

The title of Gavin Murphy's publication is taken from its epigraph, a short section from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761):

We had left every terrestrial sentiment behind and as we approach the aethereal regions, the soul imbibes something of their eternal purity. Imagine to yourself all these united impressions; the amazing variety, grandeur and beauty of a thousand astonishing sights; the pleasure of seeing only totally new things...

In a strange way, the description of these fresh and luscious sensations brings to mind the lions, sleeping gypsies, jungle leaves and desert sands of a second Rousseau, Henri, *Le Douuaier*, who painted them from his thoughts, never in his life having seen or felt the dark green, twisting undergrowth of his canvases. There is a felicitous echo of Henri's dreams in the opening pages of Gavin Murphy's book, a comparatively domesticated *Areca* palm elegantly upstretched and looking at itself in the mirror in the graceful proportions of Charlemont House, now Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. There is something of Henri there also, perhaps, in Giorgione's stormy dreamscape, laser printed and held to the wall with a strip of matt green tape.

This sense of felicity (happiness as well as happenstance) is at the heart of Murphy's practice, as well as at the heart of this multifaceted book. *On Seeing Only Totally New Things* documents his recent exhibitions, as well as acting as a repository for the body of work he has collected around the IMCO building extended by Oliver P. Bernard (with Higginbotham and Stafford), a now-demolished example of Irish modernist architecture which once stood on Dublin's Merrion Road. The book is suffused with a strange dialectic, which is also, in my experience of it, central to Murphy's practice. This is the negotiation between the deep sense of learning, historical awareness and material rootedness, and the desire to somehow leave this behind. Perhaps 'leave behind' is too strong – it might be better described as an exploration of the feelings of knowing, of rediscovery, as well as of loss. Throughout the book, the actions of research are slowed, stopped, somehow ritualized – a slow-motion sense of sifting through newspaper cuttings, of reaching for an archive box, of the sun on the face through the old glass of the Irish Architectural Archive. *On Seeing Only Totally New Things* is as much about the feeling of historical research as it is about the subject being researched, about the fortuity of finding and feeling your way through the detritus of the past. It feels oddly similar, as a project, to the now-dusty files of antiquarian researchers of the nineteenth century, folders of clippings pinned together, reviews, letters from correspondents across continents and parishes, all, in the rather lewd phrase of Philip Larkin, 'randy for antique'.¹ Like Rousseau's famous *Dream*, *On Seeing Only Totally New Things* is a strange reach into the unknown; like Rousseau's wish for a new future, it's still tethered to the real.

¹ Philip Larkin, 'Church-going', in Archie Burnett, ed., *Philip Larkin: the Complete Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 2012, 35 – 36.

The volume opens with images from Murphy's presentation *Remember*, part of Michael Dempsey's curated project 'The Golden Bough' at the Hugh Lane. His film, *Something New Under the Sun*, is the subject of a reflective essay by James Merrigan, which scans a very wide range of references, from Heidegger's theories on history to Borges' library of Babel. The essay recalls the recent popularity of the idea of the modernist ruin, and of nostalgic critique of the ideals of the modernist era, and the contemporary state of its forms and ideologies. The various readings of the sun in the title of Murphy's work are elegantly expressed by Merrigan, as constant presence, all-seeing eye and source of hallucination, as is his patterning of light and dark throughout the essay. Merrigan posits Murphy's Golden Bough project as a still point within the relentless drive of modernist progress, a point of recovery and reflection on the voices of the past which constitute the way that the present can be known.

The second section of the book, which documents the presentation of the film at the 2012 eva International exhibition and at the Royal Hibernian Academy, brings the reader deeper into *Something New Under The Sun*. Stills – beautifully reproduced – are interspersed with sections of text from the film. Here, the sepia tristesse of idealism past is balanced by the tangible continuity of what has been hidden or transmuted – from the marble mural of Niagara Falls hidden behind some 1950s modernization, to the idea of 'fume', ashes scattered into the air, unseen yet remaining part of the world. The IMCO building, as Murphy's research reveals, was home to a dry-cleaning industry – its clean, new forms mirrored the technology-driven industry it housed, but which eventually outstripped itself into obsolescence. These excerpts of text and quotations ('the clock is a machine whose product is seconds and minutes'), together with images of archive boxes and bookshelf favourites on Irish architecture, point towards the idea of the constructed and arbitrary nature of time, and the potential coexistence of past and present in different dimensions. They also connect with the efforts made to recover or touch the past – the secondary relics allowing the researcher to still gaze into the impassioned eyes of what no longer lives. It is in this negotiation that Murphy's project finds its greatest strength – the bringing together in cool and beautiful forms the fire of the past, its smoothly designed shapes, the homesick ache to feel it again, and the bittersweet realization of that impossibility, that close enough is as close as possible.

An essay by Ellen Rowley, one of the foremost scholars of Irish modernism, skillfully allows the reader to view the IMCO building from different perspectives – within the streetscapes of 1930s Dublin, its contemporary cultural position within a romanticized narrative around cultural loss, and as an example of what was seen from elsewhere as Ireland's isolated, and regressive modernist tradition. Rowley contextualizes the IMCO building within the modernist-inspired building programmes of the new Free State, extending beyond the capital to create a broader sense of developments across the country. Rowley's essay rails against viewing buildings such as the IMCO as alien visitors to the Irish streetscape, and as seeing them only in the context of each other, and of other modernist works. Together with the photographs, advertising labels and other ephemera collected and presented by Murphy, she moves the reader towards seeing the IMCO in the round, as part of a cultural landscape which was 'a place of jaunty bohemian urbanism, albeit mixed with Catholic processions and nationalist fervour'. This attention to the texture

of modern life is a welcome antidote to a rigid, uniform idea of what Modern is and is not, rather than looking at what, in fact, was. The interview reproduced at the end of the book with Mary-Kathleen 'Kay' Kennedy and Patricia O'Brien, who had worked in the IMCO during the 1940s and 1950s add to this engagement with the lived experience of the building.

The concluding section of *On Seeing Only Totally New Things* comprises a series of annotated archival images – the IMCO in the background of Irish life, as a modernizing workplace with a social conscience, the sharp logo surely once-familiar to Dubliners, as well as the documentation surrounding its demolition. An essay by Chris Fite-Wassilak, 'Time for You' shifts the focus towards time, labour and the promises of the modernizing world in a reflection on the function of the IMCO – dry-cleaning. A piece by Murphy on Oliver P. Bernard follows, inlaid within the rest of the volume, differentiated by a shift in font, in scale and in tonal weather. It also, with its colourful detail about Bernard's extraordinary life, is counterpoised against the cool analysis and philosophical reflection of the rest of the volume. Finally, a series of images from Murphy's show *Colophon* at Oonagh Young gallery includes details of his assured and balanced work, showcasing in wonderful detail his attention to the materials, edges, silhouettes and surfaces.

On Seeing Only Totally New Things, produced by Atelier, is a beautiful book, with the attention to design, quality and image reproduction characteristic of Murphy's practice and publications. It is somewhat maze-like in structure, which contributes to the sense of haphazard discovery at the heart of the project. Several of the essays rely heavily on references, and some readers may prefer more readily accessible footnotes, but overall this is a beautiful book that deepens our engagement with the idea and experience of modernist Ireland.

Dr Niamh NiGhabhann is the course director for the MA Festive Arts Programme at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick. Her own research focuses on Irish studies, with an emphasis on the art and architecture of Ireland, concepts of space, memory, performance and the body, exploring these concepts through visual images, built landscapes, poetry and prose fiction.