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T J McNamara on the arts

T J McNamara is a Herald arts writer

T.J. McNamara: A leap of imagination

By [T.J. McNamara](#)**Richard McWhannell strikes out in a surreal new direction**

The Anthropomorphic Quarry by Richard McWhannell.

It is a week of exhibitions by veterans, with two sticking to their established styles as one makes a startling jump into new territory.

At Orexart **Richard McWhannell** is showing *Springs and Falls*.

His customary style is seen only in the self-portrait in the grand manner at the top of the stairs. From then on the two dozen paintings that occupy the rest of the space have something of his usual colour schemes but the images are crowded, strange, surreal combinations of fantasy and slim figures as odd actors in an imagined world.

It is a copious exhibition with paintings varying in size but they all have the quality of imaginative invention rather than a painterly response to actual appearance.

The results of this visionary approach vary. Specifically, shades of the weird conglomerations of the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch are an influence and adapt something of his nightmarish atmosphere. Dotted throughout are specific references to other Old Masters.

A typical work is *The Triumph of Death*, which takes its subject and panoramic form from Pieter Bruegel.

McWhannell incorporates death on a white horse, distant fires and, as victims, princesses as painted by Velasquez. Other works have a slender link to his own imagery as in *Acrobats Go Home After Work* with athletic and tumbling figures rising towards a pale moon in a menacing landscape where rocks take human faces. Crowded, stretched human shapes inhabit a similar rocky setting in *The Anthropomorphic Quarry*.

Some of the smaller, less crowded paintings, such as *The Red Admiral* with its horsemen and butterfly, and *Thinking About McWhannell Leaping* where figures are driven between a grasping spirit and a businessman, have their own concentrated force.

What unifies all these inventive paintings is the artist's recognisable palette of colour, particularly his blues and browns. In striking out in a new direction different harmonies of colour might have conferred a greater variety of atmosphere across such a large and otherwise impressive show.

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