

John Beattie *The Artist Studio Series*



The Return is an odd little place. On entering the somewhat ostentatious surrounds of the Goethe-Institut one cannot help but feel quietly surprised by the miniscule gallery which lies within it. Even after multiple visits this feeling re-iterates itself. It seems fitting, then, that this should house John Beattie's latest offering '*The Artist Studio Series*'. Studios (at least in Dublin) are known as spaces either so small or so stuffed that their dimensions appear to shrink in synchrony with the low buzz of creative activity. The kind which Beattie presents, however, is of a kind much more controlled, less entropic. Comprising a large sculptural drawing tool which bisects the walls of The Return almost violently, its past attempts at mark-making are represented by two videos playing consecutively on a small lo-fi monitor on the floor. In addition to this the evidence- the drawing, itself hangs opposite the nib of the tool, as though the perpetrator had simply and silently retreated from its efforts. A framed photograph of well-known Irish painter Tom Ryan also hangs in the space, the hand of Beattie evident in a sparse, linear drawing on tracing paper which is pasted onto the portrait, disrupting the quiet domesticity of the master at work. Beattie does not try to recreate a studio in The Return (as the title might imply) but rather he attempts to problematize the notion of mastery within artistic production, and implicitly the notion of artistic production itself. Since 2008 Beattie has engaged with Tom Ryan in a dialogue which he hopes will foster a kind of mutual symbiosis between these two disparate artists. But how disparate are they? Obviously quite a lot but are the fundamentals not the same? The acquisition of some form of mastery over the domain of art itself? Although Ryan can indeed be considered a 'master' of what he does, how does one now 'master' the art of making an art that matters, that is informed and relevant now?

The sculptural drawing tool illustrates this question clearly; the sheer scale and weight of its utilization stifles any controlled or specific attempt at mark-making. Things simply can't turn out how you want them to, Beattie (or Ryan for that matter) is bound by its sheer materiality. Much in the same way, how does one make art without it being burdened by the weight of its own history? Here is a drawing that is awkward, constructed and never innocent. It will always be understood in the context of drawing as history. The drawing which Ryan works on in his portrait can only ever be read in such a light also. More widely speaking, the Return itself further compromises the audibility of such an art. It, like art history, places further demands on a (demanding) art, for good or for bad. Through the almost anthropomorphic use of first-person perspective, whereby the camera is placed on top of the tool as it draws, Beattie allies himself strongly with the attempt. Ryan, too, for that matter. The impersonal representation of the process allows us to insert either into the role of the unseen controller, the puppeteer if you will. We can furthermore place the viewer here also, for our perceptions can never be wholly free or neutral either. They are, in a Foucauldian sense, constructed: as much as the wooden drawing tool is constructed i.e. utterly. Is it possible to gain mastery over our own subjectivity? This lack of authorial voice underwrites the work and brings up more questions than it can ever truly answer. Thus represented art is an arbitrary process, its arbitrary nature caught up by the demands placed on it as an activity. But how does one achieve mastery over signification?

