

## Diaspora/Miasma exhibit crosses media

The oddly named Diaspora/Miasma exhibition at the Marta Hewett Galley pairs glass sculptures by University of Wisconsin glass and sculpture professor Eóin (Owen) Breadon with paintings by tattoo artist Kevin Veara, who holds an M. F. A. from Southern Illinois University.

The fact that both artists' work is realistic and celebrates color ties them together, although their media and subjects are quite different.

Using metal tools and wooden paddles, Breadon fashions molten glass into recognizable forms.

Veara's exotically colored birds are accurate depictions of the migratory and native birds found in the Sangamon River Valley, near Springfield, Ill., where Veara lives in the middle of a forest.

Color is important for both. One of the glass's most seductive characteristics, it can be more like light than substance.

Paint is too material, but in Veara's acrylic-paint-on-wood panel pieces, the color is luminous. Both use color in fanciful ways.

In Breadon's "Second Transformation of Tuan," beneath the matte-black boar's head is a second color, an unexpected turquoise. It is revealed when he cuts into or engraved the interlacing lings and stylized figures of traditional Celtic designs. They could have been copied from a medieval manuscript, perhaps even the 11th century one that records Tuan's story. Before then the legend was passed on verbally by "seanchai" (shan-a-hee), Irish storytellers.

Veara's color is luscious. His birds are colored faithfully, but their fantastical

surroundings are sometimes painted in a rich range of grays.

Veara titles all of his paintings "Miasma" meaning "an influence or atmosphere that tends to deplete or corrupt."

According to the gallery handouts, Veara's inhospitable environments are to "remind us of human complicity in climate change, habitat fragmentation, invasive species, and genetic modification."



In 'Miasma #15', Kevin Veara places realistic birds in a menacing setting where unnaturally colored leaves and flowers with petals that look like a spider's legs are ready to attack.

Veara's exquisite birds are trapped in unreal environments. Interlacing thorns block any exit. Leaves curl like cresting waves and reach out to threaten the placid birds. Blossoms look ready to devour them.

Veara's backgrounds team with activity. They are more energized than his unnaturally still birds, only their open beaks suggest motion. Are they singing, or warning off their compatriots?

"Diaspora" demotes the scattering of peoples from their homelands. It usually refers to the exodus of the Jewish people from Palestine. (Gallery owner Hewett also cites African slaves, Tibetans fleeing the Chinese, and the Irish

migration caused by the mid-19th century Great Potato Famine.)

I question the word's appropriateness for Breadon's work. Hewett defends it by saying, "(Breadon) is focusing on the feelings that so many people have about their ancestry, particularly in the U.S."

Two of the oldest sculptures in the show, both from 2009, are titled "Diaspora." Wall-mounted, the broomstick-like wood rods have elongated glass figures on the top and on the bottom glass "paddles," engraved with traditional Celtic patterns.

Hewett sees the distance between the figures and the paddles — the sculptures are 74" tall — as symbolizing a diaspora.

It is possible to see Breadon's other work in the show through this lens, but not easily.

These artists' work is tied together by something stronger, if less evident, than the formal elements of realism and color. Both invite viewers into other worlds.

Veara has conjured an unfriendly world that is recognizable but not faithful

to what we call real, bringing them term magic realism to mind.

It describes the disconnect between what we recognize as real — the birds — and what is too strange to be believed — their environment.

Breadon's sculptures inspired by Irish mythology could also be categorized as a magic realism.

Three of his sculptures illustrate the myth of the recluse Tuan Mac Cairill. After surviving the Great Flood, he underwent several reincarnations, starting with being reborn as a stag, then as a boar, and eagle, and a salmon

In Breadon's newest works — busts and "Aspirations" — the heads look like wig stands. In the latter, the bald head sprouts a stretched out and sexless figure. With their symbolism too easily deciphered, they lack the engaging mystery of the Irish myths.

Veara's "Miasma" paintings hold together as a unified body of work, but Breadon's work is a little scattered. Maybe that's the source of his half of the exhibition's title — diaspora.

— *Karen S. Chambers*