

THE PARTED VEIL

commemoration in photographic practices

13 April – 30 June
The Glucksman, Cork

There is a subtle elision between the main title and subtitle of this exhibition featuring sixteen Irish artists whose work in the medium of photography has addressed questions of 'remembrance and celebration'. Whereas a parting of the veil suggests a revelation of what was previously hidden, obscure or simply private, we think of commemoration as a more public affair, less a matter of personal recollection than of communal memory. That said, this apparent disjunction reflected the show's ancillary concern, which was to register the myriad ways in which intimate experiences can intersect with events unfolding on a broader socio-historical stage.

The nexus between individuality and universality was exemplified by the first work encountered. Tom Molloy's *WAVE* (2018) comprises 44 found snapshots, dating from the 1930s to the 1990s, of isolated figures waving at the camera. The disarming implication of this accumulation of particular moments in the lives of anonymous individuals is that this array might be endlessly expanded without ever gainsaying the unique nature of each image (This implication is magnified further when we consider the vastness



John Halpin, *Joanna* (2018)



Roseanne Lynch, *Stella 1* (2013)

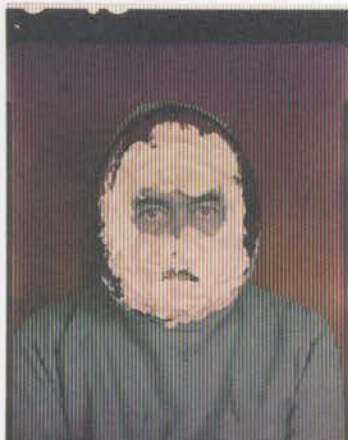
of contemporary online image culture). Sharing space with Molloy in the exhibition's opening bay were works by Roseanne Lynch, Amelia Stein and John Halpin all of which were arresting images, while at the same time withholding aspects of their genesis that were clearly crucial to their inclusion in the show. Backstories were significant here, though not always retrievable without recourse to the exhibition guide.

Lynch's two silver gelatin prints from 2013, *Untitled (Stella)* showed two views of a cast of the skull of Ester Johnson, known affectionately to Jonathan Swift as 'Stella'. These *memento mori* gained in resonance from the knowledge that both the relationship between Swift and Johnson and the provenance of the cast skull have been sources of some mystery down through the years. Amelia Stein's sombre, if not funerary black and white print *Laundry* (2018), depicts a stack of folded white bedsheets. While the exhibition guide relates the photograph to the coincidence of the 2018 Irish papal visit with the births of children to people close to Stein, this burden of information is not borne by the image itself, though the shameful spectre of the Magdalene Laundries, which is also mentioned, is more difficult to disregard. The occult (in the sense of an interposition between viewer and object) aspect of John Halpin's *Joanna* and *Sisters* (both 2018) derived from their process of facture in that both images were created by first scanning their subjects in a dome of cameras designed to capture extreme levels of detail, then replicating them as 3D models before photographing them. Though inspired by the early 20th-century portraits of the Romanian photographer Costică Acsinte, these images' (un)natural habitat is the uncanny valley of the early 21st century.

Alan Phelan's enigmatic, witty installation also revisited an earlier moment in the history of photography in deploying the long-disused Joly Screen Process invented in the 1890s by a physics professor from Trinity College Dublin; whereas Mhairi Sutherland's archival impulse led her to the papers of Robert Erskine Childers, author, militant nationalist and militant casualty of the



Installation view by Jed Niezgodá showing (left) Alan Phelan, *Untitled* and (right) Miriam O'Connor, *Tomorrow is Sunday*



Alan Phelan, *Untitled* (2 and 3), unique black and white sheet film with digital DuraClear screen, light box (2018)

Irish Civil War. *Re-imagining Treason (Childers)* (2016) is a haunting cyanotype derived from her drawing of a silhouette found in the Childers family archive. Questions of legibility and occlusion were also raised by Ailbhe Ní Bhriain's gorgeous tapestry *The Muses* (1), translated from a photo-collage combining an archival 'orientalist' photograph from the age of empire with imagery of crumbling quarry walls.

Conventional documentary photography was accounted for by Cáit Fahey's series *Collection* (ongoing since 2013) for which she has photographed the annual Hallowe'en ritual of Dublin's inner-city youth scavenging for bonfire materials. More compelling in this context, though, were several idiosyncratic excavations of household histories. Miriam O'Connor's series *Tomorrow is Sunday* (2013) was prompted by her return to her family's farm in the wake of the death of her brother who had managed it for thirty years, while David Creedon's affecting photographs of a derelict homestead honoured the nomadic life of one Mary Sullivan of Adrigole in West Cork. Lian Bell's text-and-image *Sum Total (Becoming things again)* (2018) drew on interviews with family members to illuminate the life of her late grandfather via photographs of the belongings he left behind. Similar to these works in its elegiac tone was Dervla Baker's *Waiting I-V* (2017), a quirky, wistful return to the site of an abandoned artist-led space in Cork city.

Somewhat stagey and laboured by comparison, and consequently less successful, was Lisa McCor-



James Parkin, *11 December* (2) 2016 (from the series *Folding News*)

mack's photo-series *Women of Ireland – Stories We Share* (2018). Adrian Duncan's *Pyramids* (2015-16), semi-abstracted images of New Year fireworks at a historically freighted site in Berlin sparked and fizzed high on the gallery walls, while James Parkin's *Folding News* (2015-19), a grid of images made of folded newsprint, testified to a remarkably inventive visual intelligence (Think John Stezaker, but without the aid of a scalpel.) Finally, Vukašin Nedeljković's *Asylum Archive*, an ongoing project for which he has documented almost six thousand Direct Provision Centres scattered across Ireland, though powerfully bleak, seemed of a different order than the works with which it co-habited here.

There are two general curatorial approaches to ambitious thematic shows of this scale. The first tends towards a tightly orchestrated succession of pointed juxtapositions within a strictly determined circulation. The main pitfall of this approach (illustrational, Procrustean) is the undue subordination of significant aspects of complex individual works to an overriding thematic. The second approach, the one adopted here, is more diffuse and cumulative, kaleidoscopic rather than focused, favouring diversity over congruence. The risk here is that the show will be precisely the sum of its parts, rather than anything that exceeds it; but, if the choice of works is as rich and varied as it was in this case, then the rewards outstrip the risk.

— Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith