

Art in America

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Debra Bermingham at DC Moore

Debra Bermingham's oil-on-panel paintings come in two varieties: landscapes and, predominantly, interiors. The landscapes, surprisingly, are evocatively grim. Even when the sun is out—as in the roughly 30-inch-square *Summer Landscape*—the sky glowers, the clouds are a jaundiced white and trees are uncharacteristically bare of leaves. The 2002 *Cobb Was Here* (note the mysterious title) presents nothing but hazy afternoon sky and earthbound purple—as an eggplant—foliage.

In the interiors, Bermingham has a variety of arcane, atmospheric tricks up her sleeve. Mood is developed with the use of low-lying shadows against shallow grounds. Her paint treatment leaves much to the imagination and is strongly a matter of less being less. Sometimes the interiors—all executed in her studio—are fairly innocent. *The Aerialist: Olaf and King at the Circus* features a tightrope-walking toy clown (Olaf) and his dog King; a toy duck on a tricycle balances in midair a Thai puppet and a cat—all in sunny surroundings.

Yet Bermingham's interiors, like her landscapes, tend more often toward the moody and disconsolate, as if each were telling the story of a broken childhood and a later broken heart. Ingmar Bergman and early Hitchcock come to mind: in *Three Thousand Dreams Explained* (2001), a man, hands in his pockets, stands in the gloomy murk between two cream-toned windows, his face made up clown-fashion beneath a conical hat. A white comedy/tragedy mask hangs above him. Mysteries abound: Is man essentially a puppet of the gods, or of the artist?

A fellowship took Bermingham to Ireland in 2000, to an isolated cottage near the small town of Ballycastle. At least one work on view—*February*—showed the Gaelic influence. The work comprises six small paintings in two rows, all enveloped in misty tones. The imagery on the panels includes the Thai puppet sitting on a pedestal; a mirror reflecting a distant window; a white chair between two windows; and a figure in gray standing next to a bright rectangle of white on the wall. Ireland is, after all, the ancestral home of spooks, goblins and faeries, and this piece seems haunted six times over. With menace and psychic irresolution conveyed with an intensity only hinted at in earlier work, *February* shows Bermingham at her ghostly peak.

In a 2002 painting titled *The House of Mirth* (no relation, says Bermingham, to the Edith Wharton novel), we encounter a male figure standing next to a door deep in shadow. He holds a clown mask to his chest. The door seems a convenient escape hatch; then again, our figure seems intent on holding his own against all odds. A metaphor for life, perhaps? Only the shadows know.

—Gerrit Henry



Debra Bermingham: *Three Thousand Dreams Explained*, 2001, oil on panel, 33½ by 31½ inches; at DC Moore.