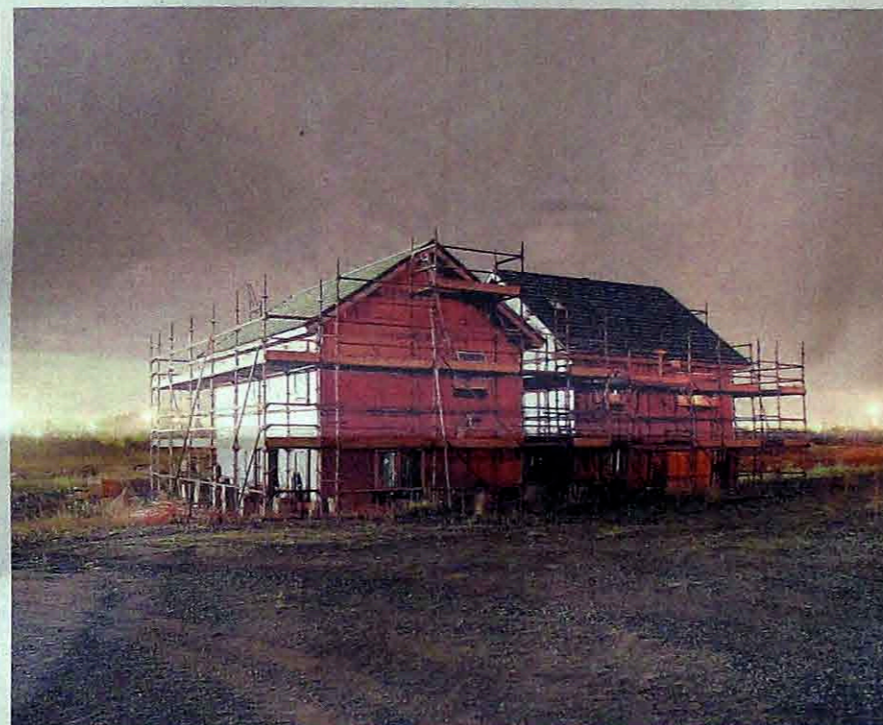


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HITLER'S MURDEROUS HENCHMAN: Robert Gerwarth on a huge, insightful life of Heinrich Himmler

Arts&Books



Celtic Tiger twilight (clockwise from top left): an abandoned quarry in Co Limerick; ghost estates and one-off houses in Cos Donegal, Cavan, Leitrim and Louth; and a disused cement factory in Co Cavan. Anthony Haughey made his images in virtual darkness, in the weird glow of vanishing daylight. His work is a positive political response to the world of negative equity, ghost estates and Nama

Ireland in ruins: the height of folly, the depths of misery



FINTAN O'TOOLE

CULTURE SHOCK

For Romantic painters, ruins were reminders of nature's supremacy. Now, though, Ireland's ghost estates embody the human tragedies of the Celtic Tiger twilight, captured and exposed by a photographer with a critical eye and a glimmer of hope

THE CULT OF RUINS dates to the 18th century, when the vestiges of ancient Rome acquired a special fascination for artists and writers. For the Romantics, ruins came, as Luke Gibbons has put it, to represent "the triumph of nature forces over human endeavour". Broken walls and creeping ivy were the cue for melancholic reflections on the transience of past glory. The remnants of an abbey or a castle cast over the present what William Wordsworth, in the great ruin poem *Tintern Abbey*, calls "the light of setting suns".

Contemporary photography has revived this melancholia. The imagery of ruins is almost always shot through with a sense of tragedy and loss. There are the ruins created by violent conflicts, pictured as evidence of savage destructiveness. Or there are (especially in recent American photography) the ruins that mark a postindustrial landscape; the crumbling factories, mills and warehouses of the rust belt. As one sceptical local blogger noted in 2009, "Detroit is going to become an economy based [on] supporting photographers who take pictures of abandoned buildings." Rust-belt ruins are today's equivalent of the physical vestiges of Rome's lost glories, with photographers taking the place of the 18th- and 19th-century painters who memorialised the remnants of the Roman Forum or of Pompeii.

But there is also another kind of ruin: the new, specially manufactured one. In the 18th century, especially if you were a nouveau-riche arriviste, you had to acquire antiquity. You did it by constructing a "ruin" on your property. The architectural folly was a European phenomenon but, as the *Oxford Companion to Architecture* notes, none of the builders of these mock ruins was "more capricious than Anglo-Irish landowners. Ireland is particularly rich in obelisks, gothic ruins, pyramids, temples and mausoleums." The Jealous Wall, a two-dimensional "ruined" castle at Belvedere in Co Westmeath, is among the great examples of the fashion; the height of folly, as it were.

WHICH BRINGS US to Anthony Haughey's remarkable images of ghost estates and half-built houses in his brilliant new exhibition, *Settlement*, at the Copper House Gallery in Dublin. Apart from their technical virtuosity and strange beauty, what makes Haughey's images so interesting is that they engage simultaneously with both of these ways of representing ruins. He gets both the tragedy and the folly, remembering that folly, in this usage, derives from the French *folie* madness.

In relation to the first notion of ruins, it is striking

that Haughey, consciously or otherwise, takes Wordsworth's line about "the light of setting suns" literally. His images were made in virtual darkness, in the weird glow of vanishing daylight. His technique (incidentally, a reminder that nondigital technology still has its uses) involved the use of very long exposures of an hour or more, pushing the film to the edge of its capacity and producing the haunted, hyper-real images that put the ghost into ghost estate. Haughey has invented an apt cultural moment: the Celtic Tiger twilight.

That glow from the past is very much in the tradition of 18th- and 19th-century Romantic imagery of ruins as vestiges of a lost era. It has all the appropriate melancholy and prompts all the same thoughts about the relationship between the natural and human landscapes. The pictures can be seen as an Irish visual version of Shelley's *Ozymandias*: "Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away." In some of Haughey's images, the churned-up land around the houses does indeed look eerily like a desert, with mounds of

muck or gravel standing in for sand hills. But the fall of the Celtic Tiger hardly has the weight of the fall of Rome or the end of American industrial might. The half-built houses that scar the landscape are much closer to the other notion of ruins. They are literal and metaphorical follies. A new arriviste ascendancy, with more money than sense, accidentally constructed its own versions of the mock-ruins at Belvedere or at Castletown House in Celbridge, Co Kildare. Ghost estates, or the empty cement factory that provides one of Haughey's strongest images, are not the relics of glory. They speak to us not of something that used to be but of something that never was. Not only were they abandoned before they were inhabited, but the thing of which they speak – the Irish bubble – was an illusion. They are the vestiges not of a great empire but of a *folie de grandeur*. This is not a past to be mourned in passive melancholy. It is a political and social outrage, a product of bad economics, bad planning and bad politics.

It's greatly to Haughey's credit, therefore, that his



Putting the ghost into ghost estates: houses in Co Donegal. Photograph: Anthony Haughey

“Ghost estates are not relics of glory... Not only were they abandoned before they were inhabited, but the thing of which they speak – the Irish bubble – was an illusion”

Settlement QR code



For Settlement, QR codes have been put on hoardings at some Nama-owned sites in Dublin. When scanned with a smartphone, they show you the alternative plans for the building. You can scan this QR code to see a video of the exhibition.

project is about far more than the aestheticisation of what is, after all, living misery. Even before the collapse of the Tiger, he was acutely interested in the disruptions of landscape as both an environmental and a political phenomenon, in Ireland and the war-torn Balkans. He is no naive Romantic. He has very consciously shaped *Settlement* as a positive political response to the world of negative equity, ghost estates and Nama.

The exhibition is linked to the ideas generated by the architect Paschal Mahoney, the UCD school of architecture and the excellent NamaLab project being pursued by the students and staff of Dublin Institute of Technology. Both at the gallery and at actual Nama-owned sites around central Dublin, viewers can scan QR codes on their smartphones that will take them to specific proposals for the imaginative reuse of the empty or abandoned buildings. NamaLab has also produced a fine book containing many of these proposals. My own favourite is the design for a "Nama jail" at Dublin Castle.

By linking his photographs of ghostly buildings to this highly political discourse about Nama, the property market and the idea of liveable human spaces, Haughey has managed both to connect with and to disconnect from the traditions of representing ruins. He connects with it by making ordinary unbuilt houses into self-conscious monuments, suffused with all the sadness that ruins evoke. His images, up to a point, are examples of what Robert Ginsberg, in *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, calls the symbolic ruin: "The ruin is a choice. It has been preserved as the remnant of something valuable in the past. The symbolic ruin is testimony of a community's identity."

But he disconnects from that tradition by telling us that these ruins are not symbols of "something valuable" in our past and that the communal identity they stand for is one we have to overcome. And he disconnects, too, by refusing the passive melancholia that usually comes with this territory.

These images are ultimately more about the future than the past, not so much reminders of what has been as urgings towards what might yet be. There is something hopeful, after all, in Haughey's technique of going out into the darkness, using his camera to capture the tiny amount of available light, and making something beautiful from it.

For more information check out our website www.settlement.ie and find us also on Facebook

Settlement, which Fintan O'Toole launched, is at the Copper House Gallery, off Synges Street, Dublin 8, until November 23rd

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