

What do we think of when we think of Paradise? Of heaven? Of something perfect, eternal, beautiful? In the paradise of the Koran there are rivers of water, milk, of wine, and of honey. But in the Koran, paradise is only a stop on the way to heaven. A place to pass some time before Eternity.

The word Paradise comes from a Greek word, which itself comes out of an, even older, Persian word for walled garden. Here, in our paradise garden, with a pool at the centre, and quartered by channels of running water, we can contemplate the beautiful, the eternal, find peace, think about the things that we can't really understand.

In the Douglas Hyde Gallery, in Dublin, The Paradise is a series of exhibitions (we're now on number thirty) that are about those ideas. But they are also about anything the artists themselves have come up with when thinking around ideas of paradise. Within the walls of the Paradise Gallery (also known, more prosaically, as Gallery Two), you can find something to make you wonder, something to stop you in your tracks, and sometimes nothing to suit you at all.

So what have the Paradise artists found? Without the big sense of production you can get from a major exhibition, there is less pressure, and more room for smaller things to happen. Once I went in to find nothing there save a small pot of pollen, glowing like gold in a jam jar. Paradise for Bees maybe. On another visit the walls were hung with maps. Looking closer, the artist, Kathy Prendergast, had named the towns and features of the maps' geographies for the feelings we encounter when attempting to love. From a plain called Harmony, climbing, you may cross Needy Creek, struggle on the slopes of Misery Mountain, and find yourself again at Inspiration Point, looking down to the sheltering valley of Homestead.

Mark Garry stretched fine cords across the space, webbing it in a rainbow that looked like birdsong might look if it was made visible. Patrick Hall hung his intense paintings, where death and life hover together and you are never quite sure if the afterlife is a promise or a threat. Sometimes the Paradise exhibitions find a counterpoint in the main gallery. Hilma af Klint, was a Swedish artist who said she was clairvoyant, painting according to the calls of her spirit guides. Unlike most artists, for whom exhibition and recognition are as vital as air, af Klint wouldn't let her works be seen until twenty years after her death. Discovering them was, for me, a revelation. She was matched, in the main gallery, by Tal R, whose barrage of bright paintings may have been getting at something similar, but did it in such a very different way. Not all the exhibitions in Gallery Two are Paradise exhibitions, just as not all art is an invitation to contemplate the eternal. But here, in the walled garden of the small gallery, sometimes you can find it.

There are, of course, imperfections in Paradise. Or could it be that the idea of Paradise makes you more alert to anything less than ideal? Perhaps it's the same "paradise syndrome" that leads us to pick fights with loved ones on holidays; spot the plastic bag in an otherwise perfect view, or tune into the sound of coughing instead of the cello in a classical concert. In the case of the small, but beautifully formed Gallery Two, my Paradise Syndrome starts when I get anxious about the door hinges that mar the perfection of the smooth running wall. Architects McCullough Mulvin designed the space, and, especially after the awkward cavern of the main Douglas Hyde, its proportions are so ideal that you can find yourself not wanting to leave. Any less ideal, and you probably wouldn't even notice the door hinges...

The hinged door leads out of Paradise, into the dark chaos of the gallery storeroom beyond. Perhaps the store room isn't actually chaotic, but I rather like to think it is. That conceit makes the door into one of those Gateways between this ordered world and the Other, wilder one. Like Oweynagat cave in Roscommon, which is said to lead you from a field, down under an Ogham lintel, through a cavern and into the Underworld. And the Underworld is so fascinating. It's a whole other realm to discover, new knowledge to find and experience.

That's what got Adam and Eve into trouble, of course. Their expulsion from Paradise was as punishment for tasting the forbidden fruit of knowledge. But perhaps there are some comforts to be found in enjoying these fruits. Some compensations. Paradise may have been lost, but it is still to be found in some surprising places. The other thing to remember is that we don't always know it when we see it. Not immediately anyway.

*A version of this text first appeared on Sunday Miscellany  
RTE Radio 1 in November 2008*

THE DOUGLAS HYDE GALLERY

T +353 1 896 1116

F +353 1 670 8330

E [dhgallery@tcd.ie](mailto:dhgallery@tcd.ie)

[www.douglashydegallery.com](http://www.douglashydegallery.com)