Subjectivity: New Work from the Belfast School of Art

Graduates and students from the Photography department of the Belfast School of Art present work that explores systems, beliefs and narratives of cohesion and fracture. Northern Ireland’s troubled history has cast a long shadow, leaving traces of latent threat hidden in streets, landscapes and memories. Aware that the dominant narratives often tell a different tale to that learnt through experience, the photographers here challenge the clichéd images of violence, presenting instead more subtle, personal explorations. Sensitivity characterises the work of the Belfast School of Art, whether in examining familiar landscapes and communities, the comfort of shared rituals and stories, the fracture of domestic violence or prospects affected by the economic crisis. With peace, what was buried unseen and unspoken can now begin to be acknowledged. The work presented here seeks to recognise the subjectivities that contribute to our understanding of the past and hopes for the future.

The collapse of Ireland’s financial systems has had a profound effect and this is explored in different ways by some of the artists here. Paul Corcoran expresses a fundamental malaise at the heart of many young Irish people, faced with bleak economic prospects and feeling forced to leave their country. Tim Durham’s study of the systems that brought about financial collapse recalls past iterations, such as the Dutch tulip craze and the etymology of the silhouette. Richard Wade’s series presents a haunting view of the effects of the economic crisis on quiet suburbia. Daragh McDonagh’s portraits of shamans uncovers the rise in people taking recourse to traditional healers in the wake of the economic crisis.

Northern Ireland’s post-conflict society raises a number of issues that haven’t gone away. Paddy Kelly explores the uncomfortable legacy of the Troubles through familiar, everyday landscapes of Northern Ireland that were the locations of IRA training camps. James McCourt reveals one of the many open wounds left from the conflict, when soldiers opened fire in a residential street, killing and wounding civilians. Aisling Kane’s upbringing in a part of Belfast synonymous with violence prompted her to offer a different representation of the people there, one based on trust and intimacy, and a more positive view of Northern Ireland.
Some difficult notions of home emerge in the work presented here. Emma Jane McAleese poignantly evokes the experience of domestic violence on children. Joanne Mullin shows the inside of women’s refuges whose interiors depict the tenuous balance between providing comfort, homeliness and security. Christopher Barr’s work looks at Irish Travellers through the importance of their horses as vital link between past and present, and explores concepts of identity and alienation in the context of the marginal position this community inhabits within Irish society.

Several photographers challenge the photograph’s contribution to our understanding of the world around us. Lewis Rankin’s series of photographs reveals the orchestration of anxiety and mistrust by media images and authorities. Gary Moore considers marine dead zones which are deoxygenated patches of water in seas or lakes within which no aquatic life can survive. Matthew Thompson questions the role history plays in our understanding of self and society, on perception, and the influence of images on memory and perception.

The stories we tell ourselves and the rituals we follow offer the possibility of cohesion and shared identity. Yvette Monahan’s series looks at a community of believers setting up home around the mountain of Bugarach following a Mayan prophecy about the end of the world. Rachel Glass considers the function of love songs and their ability to inspire belief in the experience of falling in love in those who have never encountered it. Eve O’Connor explores the Mormon belief in the fundamental role of motherhood as full-time vocation from a young age. Christine Redmond presents the diverse group of people who meet daily to swim in the sea, shedding layers and baggage and expressing faith in the importance of maintaining simple rituals. With varied approaches and different concerns, the photographers represented here demonstrate a thoughtful engagement with history, identity, belief and home.

Clare Gallagher
Curator
List of Artists

1. Christine Redmond - Sea Change
2. Yvette Monahan - The Time of Dreaming the World Awake
3. Rachel Glass - Is Love Really Like a Taylor Swift Song?
4. Richard Wade - Impasse
5. James McCourt - Operation Motorman
6. Paul Corcoran - Things Fall Apart
7. Lewis Rankin - Police Presence
8. Joanne Mullin - Refuge
9. Tim Durham - After the Fact
10. Matthew Thompson - Instance
11. Gary Moore - Dead Zone
12. Emma Jane McAleese - Long Runs the Fox
13. Daragh McDonagh - Sha-Man
14. Christopher Barr - Horse Identification
15. Eve O’Connor - Devote
16. Aisling Kane - Virgin Territory
17. Paddy Kelly - Bogland