

The Paintings & Ceramics of Stephen O'Driscoll



The Weight of Knowing

I'VE KNOWN STEPHEN for almost 25 years and in that time, he has always impressed me with his direct and insightful manner of painting. His attitude is a refreshing “what you see is what you get” approach to some of life’s most significant issues. Whether they be intractable and all-consuming or delightful and euphoric. Stephen is a rare kind of artist; one who takes his work more seriously than himself – if that makes sense? He has always struck me as someone who needs to paint. Someone with something worth sharing.

During a recent conversation about his most recent paintings, it became clear that his work has always been primarily concerned with love – what it is to be loved and the overwhelming sense of abandonment at its loss. Stephen is simultaneously capable of celebrating life whilst mindful of its profound fragility – and transience. His work is deceptively ambitious.

In his paintings Stephen has achieved an extraordinary synthesis; a compelling and precarious mixture of acceptance and apprehension. His paintings are always visually stunning – literally. Pure, sumptuous colours that ‘cloak’ a kind of drawing that displays elements of automatism, appropriation and studious reflection. The tensions in his paintings are almost palpable – and sometimes even daunting.

As so much contemporary painting drifts towards literalism and illustration, Stephen’s work remains implacably visual. His combined love of the material and his grasp of the poetic is fast becoming all too rare. In fact, his landscapes demand to be experienced as if they were not merely poetic, but poetry. They’re anything but landscapes – they’re states of mind.

I thought I was familiar with Stephen’s work but was I in for a shock? His ceramics are a revelation. Once again, he has managed to combine a sense of wonder with more than a whiff of apprehension. He has achieved this without resorting to the hackneyed conventions of expressionism or the ceramicist’s age-old ally – process. Instead, he has the ability to make objects that simultaneously beguile and disturb. Objects that appear both fascinating and absurd. His ceramics are simultaneously joyous and somehow wonderfully ‘wrong’. Both exquisitely judged and knowingly misjudged.

Just about everything Stephen makes appears to resonate with a rich mixture of love and anxiety – the joyful and the tragic – there’s genuine pathos. Heads that are becoming ‘unbound’ – again a metaphor, only this time a three-dimensional metaphor that illustrates a state of mind rather than a state of affairs. The last thing they aspire to is likeness. Evidence of some intangible but nonetheless seemingly visible trauma – or rather its shadow. It’s as if the bandages have been partially removed to reveal not The Invisible Man – but an unknowable man.

Stephen’s work embraces many contradictions, but his greatest achievement is his ability to invest the familiar with the profound. Enjoy.

Graham Crowley 2021



Opposite:
Green Spaghetti Head