

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 clamor 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 of total 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 everyday. 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 naive 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)... asymbiotic 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