

**THOMAS IRELAND / RELATED MATERIALS**

## UNTITLED

(REVIEW OF NOTES ON WESTWARD EXPANSION COMMISSIONED BY BLOC PROJECTS AND CORRIDOR 8 MAGAZINE, 2012)

Tom Ireland invokes the past and future simultaneously in *Notes on Westward Expansion*: the past of heroic endeavour and its perhaps inevitable future as a subject for storytelling.

The title, which also functions as the title of most of the works in the exhibition, hitches the wagon of American frontier spirit to that other great American adventure - the moon landings. Both of these periods are firmly fixed as History by now, to varying degrees, and both are surrounded by a significant amount of nostalgia that often takes the form of fiction.

The thing about fiction, however, is that it has a structure that the natural unfurling of reality does not. We are animals that thrive on stories and the reality of space exploration is not always a satisfying enough narrative. Back when the moon landings were in full swing there was the very real danger to the astronauts, alongside the sheer insane audacity of the endeavour, to keep everyone's love of a dramatic arc satisfied. However, as became evident in the years following the conclusion of the Apollo program, the interest of the public can only be sustained for so long without a story to follow. So now we are left with the practical bits and pieces of lunar-landing technology scattered throughout our lives in a pretty mundane way - cordless tools, scratch-resistant lenses - and no longer watching the sky as people are fired far beyond our atmosphere on top of billions of dollars' worth of rockets. Instead we watch billions of dollars' worth of CGI rockets leave Earth on a cinema screen on a far more regular basis than they ever did in truth.

By connecting space exploration and the expansion of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Ireland is firmly positioning the once shining beacon of modern life that were represented by the manned missions to the moon as something very much over; Full of ambition and conquest and discovery, but definitely finished, a relic to be codified into myth and a short-hand of visual phrases.

The language of space exploration has been stripped down in this show to the bare minimum. We know where we stand with grey rocks and dust, silver foil, institutional lighting and an eerie void. It is testament to the lingering familiarity of those iconic photos of the moon from forty years ago. It is also telling of the prevalence of films that have been made about the moon and space at large, some of our most enduring secondary souvenirs of that extraordinary time.

This fiction-as-relic is especially in evidence in the form of Ireland's black void painting. This object recalls the monoliths found throughout the solar system in Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C Clarke's epic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as well as conjuring the metaphorical monoliths of Modernist art. In *2001*, the ominous black artefacts are the remnants of an extinct society, which seem to give human evolution a bit of a kick whenever they are discovered. Similarly, Modernism was responsible for a revolution in cultural terms that has been impossible to ignore.

Ireland's painting, in contrast to the grandiose soundtracking in *2001* that occurs when anyone draws near to one of the monoliths, emits a melancholic music: a super slowed version of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* stretched to keep pace with Neil Armstrong's time spent on the lunar surface. The noise indicates we are in the presence of something not-inert, but it is not a statement of intent as much as an introduction to the possibility of action. The void-object reverberates with the sense of its own potential, even as a remainder, to affect us one way or another. But this action requires human contact - the object needs an audience for its story just as the *2001* monoliths need the proximity of humans, or their forebears, in order to activate.

It is this idea of activation that allows Ireland to draw parallels between space on all scales - both the space of the universe and that of the gallery. His work in this show takes in both and draws out their similarities as sites for action and interaction.

Space (outer, rather than gallery) has, for over a century, been a seductive setting for fiction. Space is, to a certain extent, an unknown entity upon which it is easy to project a story. It sits for the most part, or so it seems to us most of the time, in a position of inactivity; something we only think about when confronted with events like the Apollo missions or the recent landing on Mars of the Curiosity rover. It is activated briefly in our imaginations via occasional intrepid interventions, or, much more commonly, through science fiction stories such as *2001*.

The gallery operates in a similar way. Often it is empty, blank and visitor-free, unchanging between exhibitions, but it is brought to a state of engagement by the presence of work and of viewers. In this way, both spaces - outer space and the gallery - act as blank slates that await human contact to bring context and interaction. Ireland has crushed the two realms together, these human-less staging areas for our stories and our ambitions, and filled the smaller space with all the potential of the larger.

Ireland embraces the scope for fiction in both spaces as a way of communicating beyond the bare bones of the factual, and his precise and careful hand offers just enough readable material in order to engage us in a remembrance of dreams lost and recalled through the very human desire to retell, retell, retell.

#### UNTITLED

(ACCOMPANYING TEXT FROM: THE SUM TOTAL OF ENDEAVOURS TO DATE (WHILE WE'RE LIVING THE DREAMS WE HAD AS CHILDREN FADE AWAY), 2009)

Is adventure a childish endeavour? It's certainly true that innocence disappears fast in our competitive express clamour of life. Fear and laziness are proliferous in culture, the reasons behind most men being closer to apes than to geniuses, and they are contrary to the childish eyes of adventure and innocence. Maybe that's sufficient as an answer...

Space is the ultimate fiction, the greatest expanse, immensity and distance that our minds can barely dream of. In our deepest reverie, I'm sure, we all want for this adventure; the furthest daring exploit of civilization, and the most openly humane. The Sum Total of Endeavours to Date, an exhibition by Tom Ireland, is created with this spirit in mind.

Ireland employs common materials, seen or used in the day to day with a vast variety of functions, in the construction of his sculptural installations, which are anything but every day. His work, certainly, is of the extraordinary, making materials as ordinary as tinfoil appear as wondrous as asteroids. Perhaps this dichotomized simplification is significant, but somehow I think there's a whole lot more at work. There is a play on the raw human yearn for exploration and the gaining of knowledge, informed in form and mentality by the mystery and glamour of the early NASA space programme and the lunar landings.

Ireland's forms often act as signifiers for this anachronistic 'future' and the shiny but low grade materials seem to reflect an immediacy and humanity of adventure and discovery. The work shows an honesty and innocent naivety, which should in no way be indicative of a bad thing. Naivety has an unpleasant press for some reason, and wrongly I have to say, for naivety is subjective - we are all naïve to something or to someone. And it is this process of slightly sardonic realization which gives the work its lasting appeal. It is all too rare to see things which are so explicitly about this, and that's why Ireland's work is so invigorating - for this alone, it can be highly commended.

MICHAEL DAVIS 2009

### SHINING SKINNED FRIEND

(TAKEN FROM THE EXHIBITION 'THE SUM TOTAL OF ENDEAVOURS TO DATE', BANK GALLERY, CARLISLE 2008)

One of the reasons I love Tom Ireland's work is because there are usually a lot of silver things involved. I don't mean this to sound flippant – he has a great visual flair which translates into truly stunning objects, playing on our childhood excitement about the mysticism of adventure to disguise a sucker-punch of modernist aesthetic restraint.

The shiny and the metallic say NASA, supercars and The Future; but also suggest hulking monoliths of modernist sculpture and the pathetic delight of housewives-past discovering the joy of Bacofoil. Somehow Ireland maintains a balance of fascination and cynicism: his installations breath the world-weary sigh of a thousand astronaut-obsessed kids' bedrooms and modern art museum store rooms, but are never able to give up chasing the pure visual high of staggeringly attractive, intriguingly ambiguous objects.

When I look at this work – big or small, hand-made or found – my breath catches a little... seriously. Ireland's skill is in letting us in on the backstage secrets of creation without making the magic any less impressive. The truth is humbly laid bare but we still say 'wow'.

Although Ireland's methodological honesty is a little too perfect to be entirely sincere – his just-so arrangement of unassuming things is too good to be true – this artifice maps out the fascinating grey area at the centre of his conceptual home: Ireland makes monuments which seek to destroy monuments. Looking to reclaim the power of process by tracing the forgotten pasts of epic events, process becomes an event in itself. As such, Ireland's work is tinged with sadness, a longing for things lost, and the inaccessibility of a truly un-objective and democratic history.

A paradox of defeat, anticipation and fiction wrapped up in a... (I want to say 'neat', but that would be doing Ireland a disservice – his work is more complex than 'neat' would ever suggest)... a symbiotic package of show-and-tell endeavour, Ireland's art is melancholically - beautiful precision-engineered exercise in improbable exploration.

FIONA SHAW 2008

## LOOKS SO WRONG, FEELS SO RIGHT

(TAKEN FROM THE PRESS RELEASE FOR STUDIO PROJECT #9, MARKET GALLERY, GLASGOW, 2007)

At first glance, Ireland's back-handed tribute to adventure and discovery – filtered through the faded glamour of the space programme – is a somewhat stand-offish entity, despite its beguiling beauty and clarity of gesture. There is something unsettling about standing amidst Ireland's oh-so-carefully arranged objects: we know it can't have just... happened like this.

The roll of masking tape wound, with pseudo-off-handedness, around a saw horse, and a clutch of red, white 'n' blue carrier bags lazing against the back wall of the gallery smack of hours of effort to be effortless; this is what makes Ireland's work so intriguing and a constant source of renewed fascination. Little allegorical gestures of agonising decision-making stand in for larger questions regarding the worth of monumental activity.

Some of Ireland's trademark sculptures scatter the gallery – large tinfoil 'asteroids', all shimmering, flaky-edged delicacy and solid slice-your-skin-open threat – embodying the precise melancholy heart of Ireland's endeavour: how important were those vaunted surges forward in human knowledge and invention when all we're left with is the ability to cook with non-stick pans and keep runners warm after marathons?

Ireland's sci-fi satellite-come-funereal wreath bathes the space with a celebratory glow, illuminating the plinthed aluminium chunk at its centre with synthesised starlight. The grimy plugs and cables radiating from the rough wood frame supporting the hexagon of fluorescents are as much a part of the scene as the spindly black form wrapped around the foil.

Ireland is careful to maintain the balance between exaltation and memorial; objects are never far from their function or demise whilst simultaneously managing to surpass both. Outcomes are not where it's at, glory lies in the minutiae of process but is never recognised as such – that would just ruin the system.

FIONA SHAW 2007