

ARTFORUM

Willie Doherty



Willie Doherty, *No Return*, 2017, video projection, color, sound, 15 minutes.

Once home to twenty thousand people, the town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, now houses around two thousand, having lost 90 percent of its population through the withering of the steel industry. That means empty houses and streets—the visual substance of Willie Doherty’s *No Return*, which he made for a show of work by Northern Irish artists at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, very near Braddock, in the spring and summer of 2017. Alongside its succession of images, this fifteen-minute video has an aural component: Doherty combines his pictures of the town with a voice-over narrative, an image-and-text combination familiar from a number of his earlier works. In its tale of pollution and threat, *No Return* particularly reminds me of *Secretion*, 2012, which imagined the gradual spread of a mysterious epidemic. This time around, instead of devising a complex shoot using a crew, Doherty worked alone, producing a steady flow of almost motionless images. His videos are never exactly kinetic, but *No Return* emphasizes his work’s quality of watchful quiet.

Stories like Braddock’s are familiar in the United States—the entire city of Detroit offers proof—but Braddock has a particular visibility, both within and beyond the art world. For one thing it is the hometown of the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier, whose photographs of the place, powerful to the point of devastating, have been published widely and were included in a Whitney Biennial a few years back. For another, Braddock’s mayor since 2006, John Fetterman, has devised tactics for the town’s revival that have won national attention, if also all-too-limited success. So Braddock is a place where the survival issues of life in the Rust Belt have come to a boil. You would know this from Frazier’s photographs, with their focus on family and community; Doherty takes a more roundabout route.

Though Braddock is seen in *No Return*, it is not named, becoming an anonymous archetype more than a specific locale. The video’s narrator is a scientist sent there after “the great catastrophe of the early twenty-first century,” a pollution crisis that began in the town, left it empty, and now has spread across the country. His job is to analyze the causes. It is a haunted task, and a doomed one: “We had passed the tipping point,” he remarks partway through the video, and by the end he concludes, “I was lapsing into the same oblivion that had consumed

and extinguished every other living thing.” Months pass, and he seems to fall into a kind of fugue state—his instruments clogged with contaminated dust, he loses contact with the outside world, yet perseveres with his study. Meanwhile, Doherty’s photographs pass on-screen, slowly and evenly: a house choked with foliage, paint flaking from a ceiling, a dilapidated parked car, a corroded outside wall. Though the artist shot in color, the tonality that predominates is gray.

Although human presence in *No Return* is strictly limited, community is a vital issue for Doherty. Walking the deserted streets, the narrator senses their former inhabitants and feels like an intruder, “my presence an affront to the lives of those who had lived and died here.” He drifts from analyzing the town’s pollutant-induced collapse—which he realizes is irreversible—to exploring the community’s past life. One sequence involves a handful of old family photographs that he finds; we see them on-screen, but the faces of their subjects are cropped or blurred, once again becoming anonymous.

While Frazier’s work in Braddock is rooted in the urgent search for redress of present conditions, Doherty is looking at the future, and in particular at whether or not we will get there. The tragedy of his semifictional town is that it has reached a state “where stories could never be told again or passed on to future generations,” a kind of cultural or even more large-scale dead end. Yet certain lines of the script echo not just general conditions in American culture but specific ones in the spring of 2017: When the narrator mentions “the general denial and the suppression of factual information,” or remarks that a few deaths are “a small price to pay for the return to greatness,” it is a very small jump to the era of Trump.