Oil on canvas

Geraldine O’Neill’s *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* is an example of the artist’s early work but is also an excellent introduction to the thematic and stylistic concerns that continue to influence her work.

The canvas has been painted with a deep green and gold design that mimics the opulent nature of embossed wallpaper. Painted onto this is a copy of *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (1618) by Spanish artist, Diego Velázquez. The Velázquez image is painted as a reproduction crudely attached to the wallpaper by a large piece of brown packing tape. The optical effect is captivating; a seemingly three-dimensional image rendered on a two-dimensional plane. O’Neill has commented that the charting and creation of space on a flat picture plane has been of continual interest for her; the way the viewer perceives space, scientific studies of how the human eye sees and the theories of Rene Descartes all influence her work. This piece is indeed a testimony to her preoccupation with surface appearance, creating perspective, illusion and depth. It also demonstrates her knowledge of art history, in particular the still life genre and also early artistic experiments with trompe l’oeil. The depiction of *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* visually expresses O’Neill’s admiration for Velázquez’s expertise, in particular his realist idiom.

When approached from a distance the force of O’Neill’s optical illusion is at its strongest and most absorbing for the viewer. The Velázquez image, which O’Neill has so skilfully and accurately portrayed, truly appears to be a crumpled piece of paper that has been taped to the canvas. Her mastery of light and shadow, trompe l’oeil realism and the evocation of texture are the keys to the success of the illusion. For example, the glossy surface of the packing tape, with its folds and creases, renders the mark of the paintbrush almost invisible. O’Neill’s technical mastery means the tape becomes a point of focus and fascination for the viewer. Indeed the artist commented that her concern with objects and their depiction encompasses precisely this development; the painting of banal or everyday objects enables the viewer to consider them for their aesthetic qualities.

Geraldine O’Neill informed me that the piece was originally intended as a diptych but was split when purchased. The other half featured Velázquez’s *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* as a faded backdrop on which O’Neill painted a still life scene of a red pot and eggs cooking. However, *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* as an autonomous image maintains its authority as a visual testimony to O’Neill’s technical virtuosity and her ongoing concern with art historical representations.

Geraldine O’Neill’s next exhibition opens at Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown on October 2nd, 2008.

*Text written by Ruth Osborne following interview with the artist.*

Ruth Osborne, Glucksman Fellow in Curatorial Practice. The Glucksman’s Fellowship in Curatorial Practice provides curators at the beginning of their career with the opportunity to gain professional experience in an internationally significant gallery, through a year long arc of project administration and exhibition management. The Fellow works as an integral part of the Glucksman team on the research and realisation of the Glucksman’s artistic programme.