



## WILLIE DOHERTY

### City Factory Gallery, Derry~Londonderry

As the inaugural 'UK City of Culture', Derry/Londonderry has been recently rebranded. In a devilishly clever move designed to solve several centuries of sectarian violence, the city has been renamed Derry~Londonderry: the twin shibboleths of Catholic 'Derry' and Protestant 'Londonderry' glued together with a peaceful tilde. The Turner Prize and a slew of other events have opened in the city, attracting untold inward investment. Near to the Turner Prize venue (the former Ebrington Barracks), the optimistically named Derry Peace Bridge (built in 2011) crosses the River Foyle in a suitably tilde-shaped wiggle. As a visitor, it's pleasing to know that the Union Jacks and Irish tricolours, Ulster Defence Association murals and Irish Republican Army graffiti which adorn the city are symbols of yesteryear, not yet painted over with the symbols of diacritic unity.

It's all rubbish, of course. As the title of Willie Doherty's mini-retrospective at City Factory Gallery makes clear, much of the sectarian logic of this city is 'UNSEEN'. This is Doherty's hometown, and has been one of the principal subjects of his work for the past 30 years. While most photojournalists have presented the city as the setting for violent confrontations (youths throwing petrol bombs, lines of riot police bearing down on them), Doherty depicts places not people, sites rather than sights. The earlier works on show are black and white photographs with definitive statements printed in bold capitals across their surfaces. Here, the landscape itself is a locus for ethno-religious division. In the diptych *Stone Upon Stone* (1986), for example, the Republican slogan 'TÍOCFAIDH ÁR LÁ' (Gaelic for 'Our day will come') appears on one image and the Unionist slogan 'THIS WE WILL MAINTAIN' on the other. If there is a passing resemblance to British Land art, to certain pieces by Hamish Fulton and Richard Long, Doherty's work is motivated by different concerns: his images are a counterpoint to media spectacle rather than a record of wanderlust.

One of the earliest works here, *Undercover/Unseen* (1985), features two photographs with the overlaid texts: 'UNDERCOVER/ BY THE RIVER' and 'UNSEEN/ TO THE BORDER'. The former image depicts a bramble-blocked pathway – the perfect place to dump a body, perhaps – while the latter suggests some form of attack, subterfuge or escape from

one country to another. By such simple means, Doherty transforms innocuous places into imaginary crime scenes. By the time he made *Out of Sight* (1997), Doherty had evidently perfected not only colour photography but also his trademark use of depth of field to maintain a haze of uncertainty: in this particular image, a dark and out-of-focus foreground of scrub and groundwater may (or may not) contain a corpse, while the rather more prosaic background (a garage forecourt) is in sharp focus.

This is not to say that all of Doherty's works depend on allusion or metaphor. Rather more literal is *Incident* (1993), an image of a burnt-out car on a country road. We might not know the cause, but the evidence of a violent act is clear. Many of Doherty's images have this forensic quality. *Uncovering Evidence that the War is Not Over I and II* (both 1995) seem to depict the parts of an incendiary device, although how Doherty came to photograph them remains uncertain; *Bullet Holes* (1995) shows a spray of bullets in a sheet of white metal, which may or may not be a car door. The reliability of Doherty's evidence is always in doubt. *Remains (Kneecapping Behind Creggan Shops)* (2013) depicts a miserable backyard – only the title discloses what is supposed to have happened here. Whether fiction or truth, it's a reminder that, despite the official end to the Troubles coming more than a decade ago, the kneecappings have continued: there have been dozens of such 'punishment' shootings in Northern Ireland over the last two years.

Observation and documentation are also the subjects of *Blackspot* (1997), made the year before the Troubles nominally came to an end. The 30-minute video is filmed from a fixed point on high ground, just below the city

walls (thus adopting the perspective of the security forces). Also concerned with this nebulous fear and paranoia is *Re-run* (2002), a two-screen installation of a man running across a bridge at night, as though being chased. It's an exercise in drama and editing, but one that feels quite dated – a hang-up from the cinematic concerns of video artists (Douglas Gordon, say, or Philippe Parreno) who came to the fore in the 1990s, rather than rooted in Doherty's own counter-documentary impulses.

Another insight offered by 'UNSEEN' (and a possible explanation for the show's title) was a series of archival negatives taken in the mid-1980s that Doherty has recently printed for the first time. Of these, *To the Border/A Fork in the Road* (1986/2012) is perhaps the most extraordinary. It is a photograph of a loop of road that Doherty snapped in 1986, 14 years before a man accused of being a British informer was executed there. The image is a ghostly accident, an inadvertent anticipation of death. This haunting of the future is also a part of Doherty's extraordinary moving-image works *Ghost Story* (2007) and *Remains* (2013). *Ghost Story* is filmed using a roaming camera that dollies slowly down country roads and across expanses of concrete; the narrative is broken but alludes to a massacre based on Doherty's fragmentary memories of witnessing Bloody Sunday as a 12-year-old bystander. The narrator mentions 'men being taken away blindfolded', 'bodies in a pile', but also media-derived memories such as 'a car blown apart in a surgical strike'. This presence is foregrounded by the fact that the narrator of *Ghost Story* was previously employed to be the 'voice of Gerry Adams' during the broadcast ban on Sinn Féin in the 1980s.

In *Remains*, the camera pans around a burning car, as a narrator speaks of another traumatic memory: a kneecapping he endured in his own youth and, 30 years later, of being forced to bring his own son to be submitted to the same gruesome ordeal. While the narration might sound portentous, even fabricated, it is rooted in an actual event from 2012. In Doherty's video, the narrator talks allusively; no specific crimes or accusations are elucidated. Instead, *Remains* speaks of: 'The past as the present [...] the sins of the father [...] a failure to re-imagine the future.' Unless there is a sustained attempt to bring employment and prospects to this fractured city, this state of desperate violence seems set to continue. I somehow doubt that a curvy bridge or a rebranded name is the solution.

COLIN PERRY

