Buckman
ISBN: 0-9532609-0-9
ISBN: 0-90083-19-0

Exhibitions
One Man Shows
1993 European Modern Art, Dublin

Selected Group Exhibitions
2006 Contemporary Paintings and Prints, Adam’s Gallery, Dublin
2006 Spring Contemporary Exhibition, Jorgensen Fine Art, Dublin
2006 Interiors, Jorgensen Fine Art, Dublin
2005 New Gallery Artists, Nicholas Gallery, Belfast
2005 Royal Hibernian Academy Drawing Exhibition, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin
2002 Waddington Tribby Fine Art, Boca Raton, Florida
1999 The Importance of Drawing, Royal Museum, Canterbury
1998 Vital Presence, Bell Table Arts Centre, Limerick
1996 Twentieth Century British Art Fair, Royal College of Art, London
1995 Cabinet Paintings, Theo Waddington Fine Art, London
1993-2009 Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition, Gallagher Gallery, Dublin
1990 Spring Contemporary Exhibition, Albany Gallery, London
1990 Mixed Graduate Show, Leighton House, London
1989 A New Perspective, William Hobbyayne Gallery, Middlesex

Public Collections
Haverty Trust
Allied Irish Banks