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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
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MARTIN GALE: NARRATIVE CONTENT ^{of} TO HIS PAINTING
BY
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Introduction

Introduction

Having grown-up in a household where my father, Martin Gale's studio has always been the main focus, fine art has been a strong influence from paintings in the house, to various exhibitions and openings and my father's work. As a child, I can clearly remember posing for photographs in specific dresses for what seemed like hours, then seeing images from these photographs being drawn up on the canvases, the painting of the undercoat right through to the final varnish. I spent a lot of time in the studio with my father and, still, whenever I go home one of the first things I do is see what he is working on at the moment.

Thus, writing a thesis on the subject presented to me an opportunity to find out more about my father's work and in hindsight gave me the opportunity to find out more about him through his work. It also gave me the chance to focus on the particular elements of his work that I personally liked myself.

Having read various people's interviews with my father and reviews of his work, it became apparent that few seemed to focus on the narrative side to his work, A side that I personally find most interesting, more often because I know the places and people in the paintings or indeed his own personal reasons for the painting.

Having access to a collection of every published review and access to a wide range of obscure material gave me the opportunity to analyse other people's views and question and indeed clarify my own opinion on the work. By tracking down the paintings that I wanted to deal with in this thesis, I had the opportunity to examine the original artwork combined with personal memories of other works of the time. I also conducted an extensive interview with the artist. All this, combined with the experience of growing up surrounded by his painting and spending a lot of time in the studio with him, gave me a good body of research to analyse and allow me to generate my own ideas.

I wish to explore the importance of the narrative content of Martin Gale's paintings, which are largely autobiographical and have a narrative vein which is not immediately obvious. Frequently we are given clues through title and/or his use of image, always drawing the viewer into the painting and inviting you to question what is happening. Rarely is the narrative clearly and obviously explained but rather the paintings carry the implication of narrative.

Though more often considered a landscape painter, I feel that my father uses the landscape as a secondary element to indicate location, season or mood in what is essentially a narrative composition. The landscape is usually used to enrich visually the

composition, providing an important context from which he can develop his narrative like a stage set upon which to set a play. The objects and figures are given roles with which to replay the story or narrative content. This gives the viewer a playground with an atmosphere created using tools of light and colour for their imagination to establish their personal response to the imagery. He deals directly with the visible world as opposed to the abstract world; there's no secret language or hidden symbols. However, the paintings usually carry an air of expectancy; something is about to happen or has just happened. Combining what has been given, i.e. imagery and titles, the plot is laid out loosely enough for the viewer to establish their own personal response.

Observation is the basis of Martin Gale's work with regard to the imagery and his technique. He usually develops his ideas from closely observing the landscape around him, whether it is, for example, West Wicklow; Ardmore, Co. Waterford or the North. Wherever my father goes he records what he sees by taking photographs and making quick sketches. When he has more time he will paint small oils on paper to remind himself of a certain place. When in the studio, he will begin to piece together a painting by sketching the landscape and placing figures, buildings or cars where he wants them.

The next step is to paint a small oil on paper or occasionally on canvas. If he feels that the study works well and that the image is strong enough for a large painting he will begin to plan the larger canvas. Frequently small changes are made. He builds a larger

stretcher and primes the canvas. My father always begins by painting the entire canvas a deep red-brown colour, a mixture of burnt sienna and alizarin crimson. He feels this lends an under-lying richness to the colours that are painted on top. He then draws the image onto the canvas using the close observation of photographs, still life set-ups and previous studies as his source (see fig. 1). The whole process takes roughly four to five days, though he usually tries to build and prime more than one canvas at a time. Once the canvas is drawn, he begins under painting, usually in darker colours than the final coat. It's impossible to say how long a painting takes from start to finish, as it depends on size and if many changes take place during painting. Often my father will add in figures, buildings or objects, or take them out as he sees fit, until he feels that it is right.

However, he does not paint directly from photographs. He will take a photograph of the place for the setting, the people and/or objects which interest him and along with previous sketches amalgamate them together, while always keeping a close observation for natural detail. This casual formation of imagery which we are presented with is a more calculated and planned process than we might imagine.

He also paints in a very realistic style which adds an atmosphere and often a tension to the painting. The scenarios are usually very believable and the viewer often feels like an uninvited trespasser upon a private scene or memory. This draws the viewer into the



Preparation of canvas for Fig. 1 '*Leaving the Glen*'.



Fig. 1 *Leaving the Glen*.
oil on canvas, 90 x 120cm, 1998.



Detail of under-painting of Fig.1 *'Leaving the Glen'*.

painting as the meticulous detail keeps your attention focused on the image.

I want my paintings to evoke an emotional response. I want people to like them and remember them, a particular landscape, a mood, a feeling. A painting of a chair, for example, may be more than a representation of the object....it can evoke the absence of a person and I'm not concerned with metaphors or symbols and I don't see why I should turn away from real images from a direct line of communication.
(Gale, Interview with Kehoe, 1979).

These paintings do indeed carry a direct line of communication to the viewer, with a certain amount left open for the viewer to fill in for themselves. The paintings are largely autobiographical and of quite personal memories and experiences of my father's which may not be immediately obvious but which carries the implication of a narrative. It is my intention to focus on six paintings in depth, to illustrate my point. The paintings that I have chosen represents in chronological order, the main different stages of my father's painting, from his leaving college to the present.

The first three paintings which I deal with, *'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys'*, 1978 (see fig. 2), *'Hide and Seek'*, 1981 (see fig. 4) and *'Waking Up'*, 1986 (see fig. 5) are a representation of his early style of painting. Then there came a change of direction in 1990 as he began to paint still life paintings and I have chosen to use *'Detective Story'*, 1992 (see fig. 8) as an example of his work at this time.

Following this period in 1995 he painted '*Cliff Walk*' (see fig. 13) which I feel is a good representation of his return to landscape painting. Finally, '*An Incident*' (see fig. 14) painted in 1998 is a recent example of the style of painting he is developing at the moment. These six paintings are also personal favourites of mine, that I believe as a collection are a good representation of the direction that my father's work has taken over the last twenty-five years.

Chapter One:
My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys.

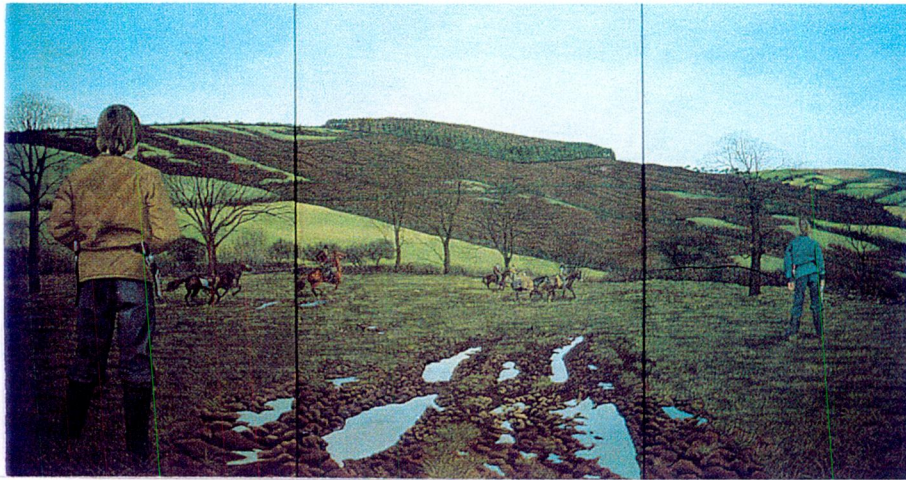


Fig. 2 *My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys.*
oil on canvas, 91 x 183cm, 1978.

Chapter one: My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys

While at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, between 1968 - 73 Pop Art had been a major influence on my father, rather than Abstract Expressionism, which was the predominant influence among his contemporaries at the time. Pop Art dealt with images; it made images. For example, Warhol's soup cans, when repeated, became extraordinary. Warhol knew how to find the extraordinary in the ordinary. English Pop artist Peter Blake used images which were common place, for example fan magazines, cheap toys and lucky bag type objects and elevated these to something else, high art almost. My father was interested in the idea of making strong images of everyday objects. Which, later, he developed as a means of story-telling. Strong images can be used to tell stories as a "*direct line of communication*" (Gale in interview with Kehoe, 1979).

When my father left art college in 1973 he had a very stylised, unreal approach to painting the landscape (see fig. 3). For example, in the painting '*Watchdog*' the landscape is quite unreal, in fact, it is almost surreal. This changed dramatically when the family moved to West Wicklow, in 1974. The landscape had a profound effect on him and he could not live surrounded by this wonderful landscape and stylise it. These new surroundings were the predominant influence on his work at this time. However, it was not enough for my father to paint straight landscapes; he had to do something with it.



Fig. 3 *Watchdog.*
oil on canvas, 120 x 150cm, 1974.

Taking the extraordinary/ordinary idea, he began to insert figures into the landscape and use it as a stage in which he could set a story or event that would stimulate the imagination.

It was at this time (1978) that he painted '*My heroes have always been Cowboys*' (see fig. 2). This painting derived from a painting one year earlier of children, seemingly frozen in time, distracted by a helicopter flying overhead. It was the strong atmosphere created in the first painting, something which was capable of distracting a child from play, which evolved into this painting. Two boys dressed as cowboys are looking into the landscape and in the mid-distance there are four cowboys with packhorses moving across the landscape. These are real cowboys set in a real West Wicklow landscape with the two children watching them. They have captured the children's attention.

It's a very detailed painting of dark tones, with every blade of grass painted. The mud in the foreground is handled in a much looser manner with little reflected in the water. The mud and water lead you right into the painting and the slant of the hill brings your eye down across the plain, which leads you to the cowboys. You are as surprised as you imagine the children to have been when you see the cowboys, as they are almost unnoticeable as they merge into the background of the same tone and almost same colour.

The idea behind this painting was to explore the gap between fantasy and reality for children as they often have a way of exploring the two. I can remember as a child, going to the cinema with my brother to see "Ok Corral wearing our good coats, with our guns and holsters on underneath and as a child you just don't rationalize these things.(Interview -1 / 11 / 98).

This painting questions where does fantasy begin and reality end in a child's mind?

To emphasize that this is what the painting was about it is painted from a child's height or viewpoint. You're looking slightly up at the figure on the left-hand side; it's painted from the viewpoint of someone roughly four and a half to five feet tall rather than average adult height. Martin Gale thought that this device would give a clue as to how the painting should be taken or interpreted. The children are not particularly surprised or taken aback; they're not panicked or frightened; they are just looking, which is often the way children will react to that which may seem unusual or bizarre to an adult.

At this time the family had just recently moved to West Wicklow, and my older brother, who is, in fact, both the boys in the painting, would spend a lot of time playing on his own, as he was an only child for seven years. Was it my father's observation of their only child, at this time, that influenced this painting? Perhaps it was on his mind that Jonathan (after moving from Dublin) had to spend a lot of time on his own. Jonathan had an incredible imagination and would spend hours exploring the surrounding countryside. Perhaps this was our father's way of trying to relate to and imagine what was going on in

his child's head. It can certainly be considered one of the first paintings where Martin Gale began to focus on his family for his painting.

Martin Gale puts into an ordinary setting an extraordinary event, resulting in an engaging painting, one that you can't look at indifferently. You wonder "why is this happening?; what is happening ?; and why are you are being allowed to view this scene? The title '*My heroes have always been Cowboys*' (see fig. 2) leads you to believe that this is all in the boy's imagination as he idolizes cowboys and longs to be just like one of them as he plays in the fields of this Wicklow landscape, which is an open plain or blank canvas to a child's imagination. Hilary Pyle wrote that;

The same boy gathers up acquaintances of his imagination into a figure filled landscape, with wonderful universe reflecting puddles, so that, though standing alone in a field, he is at the same time in the middle of a cowboy fracas.
(Pyle, 1982)

This boy believes in these cowboys riding across the landscape in front of him, and hence so does the viewer. The narrative vein to the painting is concerned with the narrowness of the gap between reality and fantasy in a child's mind.

The painting is also about childhood and recollection and is also very much about my father at this time, and his memories and recollections of being a child.

I was twenty eight when I painted this, which is generally a time of life when you look back on childhood and the memory is still semi-fresh and you can still remember childhood experiences, it really is quite an introspective picture. (Interview 1.11.98).

It would seem apparent that at this time that the moving of the family home from Dublin city center to these new rural surroundings had an impact on the family and thus influenced my father's painting.

'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys' (see fig. 2), *'Hide and Seek'* (see fig. 4) and *'Waking Up'* (see fig. 5) are three paintings which represent the early style of Martin Gale's painting. The paintings of this time tended to be executed with a thin application of paint with barely a trace of brushstrokes, highlighting the meticulous attention to detail. This intensely detailed representation of the landscape lends an air of unreality, and draws the viewer into the painting even closer, to the extent that you almost feel as though you are intruding or trespassing into someone else's world. This gives the painting an anxious edge which succeeds in capturing the intensity of the moment forever, whether it be a child's imagination, a girl playing hide and seek or two children in a forest. The freezing of a private moment and atmosphere is unnerving. There is the

sense that something has just happened or is about to happen. You (the viewer) haven't been given the full picture of what's occurred but there's something going on that you don't know about. You are only given clues through title, the figures and the atmosphere of the landscape to the nature of the drama. In her thesis, Helen Richmond made the point that in Gale's work

The idea of developing an integrated relationship with the landscape is often disregarded, the landscape being seen more often as a kind of stage set against which the dramas of modern lifestyle are played out, in which the landscape itself does not play any real part in the action or as not seen to have any major effect on the people's lives (Richmond, 1990)

I agree that the landscape is used very well as a stage set and plays a major part as supporting role to the figures, adding to the atmosphere of the painting, whether it be an open plain for a child's imagination, a confusingly detailed backdrop to a seemingly innocent game of hide and seek or indeed an enclosing forest surrounding two possibly lost children. However, it's the intensity of detail to the painting of the landscape that influences the atmosphere of the painting, with the detail giving an unnerving anxious feel.

My father regularly brought us for walks around the area where we lived and during this time, as he was watching us, it would seem that he found ways to create particular scenes

for paintings. Not coming from a farming background, as children the area where we lived (West Wicklow) was to us somewhere we could explore as an open playground. We didn't farm the land or tend to fences, etc. To us it was somewhere to play. I feel that this disassociation from the land shows through in many of the paintings and adds to the viewer's feeling of being on the outside and looking in on something going on though you're not quite sure what exactly it is. In many of the paintings the figures seem to be in their surroundings for no obvious reasons, besides having a role in the particular event that the artist is depicting. The lack of physical involvement or interaction with the landscape makes the figures seem somewhat uncomfortable in their environs, adding to the tension and anxiety. This feeling of being an outsider strengthens the sense of disassociation, making the viewer alienated from the landscape yet still drawing them in through an incredible attention to detail.

**Chapter Two:
Hide and Seek.**



Fig. 4 *Hide and Seek.*
oil on canvas, 91 x 91cm. 1981.

Chapter Two: Hide and Seek

In *'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys'* (see fig. 2) it is obvious that there is something happening, though the viewer is not part of it, just another onlooker. However in *'Hide and Seek'* (see fig. 4), *'Waking Up'* (see fig. 5) and in subsequent paintings, there is much more of a sense of something about to happen, where the stillness of the moment is threatened by interruption.

'Hide and Seek' (see fig. 4) was part of a one man show in Taylor Galleries which then became a part of a touring show around Ireland and, in 1981, was part of the *'Images of Ireland'* show in Brussels. It came about after a visit to my grandfather's aunt's house in Hereford. She had a wonderful garden and greenhouse, which was steeped in a feeling of the past. While renovating the house a corner cupboard was found to have a false bottom which contained a box and in this box a baby's skeleton was found which was, approximately, 100 years old, and nobody knew anything about. The place was steeped in history, memories and atmosphere. My father felt that this was a place that he could use in a painting, the setting for a drama. Bruce Arnold wrote that;

he paints a crumbling greenhouse, its shadows and glassless windows set against the brilliant sunshine of the late summer/early autumn in such a manner that we look for a hidden message. The intensity of vision creates an atmosphere pregnant with message. We are conscious of some kind of overall impact and search for it, as we so often do in art for elusive meaning. Yet the message is what we see (Arnold Bruce, 1989).

At four years old, I'm the girl in the painting and I can clearly remember standing with my hands covering my face while my father took photographs to use as studies. The image of the girl with her hands on her face seemingly counting makes you wonder if somebody is hiding? The painting evokes the possible presence of someone else in the garden that we can't see. The isolation of the girl gives a slightly sinister overtone as you realize that the child can't see either. The title is a clue, though you don't know if her companions have run away and disappeared and left her there. Is someone hiding or, indeed, has someone done something that she can't look at? We are aware that we are watching something that we are detached from.

This slightly sinister atmosphere, apart from the image itself, is also down to the very tight attention to detail. It's a grey cold uninviting place with a slightly uneasy/disturbing feel about it. With several different narratives/story lines hinted at, it creates a little arena that the viewer can let their imagination run freely around. The atmosphere of unease and anxiety are subtly achieved without being overly dramatic about it. The paintings of this period are all about hints and suggestions rather than spelling it out, letting the viewer decide what it's about. It's a case of coaxing the viewer into different ways of looking and interpreting the paintings. The idea is that the viewer is instantly locked into a situation which should transcend mere commentary and induce feelings, for example, of discomfort. What could appear as a mask of calm over these paintings has a disturbing edge to it in paintings of this period from 1980 to 1990.

The colours are all middle tones with lots of green on green which is something that Martin Gale noticed from looking at the paintings of Matisse (Interview, 1.11.98). If Matisse used one red, he'd use seven or eight different reds so that he could build up an intensity by using similar tones of the same colour. In *'Hide and Seek'* (see fig. 4) if the girl had been standing in this brownish green garden in an orange jumper it wouldn't carry the same weight that it does. However, it is the representation of the textural elements of the garden that dominates the painting. In a review of this exhibition Brian Fallon wrote;

The touch of tension and poetic unreality which he adds saves his work from ever lapsing into the near photographic banality of the New Realists, most of whom look like the Old-Academics writ small. He is, in fact, closer at times to Surrealism but keeps a firm footing in nature and has a keen eye for natural detail. (Fallon 1982).

I would agree that the emotional atmosphere which is created in these paintings is a major element that separates his work from the category of 'New Realist' or 'Photo Realist'. Indeed, later in 1989, Brian Fallon also wrote that;

'Photo Realist' is the label which is usually applied to him but to be pedantic, he is closer to Magic Realism. The harsh urban, ultra-contemporary tone of the New York realist is far removed from his; in fact, he seems to belong to another world. (Fallon, 1989).

However, one of the major elements to his work that separates Gale from the label of "Photo Realist" is the fact that the camera is used just as a tool, used for collecting and

recording images and is not of paramount importance. Photo realists treat the photograph as a still life. They are interested in the photograph rather than the subject of the photograph. Separate images are recorded and amalgamated together through sketches and often small oils on paper. He never sets up an entire scene, photographs it and then paints the photograph, his use of the camera and the importance of the camera to him separates him from the 'Photo Realist' label which is often applied.

The touch of tension and poetic unreality which he adds saves his work from ever lapsing into the near-photographic banality of the New-Realists, most of whom look like the Old-Academics writ small. He is, in fact, closer at times to Surrealism, but keeps a firm footing in nature, and has a keen eye for natural detail. (Fallon, 1982).

It could be said that this 'Surreal' element is more apparent in his earlier work i.e. paintings following college. This indeed is an element that has followed through and I would agree that it is the close observation of his surroundings and his "*keen eye for natural detail*" (Fallon, 1982) that separates him from the category of being 'New Realist'.

Chapter Three: Waking Up.



Fig. 5 *Waking Up.*
oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm, 1986.

Chapter Three: Waking Up

During 1986 my father painted a picture which he called '*Waking Up*' (see fig. 5) showing two children in a forest. At 122 x 152 cm it was quite a large painting executed for the A.I.B. Art Collection and then borrowed for the show '*Beyond the Garden Wall*'. One child, a girl, has her back turned and is walking straight out of the picture away from the viewer; the other child looks straight out of the picture at the observer and has an expression of surprise on his face. I know now, in retrospect, that the painting reflects my father's anxiety about what he was going to do and how he was going to cope with his domestic situation at the time. The situation was within the immediate family, as our parents spilt up and my younger brother and I stayed with my father. It was an anxious time for him, for obvious reasons, as he wondered about his ability to deal with the situation.

How could or should I get it [the situation] across? Somehow finding the forest, seeing it in the early morning with light just coming through the trees, the atmosphere created by the dark cover, it all began to fall into place – as I was painting it and I was able to follow a definite line with it.
(Interview, 1.11.98).

He originally painted a small canvas 10" x 12", just of the forest and felt that it had possibilities. The narrative element just presented itself as he was painting it. (Interview – 1.11.98). This painting is really one part of two companion paintings which were both

painted at the same time. *'At the Landing'* (see fig. 6) has a boat in the foreground, a road with a car parked with a car door open. The same two children are standing in the forest looking up and down the road and you get the feeling that an adult has gone and left them and the children are feeling isolated and vulnerable, which is the key word really to both this painting and *'Waking Up'* (see fig. 5). At this time the paintings were becoming much more autobiographical.

These paintings were not sparked by the situation but by the forest, which is near to where we live (Russellstown on the Blessington Lakes). The evergreen forest with little or no life holds a riddling silence and an almost dead atmosphere. It was while walking through this area that Martin Gale felt this was an atmosphere he could use and that the forest would be a good place to set a painting. The situation was obviously on his mind but he had not thought of how or whether to use it in a painting. "The narrative began to emerge as I progressed with the painting, which I found extraordinary. *"It took over the direction it was going in itself; I was almost following it in a sense."* (Interview-1.11.98). It would appear as a more subconscious decision to use this dark foreboding setting as a stage set upon which to deal with his personal thoughts on the situation. I find it very interesting that my father feels that the painting took it's own direction and that he was *'following it'*. From writing this (thesis) and having to separate my thoughts of him



Fig. 6 *At the Landing.*
oil on canvas, 152 x 183cm, 1986-1987.

firstly, as a painter, I can understand the importance of this painting to him and secondly from knowing him as a person I can understand his method of dealing with this situation more clearly.

The painting was a way for my father to deal with the effects of the separation and the personal upset for him while also acknowledging the toll that it takes on all members of the family. The strong emotional tensions and anxiety felt by him at this time are conveyed to the viewer in this painting. There is a mysterious silence and stillness to this painting which, portrayed with such an assured technique, captures the viewer.

The child facing the viewer with such a chilling stare, making the viewer aware of their intrusion, entices you into the painting. The girl walking away draws you after her into the depths of the wood. This is one of the few paintings where a figure looks out of the painting towards the viewer. The composition of the painting is distracting and doesn't let the viewer dwell on what's happening too much. Your eye nervously skips across the painting with no direct lead laid out for your trail of vision. You look at the boy up and down, then the girl running off into the distance, then back to the tree in the foreground and you are momentarily distracted by the meticulous detail of the forest floor and surrounding encapsulating trees. Then the eye moves back to the boy, reaffirming a nervous anxiety. This does not allow the viewer to think about the personal side to the

painting, the extreme detail is distracting. Did he feel that his daughter was leaving, the running away perhaps, symbolizing her growing up or growing apart, or being pushed out by the anxious circumstances? The void between the two children has an uncomfortable feel to it and we are made aware of the separation between them, as though they are ignoring each other. You don't know quite what has happened and there is a sense of foreboding. It would also appear that something has happened already between them, as there is no attempt to connect them to each other. They are only connected visually, by the fact that they are both wearing blue and red.

I feel that perhaps this was my father's way of trying to distract himself from what was happening. By involving himself so thoroughly with the time consuming intense detailed handling of the paint he could distance himself from what was happening around him. My younger brother looks so lost and saddened and I'm running away from him, leaving him and leading the viewer into the depths of the forest. I remember the day when our father took the photographs of Robert for this painting, and he cried and cried, childishly, simply because he didn't want to have his hair combed. I wonder did our father, perhaps, subconsciously record this moment/expression of this child's unhappiness to capture it for the mood or atmosphere of this painting, that feeling of being lost and not understanding the circumstances. This must have been paramount on our father's mind at this time.

The presence of sky in this painting draws you deeper into the painting and brings your eyes down to trees, showing the depth of the forest. As your eyes cannot wander across a skyline you are directed to concentrate on the children. As Ciaran Carty wrote “ *The sky has virtually disappeared from his landscape. The effect is to focus attention much more intensely and atmospherically on the people and places*” (Carty, 1987). My father felt that “ *when you take away the sky, the world is your oyster. You’re no longer limited by the horizon. It throws everything open. You’re forced to look at things from a whole lot of different viewpoints.*” (Interview – 1.11.98). It would seem that there are a lot of different viewpoints to the narrative of this painting. There is the possible meaning of waking up to the situation we were in, with the children appearing worried and unhappy. But the painting also tells you something about the artist. “*The vulnerable person at the time was really myself, as far as I know the children were not vulnerable and I was the one carrying the anxiety and fretting about the whole thing,*” (Interview – 1.11.98) So the painting is actually a portrait of how my father was at the time. His state of mind perhaps.

The forest could also be considered as a metaphor for sleep with the dawn going on outside the forest. You can see the sunshine breaking through with one child walking towards the dawn/light as if she’s waking and the other child is still deep in the forest, waking being a metaphor for harsh realities coming home to bear.

“ Gale imbues this simple scene with a mysterious rapt stillness. Everything is held and seen as if for the first time. The world beyond, in the shadowy forest is an enigma.”

(Dunne, 1987) I feel that the painting's atmosphere has a stillness which reflects sleep.

Kate Robinson wrote, *“Waking Up (see fig. 5) conveys the loneliness of incipient adolescence”* (Sunday Independent 1.3.87.). People will always see paintings differently as the imagery is left open for personal interpretation. This interpretation is not wrong just very different to others. Paintings can only carry so much of a universal language, and with a narrative only being hinted at, there is a lot left open to the viewer's personal interpretation.

This painting [*‘Waking Up’*] (see fig. 5), *‘At the Landing’* (see fig. 6) and another painting of the time, *‘Tea Ceremony’* (see fig. 7) which shows a girl in a kimono in the foreground with my daughter in the mid-distance looking directly at her in an assertive way, were becoming intensely personal.
(Interview, 1.11.98)

Martin Gale feels, looking back now, that the paintings at this point were becoming too personal and introspective to be of interest to other people and the personal element was taking over from the *“universal art”* content. (Interview – 1.11.98). I feel that it was important for my father to make a change. There had been a major ‘turn around’ in his

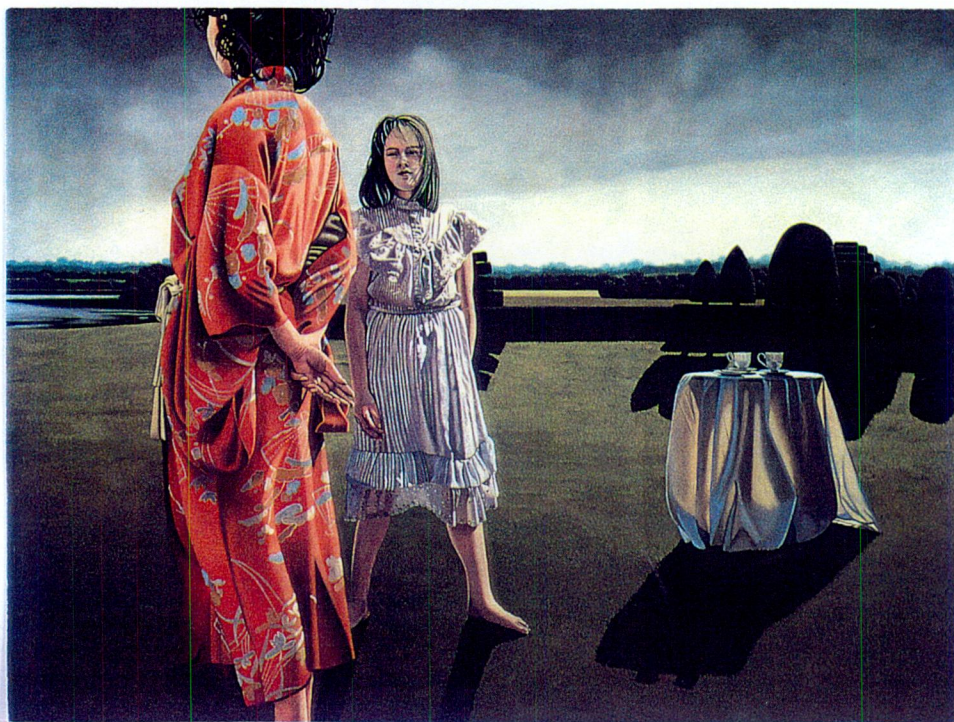


Fig. 7 *Tea Ceremony.*
oil on canvas, 137 x 184cm, 1987.

life, which inevitably would be reflected in his painting. He was beginning to feel that other people would lose interest in his painting. He needed to prove to himself that he could paint well and didn't necessarily have to rely on such personal sources for ideas. Also, as the domestic situation began to improve and he became more comfortable, a need to feel more confident as a painter developed. He needed to prove to himself that he was good at what he did and that people were interested in his painting.

**Chapter Four:
Detective Story.**

1954-1955



Fig.8 *Detective Story.*
oil on canvas, 88 x 88cm, 1992.

Chapter Four: Detective Story

Having done these paintings [*Waking Up* (see fig. 5), *At the Landing* (see fig. 6), *Tea Ceremony* (see fig. 7)] I found they were getting a bit personal and I was losing something else because I love landscapes, I love landscape painting and I love using the landscape in my paintings and I was having difficulty separating the landscape from this personal content. I felt I had to break that trend/direction so in 1990 I changed course and decided to tackle a totally different subject matter and way of painting, in a sense, to break the link.
(Interview – 1.11.98)

It would appear that Gale felt that his painting was becoming secondary to the story that it had to tell. As my father said, “*when painting ‘Waking Up’ (see fig. 5) the painting seemed to take its own course of direction*”. Obviously at this time it was important for him to make this break from portraying this personal content in his paintings. Also, at this time he was happier with his personal situation as circumstances had improved.

So taking *Tea Ceremony* (see fig. 7) with the table in the mid-ground which had china teacups and saucers on it, I had done a watercolour landscape study, for the picture called “*Tea Dream*” (see fig. 9) which I thought was successful and took this as my starting point.” (Interview – 1.11.98)

This became the starting point for a series of still life paintings



Fig. 9 *Tea Dream.*
oil on canvas, 30 x 45cm, 1988.

A desire to create strong and memorable images has always played a part in my work, and still life seemed to offer an opportunity to achieve such images. Object in the paintings are not in themselves significant and only have an importance in the context of the painting (Gale, Catalogue, Still Life Painting, 1992).

The still life paintings were frequently of an unusual mix of objects, often painted larger than life size, which gave them a powerful presence. These were placed on highly polished wooden surfaces with a play of light causing reflections.

After the still life show in Taylor Galleries, Dublin, *'Detective Story'* (see fig. 9) was painted for Kelly's Hotel in Roslare in 1992. This painting contains a desk with a toy gun, box and a broken decanter. It is nearly narrative, as the box hints that it contains something for which violence was committed. Reading the box as a treasure chest, the gun as the weapon and the broken decanter as the victim, you have the ingredients for a 'detective story' just like an Agatha Christie book. The antique furniture is also akin to the type of furniture that you would expect to find in a private country house or perhaps a library, the kind of place where fictional murders occur.

When painting this picture my father set the objects up on a table in his studio, with light coming through the window, placing the whole scenario in a strong lighting, so that the objects stood out clearly.

I wanted the picture to have clues, such as the palm tree which points to a clue of some sorts, the curtain and chair at an angle askew to the table, which has what looks like a locked drawer along with the toy gun, broken decanter and exotic looking box. So it's the sort of scene that you'd imagine a detective coming in and pouring over, trying to piece together what had happened? Why it happened and who did it? A drama without figures. (Interview 1.11.98)

The title suggests the narrative vein and direction of thought in this painting. There was obviously care taken to ensure that the painting was not overloaded with images, yet that the images or objects were strong enough to individually carry a clue and when placed together possibly tell a story.

These still life paintings started as a throw back to much earlier work. After college, in the 1970's, many of Martin Gale's paintings contained for example, images of large cabbages/lettuce then later, he again painted a large still life of cabbage (see fig. 10) followed by leeks in a window setting. Strong single subject compositions, almost echoing Warhol's soup cans and Brillo boxes. Portraying them far larger than life and centring them squarely in the centre of the canvas gave them an emblematic quality, similar to the effect of Warhol's soup cans. This emblematic feel to the objects in the paintings continues throughout the series. *"It is a rare accomplishment to retain the stylistic threads from one's early development in the middle years with integrity"* (Fallon, 1989) Though this was written about earlier paintings, I think that it is particularly relevant at this point. The still life paintings reflect his earlier style of painting.



Fig. 10 *Cabbage (Still life).*
oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm, 1994.



Fig. 11 *NightStand.*
oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm, 1994.

The composition of reflections, on the table surface, with the glass on the highly polished table, gave Martin Gale the opportunity to show his high level of technical skill, which is evident in this painting.

He focuses on objects in interior light; a plotted plant; bric-a-brac, a glass vase etc. They are usually grouped in opposition to each other, but very sparsely and much play is made of the light reflections from polished wood.... What is noticeable is that the backgrounds are rarely painted in detail, instead they are in a free, painterly style which sometimes contrasts with the cool, exact style of the objects represented. (Fallon, 1992)

The looser style of painting, which is evident in the background of this painting and other paintings of this time, reappears in later paintings and it would seem that this confidence in technique was really beginning at this stage.

The earlier still lifes had a landscape towards the back, for example, out of a window, etc. Eventually he homed in much more on the objects and his leaning towards narrative painting influenced the choosing of them. *"I began to chose objects which had a significance for me, such as a box with pearl inlay left to me by my Grandfather; these various objects and their significance began to seep into the paintings."* (Interview 1.11.98) The still life paintings were also becoming more complicated with a more obvious narrative vein to them, for example, *'Arm Chair Traveller'* (see fig. 12) which has a table with a box with Chinese landscapes inlaid in pearl upon it. There's also a toy



Fig. 12 *ArmChair Traveller*.
oil on canvas, 122 x 122cm, 1992.

car on top of the box and a palm tree in a pot beside it. The artist has confirmed the metaphorical aspect of the image, with the car representing travel and the box obviously coming from an exotic place, perhaps the destination which is emphasised by the palm tree. At this time it was clear to my father that his paintings are personal and usually with a strong narrative vein to them.

When beginning this period of painting, the element of having one central image was paramount. One central image that powerfully holds your eye leaving you with an after image when you close your eyes was the intent of these still life paintings. Yet despite this original intent, the narrative element began to creep into the painting.

I persevered with it for four to five years, until I began to eventually think – hang on a minute, I’m beginning to make these paintings into landscapes and I couldn’t get away from this landscape because I live in the middle of one and to be honest I was missing it.

(Interview – 1.11.98)

Though I believe it was a very important period for my father as he made a break from painting such personal experiences as in for example, ‘*Waking Up*’ (see fig. 5) which he obviously wasn’t really comfortable doing. The still lifes were an opportunity for him to explore his technique when painting more complicated compositions such as broken glass on highly polished wooden surfaces, effected by various lighting. Following this, I think

there is more confidence evident in his painting technique. It was an important step for him to take at the time and I feel quite a brave one, as he needed a break from the emotional content which the still life series offered him.

So the call of the landscape was still there and Martin Gale began to paint these small paintings and reintroducing the landscape in the background. He used landscapes from Renaissance paintings; for example, there is one called 'Good Morning Senior Bellini' (see fig. 13), which shows a section of a landscape from one of Bellini's paintings 'The Madonna in the Meadows'. There is an Italian town set in the original landscape and Martin Gale used a section of this for the background. The centre of the picture was a boiled egg and a spoon, representing breakfast. Another painting, 'Renaissance Onions', had a Renaissance landscape with a couple of large onions in the foreground. He reproduced a John Constable painting 'Hampstead Heath' in 'Constable's Lunch', with a ploughman's lunch, with a pork pie and a knife in the foreground. It became apparent that inevitably Martin Gale was working his way back to landscape painting.

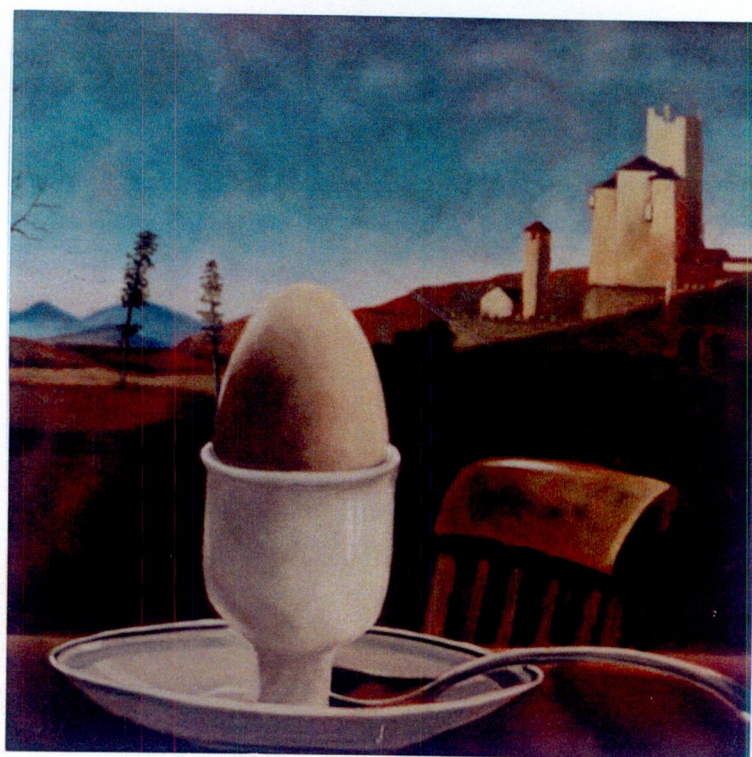


Fig. 13 *Good Morning Senior Bellini.*
oil on board, 22 x 22cm, 1993.

Chapter Five:
Cliff Walk.



Fig. 14 *Cliff Walk*.
oil on canvas, 122 x 122cm, 1992.

Chapter Five: Cliff Walk

As the first step back to landscape painting, in 1995 my father exhibited a painting called '*Cliff Walk*' (see fig. 14) in the Davis Gallery 25 years celebration show. The landscape in the painting is of Ardmore which is a place my father has been going to since he was a child. In 1990 he took my younger brother down there for a holiday. My father could see the same sort of things that happened to him there, happening to Robert. He could see Robert being drawn into the place, making friends there and so on. It's a small holiday village, where the same people go ever year, so you meet the same people each year. It's not a resort, though the holiday homes have been in the same families for generations, even the caravans in the small caravan site have been in the same families for years.

The painting is set in the village. There's a walk as you're coming into the village, seen on the left hand side, where the boy is. The village faces north and the sun goes down behind it, rather than over the sea, which gives a slightly unusual atmosphere. "Like 'My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys' and most of the others, the painting is more about me rather than the boy in the painting; the boy is standing in for me." (Interview 1.11.98). This visit to Ardmore revitalised all sorts of old memories that my father had. In the same interview he recalled meeting an old friend he'd had when he was a child there, saying to him "*walk around, go lay all the old ghosts and take it for what it is now*

and stop thinking - remember this, remember that from thirty odd years ago". This he did and these paintings are for him his way of 'laying the old ghosts' and looking at the place as it is, to him, now.

There is a feeling of drama with a slightly disturbing aspect to it, which tends to happen because of the technique and colour. The technique is quite detailed and the colours range from darks to very light which lend the painting an atmosphere.

"In Gale's depiction, the figures are rather disturbingly represented as lonely or lost inhabitants of what seems, and I suppose can be, a threatening oppressive world." (Ferguson, 24.11.96). The figure in the foreground is indeed, 'disturbingly represented' as he appears to slightly acknowledge your presence as he glances over his shoulder towards the viewer. Involving the viewer in this way, puts the viewer, uncomfortably on the spot, a voyeur, you feel that you are intruding on this person's private life. What has happened between this person and the figure which seems to be running ahead of him on the path? It is left to the viewer to speculate.

My father has said that he put the girl into the painting for *"no other reason than composition. I just wanted two figures in the painting. The identity of the figure is not significant."* (Interview 1.11.98). However, the figure is significant in terms of colour

and balance in the painting, giving a lot of action down that side of the painting. He also achieved a balance between the area of intense activity and an area of open space.

Your eye is lead into the painting by the figure in the foreground then along the path, to the second figure, then through the trees and across the village, which lies under a heavy skyline. This heavy skyline adds on unsteady atmosphere to the painting, as the sun is setting and the clouds signal that bad weather is on the way. A short while later, following this captured moment we feel there will be a dramatic change in the weather.

This painting is more about the place rather than the people who are in it which is unlike his body of work before the still life series. As Aidan Dunne wrote, *"two landscapes a wild cliff walk and town structured by people with a background o farm land, people interacting with own landscape"*. The narrative is for the viewer to interpret. *"The landscape is accurately appraised as an amalgam of great natural beauty and the imposition of human schemes of order ownership, habitation, industry and exploitation"*. (Dunne, 1996). I agree with Aidan Dunne's view here that the painting represents *"an amalgam of great natural beauty and the imposition of human schemes of order."* I feel that this element appears again in later work and seems to be a direction that Martin Gale is taking. It's a pointer towards the narrative content that the viewer can take but more so this painting is an open space in which to let the imagination run. Compared with earlier work, the narrative content is left more open for the viewers to construct for themselves.

The painting is freer than in previous pictures with slightly more evidence of brushwork and the method of painting. This was the direction my father was interested in taking. He felt there was more of an enjoyment to it and it was less of an exercise in technique and there was more of a feeling of the paint.

Chapter Six:
An Incident.



Fig.15 *An Incident.*
oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm, 1998.

Chapter Six: An Incident

Having gone through the still-life period and having re-introduced the landscape into his painting, I feel that my father was now more comfortable with his established standard of work. He could now worry less about other people's view, i.e. critics, etc, and was more confident with his painting. The still-life period had acted as a playground for him to explore and, indeed, to prove his technical skill. He was also personally happier painting landscapes. I believe this is apparent by the looser, freer and more 'painterly' style with which he began to work. In his studio there has always been lots of tiny paintings on the back of various boxes and small scraps of paper with the paint often applied with a palette knife or very heavily with a brush. I know he has for some time wanted to shed this 'Photo-Realist' label and to paint with this looser style and heavier handling of paint. It would seem that now he had the confidence to do so.

In 1998 this looser style of painting was clearly evident in my father's exhibition in the Boathouse Gallery, Castletownsend, Cork. These paintings derive from a project where a southern painter went to the North and a northern painter went to the South of Ireland to produce a body of work from that place. *"These paintings are a response to a visit I made to North Antrim in the winter of 1997, I chose winter because it is the season when the true shapes and essence of a landscape is most visible, like a face without make-up."* (Gale, 1998). My father was to begin with, anxious about going to the Glens of Antrim,

but the natural beauty of the place encouraged him to forget his anxiety and he felt that going to Cushendall was like finding a well-kept secret. He began by doing quick oil sketches, pencil sketches and taking photographs to collect as much visual information as possible in what was a relatively short time. It appeared to him as a place with more than just a beautiful physical geography. There was a sense that people from the South were afraid to go up there, to experience the beauty for themselves. *"It is a stimulation and dramatic landscape. The Glens are stunning. The interaction between the people and their landscape is a wonderful subject."* (Gale, 1998).

The first day my father was there it snowed and while driving he came across a car which had slid off the road. He was immediately concerned, then in an instant he thought of finding bodies in the car, political killings and all those kind of things that you associate with the North. If it had happened in the South, you'd go over straight away and see if you could help. In the North you'll hold back a little, as there could be more than meets the eye to the situation. It was experiencing that moment of apprehension that influenced him to paint *'An Incident'* (see fig. 15). As it happened, there was nothing sinister about the 'incident'; the car had just skidded off the road. It is that moment of watchfulness, that moment of anxiety that is suggested by this painting. You, the viewer, are kept at a distance; you are looking at the incident of occurrence from a distant perspective. There is a sinister element to what could be a perfectly normal situation.

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2. The second part of the document outlines the specific procedures for recording transactions. It details the steps involved in the accounting cycle, from identifying the transaction to posting it to the appropriate ledger account.

3. The third part of the document discusses the role of the auditor in verifying the accuracy of the records. It explains how the auditor uses various techniques, such as sampling and vouching, to ensure that the financial statements are true and fair.

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5. The fifth part of the document discusses the role of the accounting system in providing information to management. It explains how the accounting system can be used to generate reports that help management make informed decisions about the organization's operations.

6. The sixth part of the document discusses the importance of the accounting system in providing information to external stakeholders. It explains how the accounting system can be used to generate financial statements that are used by investors, creditors, and other interested parties.

7. The seventh part of the document discusses the importance of the accounting system in providing information to the public. It explains how the accounting system can be used to generate reports that are used by the public to make informed decisions about the organization's financial health.

8. The eighth part of the document discusses the importance of the accounting system in providing information to the government. It explains how the accounting system can be used to generate reports that are used by the government to monitor the organization's compliance with tax laws and other regulations.

9. The ninth part of the document discusses the importance of the accounting system in providing information to the media. It explains how the accounting system can be used to generate reports that are used by the media to report on the organization's financial performance.

10. The tenth part of the document discusses the importance of the accounting system in providing information to the general public. It explains how the accounting system can be used to generate reports that are used by the general public to make informed decisions about the organization's financial health.

The landscape is dark and foreboding with highlighted glinting of the snow. The landscape is not used just as a background but is integral to the narrative content of this painting. The painting has a heavy atmosphere to it, though it's not too obvious what is being hinted at. The structure of the landscape looking across the glens has a rough, rugged uncomfortable look and feel to it. The jagged edge to the landscape is highlighted by the signpost, which echoes the jagged hillside.

The handling of the paint is much more robust, as the Glens of Antrim are a rugged and uncompromising place. Martin Gale wanted the handling of the paint to reflect that, so the paint is thicker and the handling is more muscular and rugged in a way. This gives the place an atmosphere of incipient violence. There is less of an attempt to represent the scene with meticulous detail and, therefore, the canvas became more of a place to play with technique. The painting is as much about the place that the incident occurred in, as about the incident itself.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Having studied these six paintings in depth I believe that they outline Gale's style of painting and are a good representation of the direction that his work has taken over the last twenty years. I studied these paintings, researched other people's reviews and talked to my father about his work and from synthesising these sources together, formed my own ideas and personal views on his work. I feel that, throughout the years, observation has been the basis of his work, observation of relationships, tensions family, friends and places. This observation is evident through the narrative content of his work.

The paintings are of such precise reality that they are almost photographic, yet, they interpret an event or a mood, that leaves the viewer wondering what has just happened or what is about to happen. They pose questions rather than offer answers. Certainly, in his earlier paintings, he uses figures and other strong images to tell stories using the landscape as a stage upon which to set these scenes. The composition use of title, colour and almost obsessive attention to detail creates the atmosphere.

The paintings from 1980, '81 onwards were much more to do with people. For one thing, I realised that, for me, the human figure is the great theme. As the children grew up, their personalities began to assert themselves and that came into the painting.... Basically they were much more about the people in them than they were about the landscapes in which they were placed and during all that time I was worried about the direction in which my painting was going - I felt that it was becoming too hermetic, too claustrophobic.
(Gale 1995).

His painting was becoming very autobiographical and with a heavy emotional content. Though there were other possible narratives for viewers, my father felt that his work was becoming too personal and he felt the need for a change.

The still life series gave an opportunity to change the direction his painting was taking. Throughout the painting of this body of work he achieved strong images and found an extraordinary element to more ordinary objects, an idea, which had always interested him. The objects were usually painted larger than life size with incredible detail. As time went on his choice of objects became more symbolic, inducing a narrative content. The background to begin with was usually of a looser style and then after a while landscapes began to appear in the background of these still life paintings. He recalls *"finding it very difficult to live in one set of surroundings and paint another set of surroundings"* (Interview 1.11.98). Though by this stage he had succeeded in separating his use of landscape from the personal and emotional content and in 1995 he once again returned to landscape painting.

In earlier work he used the landscape as a stage upon which to work out personal situations, through painting and the importance of the landscape for those reasons had now changed. Whereas upon his return to landscape painting, it was the place and other people's relationship with that place that became more important.

His work had taken a new direction and his confidence with this new direction is made evident by the looser, freer more painterly style that evolved. Recently Aidan Dunne wrote that,

Gale's paintings are abrasive in that they recognise problems in the perceived view of rural Ireland. The rural idyll promoted by Bord Failte (Tourism Board) overlooks a virtual absence of planning strategy in rural areas which has allowed the eclipse of vernacular architectural style by incongruous bungalows and indiscriminate ribbon development, ignorant of existing settlements and patterns.
(Dunne, 1998,p.101).

Here Aidan Dunne makes a point which I feel is central to understanding Gale's work of the moment. He has also written that,

Gale's Ireland is really a place of agricultural industry, of European Union subsidies, headage payments, drainage schemes, bungalows, adolescent restlessness, greed for land, monotonous conifer plantations, Japanese cars, isolation, cold Winter light, moisture-laden air and melancholy Autumn evenings.
(Dunne, 1998,p.101).

I agree with this view and would feel that this is direction which Gale's work appears to be taking. As he has said that;

To me the most interesting aspect of any landscape is the human presence of the suggestion of it, the way people change or alter their landscape, sometimes taming it, sometimes existing in spite of it and indeed sometimes being defeated and overcome by it."
(Gale, 1995).

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7. The seventh part of the document discusses the social aspects of the organization. It provides an overview of the various social risks and how they are being managed. This section also discusses the various challenges that the organization is facing in terms of improving its social performance and engaging with the community.

8. The eighth part of the document discusses the overall performance of the organization. It provides an overview of the various key performance indicators (KPIs) that are being used to measure the organization's performance. This section also discusses the various challenges that the organization is facing in terms of improving its overall performance.

The tension in his work now rises from the slow and uneasy transition from traditional rural values to a more industrial urban influenced lifestyle. With influence coming from outside the immediate community, rather than within and thus “*accurately reflecting the realities of rural life.*” (Dunne, 1998,p.101).

To express critical views on something that you have grown up with and have been surrounded by all your life was a difficult thing to do. When viewing his work I had to try to separate the painter, the person and father figure. Distancing myself from my father's painting and looking at it from a different view proved almost impossible. I know too much about the whole process which brought these paintings into being, from the photographs being taken, through the drawing and painting stages right up to when they are hanging in a gallery. They become quite personal to us, whether we remember that particular place, time or even clothing. One of the strangest feelings is when, coming up to an exhibition, the house is full of paintings; every wall is covered and there's an entire body of work in the house. Then, they are collected for the exhibition and the moment the house is emptied it feels completely bare, and we always want to keep them. We each will have our favourites, that particular one that particular one that you want to keep for yourself. There's always a great build up to a show. When my father's working towards an exhibition, he will ask anyone who comes in or out of the house for their opinion and the paintings will be the topic of conversation for everyone at home. There's

a strange feeling of loss, particularly for the larger paintings that have such a presence in a room. You are involved in them, with what is going on and then one day, just like that, they are gone and who knows where they will end up. My brothers and I are hanging on someone else's wall, the possession of strangers. So writing this thesis gave me a great opportunity to study in detail six of my personal favourite paintings.

Finally, I would like to think that this thesis explains the importance of the narrative content of Martin Gale's paintings. . Gale's work is also largely autobiographical. So by looking at these six paintings from six different stages, we can follow how his work has progressed. The earlier paintings having a very personal content using figures and images set in a West Wicklow landscape, used as a stage upon which to set a narrative. Then, there was the still life period, where he took the opportunity to separate his use of the landscape from having this personal element to it. Now, following his return to landscape painting, Gale seem to have developed quite a different view of the landscape, concentrating more, as I have previously said, on the fragmentation of rural Ireland caused by the uneasy transition from traditional values to a more industrial influenced lifestyle. Yet it is evident that it his close observation of relationships, family, friends and places is indeed the basis of his work.

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