

Introduction to Willie Doherty: Somewhere Else
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Introduction

Willie Doherty lives and works in Derry, Northern Ireland. Commentaries about his photography and audio-visual installations have placed his work in the context of that region. This exhibition occurs when there are high hopes for a new phase in Northern Ireland's history, a time when anxious memories of the past intermingle with dreams for the future. The artist is keen to have his work discussed outside this context.

I prefer to talk about [my work] in broader terms, to attempt to define it within general concerns about language and representation and how that impacts on us all ... for me it's extremely important that the work ... has the possibility for making sense outside of its very particular and very local site of production ... what is useful for me about staying in this one place is that I can use this place as a model. (1)

In his early photographic work Doherty supplements black and white images with text. Photography is a tool used frequently in the media and it filters our view of the world and events. Photographs as documents comprise a language which is a cultural and historical product. The artist has said of his use of photography;

For me ... photographs are completely unreliable as documents, even though their status as documents is undeniable, i.e. they're not staged, they're not manipulated in a digital way. (2)

Doherty appropriates journalistic tools in his work, but subverts them by combining his photographic images of rural and urban Ireland with the language of conflict and politics in works like *Stone Upon Stone* (1986). The duality of the messages the work conveys through the use of image and text makes the subject of the work ambiguous.

The role and position of the viewer is important in Doherty's work. In his photographic images we see through the lens of the camera. His colour photograph *Critical Distance* (1997) is a twilight view across Derry taken from the vantage point of a surveillance camera. On other occasions we become detectives looking at the scene of a crime shot in the dark. In *Bullet Holes* (1995) and *Incident* (1993) we see detail shots of documents left after events - bullet holes in a metal panel, a burnt out car on the roadside. His images of disused warehouses and abandoned homes as in *Abandoned Interior I and II* and *Disclosure I (Restricted Access)* (1996) are taken from a low angle and this makes the viewer feel they are about to walk into the image. The subject of many of his images is ambiguous. The titles suggest they are records of events and activities; they could also be documents of the debris of urban life. He combines fact and fiction. With reference to the placing of the viewer Doherty has commented;

the work has become more interested in the gap between the real experience of living in the place and the existence of the work as part of a body of mediated imagery about this conflict. So I'm interested in that gap and I think most viewers exist somewhere within this gap. So that's a much more potentially interesting place to locate the work. (3)

In his audio-visual work we watch a sequence of images and hear a conflicting set of messages - always spoken in a monotone voice. The experience of these works is not dissimilar to entering a cinema and watching a film in a dark space. When watching a

film in this environment the viewer is allowed to be a passive spectator, observing but never being observed. Doherty never allows a narrative to evolve, and directly addresses the viewer by controlling his or her physical movement around the space. He has suggested that this makes us the viewers;

I would say that more and more the work has become involved with mechanisms of projection and identification; and one of the strategies within the installation work is the question of positioning the viewer... , in a physical sense - in that you become aware of your body and how you move within the installation - but also positioning in terms of identifying with the protagonist or the lack of a protagonist.
(4)

Doherty's works are about our complex relationship with our individual and collective memories of the past and visions of the future. Walking through this exhibition we enter into a voyage which is constantly interrupted. There is an alluring and fascinating beauty to his images. When looking at his work *The Fence* (1996), we wish to see into the distance. In various ways the artist does not allow this. *The Fence*, a physical barrier, becomes a metaphorical barrier, preventing us from seeing beyond or behind it. The glossy finish to the cibachrome print reflects our own image onto the surface of the work. This forms another barrier, which we have to try and ignore to see the work, simultaneously preventing and encouraging our desire to enter the picture plane. Behind or beyond the fence we see glimpses of lights, indecipherable yet present in the dark. The promise behind the barrier could be our wish to return to the idyllic ideal of innocence lost - nature and childhood. Beyond the fence could be our utopian vision of new life - peace and harmony. As with all ideals whether illusions of the past or visions of the future - they are always just out of reach. It is the process of wishing to go beyond this, to enter the voyage, which epitomises our eternal hope. Whether our own destination lies in the past, the present or the future it is undoubtedly other than where we are - it is always somewhere else.

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(1-4) all of these quotations are taken from an interview by Dirk Snauweart published in the catalogue *Art from the UK*, Sammlung Goetz, 1998, p 48 - 52