

Exhibition / Education Guide

Dermot Seymour Selected Paintings 1987 - 2012

This guide is designed as a resource for teachers and students of varying levels, schools, and other groups, who may or may not have visited this exhibition. You can adapt the ideas presented to suit the age and understanding of your students.

Using the images shown here and the links to other websites you can explore this exhibition, Dermot Seymour's work in general, and themes related to the work and develop your own artwork based on the ideas raised and artistic approaches used.

Dermot Seymour is an Irish artist, originally from Belfast and now based in Co. Mayo.



In their watchtowers the Blackwatch are watching O'Hanlon watching the Blackwatch,
Dermot Seymour, 1988, Oil on Canvas, 150cm x 210cm

This exhibition shows a selection of paintings by Dermot Seymour from the 1980's to the present, focusing on work he has made since around the time he moved to live in the west of Ireland in Co. Mayo.

Seymour's background, growing up in Northern Ireland, has shaped his view of the world, developing a unique style of detached observation of the strange world he sees around him, mixed with a heightened sense of the absurd, and a surreal sense of humour.

The exhibition includes;

- Large-scale landscape paintings made in the late 80's in which a number of different realistically painted elements are assembled together into an imagined scene that does not tell a coherent story, and challenges the viewer with the gaze of the ever-present animals he includes.
- Animal portraits, both small and large scale, painted between 2003 and 2010, in which the relationships between the many elements of the landscapes are removed and we are left with the animal's gaze.
- Two more recent paintings that return to the format of the imagined landscapes, and the juxtaposition of different elements.

Throughout the exhibition these three types of painting are hung together, complementing one another. In all of these works, the titles are also an important part of the work adding a further element of non-narrative meaning.

The three earliest landscapes have many features in common, each clearly referencing the military presence in the North of Ireland where Seymour was raised. *In their watchtowers the Blackwatch are watching O'Hanlon watching the Blackwatch*, from 1988, which begins the show in Gallery 1 and *In the wake of the poisoned wind*, from 1987, found later on in Gallery 3, each contain the same red airships in the sky and watchtowers on the hills behind, with *In the wake of the poisoned wind* also featuring a helicopter, present in many of Seymour's earlier works.

"The helicopters in the sky aren't any kind of political statement; I painted them because they're there in the sky, like the sun, moon and stars"

Dermot Seymour

Seymour often speaks of his work in this way. He was inspired early on by the American pop artist Andy Warhol, who said you should always work with the obvious (he is well known for his paintings of the [Campbell's soup cans](#) that he ate for lunch). For Seymour growing up on the edge of Belfast, the obvious, the things around him that he saw, included farm animals, and helicopters. His view of the world is shaped by where he is from, Northern Ireland during the troubles was a strange and surreal place to live, full of suspicion and conflict, and that comes through in Seymour's paintings.



In the wake of the poisoned wind,
Dermot Seymour, 133cm x 107cm, Oil on Linen, 1987

"You see everywhere you go with a northern accent, the northern sense of humour, there's a wonderful sense of the daft everything is absurd."

Dermot Seymour

In their watchtowers the Blackwatch are watching O'Hanlon watching the Blackwatch plays on this sense of being watched. The Blackwatch were a regiment from the British forces, who served in Northern Ireland, but what are they watching here other than the farm animals, who watch us, as we watch them? The atmosphere is one of suspicion

and surveillance, made all the more unsettling by the passive watchfulness of the animals. In *In the wake of the poisoned wind*, the seal confronts us even more directly, staring straight out at us past the hanging dead hare, and the sense of death and conflict is heightened by the title, suggesting death hanging in the air.

The third of these three early paintings hung in Gallery 2 has the longest title of all; *A Hereford nods in awe at the 5th battalion North Irish Horse who perished of pestilence and malaric fever on the 4th day of the battle of Omdurman*. Both the painting and its title contain a mish-mash of images and references, none of which quite add up, and add to the sense of something not being quite right. We can see the Hereford cow on the right, and the military connection of the statue, but the references in the title are not historically correct. The North Irish Horse was not formed as a regiment until after the battle of Omdurman in 1898, part of one of Britain's last major colonial wars against the local Mahdi forces, to conquer the Sudan in 1898 that was controversial for the brutal killing of wounded men after the battle. The dying songbird falling through centre of the image reinforces the sense of the futility of war, watched by the ever-present, ever watchful cattle. This is an example of Seymour not wanting to tell a story, but to present us with the things he sees going on in the world and to let us make of them what we will.



A Hereford nods in awe at the 5th battalion North Irish Horse who perished of pestilence and malaric fever on the 4th day of the battle of Omdurman,
Dermot Seymour, 145cm x 194cm, Oil on Canvas, 1989

"The last thing you do is make the title. A lot of it has to do with the fields, the land, the streets; you chisel it all together and come up with a title."

Dermot Seymour

As well as exploring the content of these paintings, the references they make and the context of the artist's own background, we can also look at their formal elements, how the artist makes the picture work. Their strong compositions add to the sense of disjointedness. The animals in *In their watchtowers...* are carefully placed in a triangular composition, one coming in from each side and one in the centre, a definite space between each one keeping them separate from one another. The directional brush marks across the canvas keep it off balance.

If you look closely can you see all the different directions created by brush marks in the sky, the animals' fur, the grass?

This is even more pronounced in *A Hereford nods ...* in which the cow leans in at a strange angle, the sky drags across diagonally, the statue is not standing straight, the songbird creates a strong jagged shape across the middle and the small yellow flower growing up from the foreground to the right looks completely out of place. *In the wake of the poisoned wind* makes use of a telegraph pole as a strong vertical device to split the canvas in two.

None of these things is accidental. The artist has made careful decisions about how he places things on the canvas. Although the individual elements in the paintings are very realistically depicted, the general landscape is more stylised; the dramatic skies, the unnatural shape to the hills. It is a stage set on which his closely observed characters are placed.

The two most recent paintings in the show follow a similar approach in that they are imaginary stylised landscapes in which a cast of animals are placed. In *Goose Crane*, 2012, in Gallery 3 Seymour returns to his recurrent motif of the cow as both an everyday feature of the landscape and a potent symbol.

***"I don't paint cows because I love cows;
I paint cows because they're in the way."***

Dermot Seymour



Goose Crane, Dermot Seymour, 214cm x 152cm, Oil on Canvas, 2012

"The cattle are a great symbol, they're throughout the whole island; they're everywhere. And the associations that go with them – what we have we hold, what they have we want back. All that land issue, all that disgruntlement."

Dermot Seymour

This painting stands out as having a much lighter palette than any other painting in the show. The sky is no longer streaky, dark and highly coloured, it is the pale flat blue sky

of a summer's day. The huge canvas is divided, horizontally by the floating land on which the cow stands, and vertically by the receding length of red, white and blue bunting, suggesting the colours of the British flag, and creating a political feel to the work. Seymour's suggestion of cattle as a symbol for the land issue is reinforced by this image. Beneath the land a bird flies on past, the goose crane of the title?

Did you notice that the cow, this time, is turning away from us, his left foreleg raised in movement?



The lagomorphic papal peril,
Dermot Seymour, 2011, Oil on Canvas, 100cm x 120cm

The lagomorphic papal peril, 2011, in Gallery 1, suggests the divisions of Northern Ireland both in its title and its content. Although having lived for many years in Co. Mayo the fractured nature of the community in which he grew up is still very much a part of his work. The hare (lagomorphic refers to the family of animals of which the hare is a part) is trying to escape across a border, to leap across a cliff, but is being held back by the arm coming down from the top.

Can you identify the strong horizontal and vertical elements in this composition?
What effect does the empty space to the right of the picture have?



Hare Dog, Dermot Seymour, 61cm x 51cm, Oil on Canvas, 2003

In Seymour's animal portraits, he has removed the relationships between the different elements in his larger landscapes and left us with just the animal, looking back at us from an empty background, and the title, to suggest a context to the work.

The smaller animal paintings, *Border Peck*, 2005, in Gallery 1, *Hare Dog*, 2003 in Gallery 2 and *Anglo Norman*, 2010, in Gallery 3, are very reminiscent of human portraits in their framing of the head and shoulders, and the animals' life-like expressions.

The art critic Aidan Dunne, writing about Seymour's animal portraits describes;

"their muteness, their helplessness, their apparent watchfulness, they perhaps stand in for humans imprisoned in their inherited identities, their wider histories, victims, unaware of their victimhood."

Aidan Dunne

The toad in *Anglo Norman* relates to the mixed heritage of its title, through the use of its own reflection creating a double portrait, a split personality. The goose in *Border Peck* is honking back at us, defending its borders. Geese make great guard dogs the title reminds us; don't step into my yard.



Anglo Norman, Dermot Seymour, 2010, Oil on Canvas 50cm x 60 cm

The titles of the two larger portraits, *Hiberno Horse* and *Border Cross* also reference racial identities. The composition of these two paintings is very similar. The animals both stand on dark backgrounds and are placed high up in the canvas, with nearly the whole bottom half left as an empty foreground, creating a space between the viewer and the animal we are looking at. Because of the size of these paintings they stand over us, looking back at us with an unreadable gaze.

Can you notice any differences between the way Seymour uses wild creatures in his paintings and the way he uses domesticated animals?

Do they have a different feeling to them?

Think about the background colours used in all the paintings, they are unrealistic but they set the mood of the paintings in different ways.



Hiberno Horse, Dermot Seymour, 168cm x 137cm, Oil on Canvas, 2009

The final painting to mention in this exhibition, *Hiberno Head*, 2007, does not quite fit into either the category of the animal portraits, or the landscapes. It shows us a beautifully observed fish, held out towards the viewer, as if being offered to us, by a man with no head. Notice that the composition here is very balanced. The man stands centrally, the fish spans horizontally across the canvas, the suggestion of the hill behind in the darkness is symmetrical with the absence of the head leaving an empty dark space at the top of the canvas.

Although other of Seymour's paintings feature whole people and faces, the only actual human presence in this exhibition is this headless man, and the hand holding back the hare in *The lagomorphic papal peril* hanging alongside it in Gallery 1. The fish itself, very alive looking though out of the water, can be seen in the context of Seymour's

lifelong love of fly-fishing, begun as a child in Belfast but as with so much of Seymour's work it leaves us with more questions than answers. These paintings do not make sense, but neither does life when you grow up in a country in conflict, so perhaps they are all the more realistic for that.



Hiberno Head, Dermot Seymour, 2007, Oil on Canvas, 120cm x 100cm

***"Nothing is ever what it seems, the whole things is half-truths and no truths,
half histories and blatantly no histories at all."***

Dermot Seymour

For further reading there is an interview with the artist by Brian McAvera on the Irish Arts Review website [here](#)

Further discussion and research

Explore your own landscape and the animals that inhabit it. What do you see everyday?

Think more about the animals we share our landscape with, what do they mean to you? What do they symbolise? Do they have certain associations?

Brainstorm a list of words to describe each animal to help you come up with as many connections as you can, physical adjectives, character traits, habitat, mythology, practical uses, symbolic uses etc

Seymour's work is heavily influenced by the places he grew up in, or lives in. Another artist he admires is the Mexican muralist [Diego Rivera](#), whose work, Seymour says, only makes sense in Mexico. Think about how artists' work is influenced by the place in which they live. How are urban artists different to rural artists? How do artists in different countries reflect their own culture in their art? Look at other artists from the North of Ireland to see how their work is influenced by their place.

Seymour's style of painting is influenced by earlier artists such as the [Renaissance artists](#) and [Rembrandt](#), who, before the invention of photography strove to find their own ways to depict life in a realistic manner. He was influenced by Pop artist [Andy Warhol](#)'s use of the obvious and the everyday. His painting can also be described as being Surrealist. [Surrealism](#) was an art movement that painted images from dreams or the subconscious in a realistic manner. Look up some of these artists' work, to see if it interests you, and compare their paintings to Seymour's work.



Border Cross, Dermot Seymour, 220 x 163cm, Oil on Canvas, 2003

Practical ideas

The following suggestions will give you some ideas of things you can try out for yourself.

Try making simple drawings of some of Seymour's compositions - this will help you to understand how they work. Draw a rectangle to the same dimensions as the paintings, block in the main shapes and use smaller and larger arrows to show the directions of movement or brushstrokes.

Spend time experimenting with different brushstrokes to achieve different textures and movement. An easy exercise to do this is by dividing an A2 page into 8 rectangles using masking tape and trying to make the brushstrokes in each one different. You can do the same things with drawing materials to practice making different kinds of marks.

Make a note of the things you see everyday in the landscape, and in your day-to-day life; the obvious. Take an interest in what is around you, things that you might not normally notice. Use a camera or sketchbook to record these. Seymour works from observation and from photographs to create his paintings. Look closely and draw as accurately as you can. Collect images of animals through photography or from magazines or the internet that you can use in your work

Collect and draw images that are relevant to your way of looking at the world, and where you come from. Perhaps you have old photos from your childhood, or places you have been that had an impact on you. You can use these images to make your work more personal.

When you have collected lots of images to work from, there are many different ways you could use them inspired by Seymour's work.

Although Seymour does not use collage himself, the way he puts together the elements of his pictures is similar to a collage approach. Try cutting out some of the images you have collected and rearranging them into collages. You don't have to stick them down right away, just move them around in different ways and see how it changes the meaning, or the balance in the picture.

Try using some of the compositional devices that Seymour uses.

- Strong vertical or horizontal shapes that cut the page in two
- Tilting shapes in different directions to make them off-kilter
- Overlapping shapes, or leaving spaces between them
- Bringing things in from the side of the page, or placing them dead centre
- Leaving part of the page with empty space

Collages can become finished artworks in their own right, as in another Northern Irish artist's work [Sean Hillen](#). Or you can use them as a basis from which to make a drawing or painting like Dermot Seymour. Don't forget to think about backgrounds and colours, and how they can change the mood of the picture.

For a simpler approach to using juxtaposition add one incongruous element to a conventional realistic scene. For example you could do a simple landscape painting, say a view of the hills from your back garden, and add in something that is either very unusual, or imaginary, and unlikely to be seen there (a dragon?), or something very ordinary and everyday that would normally not be included in such a painting ([a shopping trolley?](#))



Border Peck, Dermot Seymour, 61cm x 61cm, Oil on Canvas, 2005

Be inspired by Seymour's animal portraits to create portraits of your own of either animals or people, or perhaps [mixing the two together](#) . You could use elements of different faces and collage these together to make new faces in the same way as you can collage elements of a landscape together.

When planning your portrait think about the decisions Seymour made;

- Will you just focus in on the head and shoulders, or the whole body?
- Where will you place it on the page?
- Where is the face looking? Is it looking out at the viewer, or to the side, or away?

Perhaps you could make a fun portrait that changes its gaze. Draw your animal (or person) out first onto an A3 page. Make sure the eyes are looking toward you, and in line with one another. When you have finished cut holes where the eyes are. Now place a strip of paper, wider than you page, behind it at the level of the eyes and secure it by placing two small pieces of paper behind it at each end, secured with tape. This strip of paper should move easily back and forth. Draw in the pupils, through the eye-holes onto the strip. Now you can change the portraits gaze, by gently pulling the strip of paper back and forth to make the pupils move side to side.

Choose one thing that has meaning for you, an animal or an object. Spend time doing studies of it, either from observation of real life or from photographs. When you are confident and ready you can create a painting of it placed alone on a dark background as with Seymour's horse and goat.

Consider where you place it on the canvas. Something ordinary or everyday by being so closely observed and separated out from its usual context, makes you really look at it and gives it importance.

With any of these ideas you can then have great fun coming up with a title. Piece it together as Seymour does by thinking about all the elements, or influences, or associations, the reasons why you put those things in your artwork. But don't make it too obvious, you want people to have to think about it.