

Landscape as witness

Stephanie McBride reflects on the content of Anthony Haughey's solo exhibition at Limerick City Gallery of Art, where national disasters and global crimes come under scrutiny

Derek Mahon's poem 'A disused shed in County Wexford' constructs a daring conceit: it re-imagines a settlement of mushrooms as messengers on behalf of lost people. The empty shed, a leftover from a burnt-out 'big house', evokes Ireland's past, yet is firmly located within its present – in this case Ireland in 1972, at the height of the Troubles. The poem addresses two types of photography:

only the ghost of a scream

At the flash-bulb firing-squad we wake them with

...

You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary,

The former suggests the blast of the media gaze, the latter the more leisurely but no less intense tourist gaze. Eschewing both kinds of scopic intrusions, Anthony Haughey's 'Settlement', a series of photographs depicting ghost estates, is, like Mahon's lines, located in a specific historical moment. These images, of half-built houses littering landscapes on the edge of town, document the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger era (Figs 1&3). Yet Haughey's lens prompts a deeper and more reflective gaze as he 'frames the scene of a crime'. Shot on film, using extremely long shutter speeds in the liminal light



between dusk and dawn, the images avoid the gloss of 'property porn' yet assume an eerie and curious beauty of their own. Haughey's aesthetics challenge easy notions of idealized landscape, and foreground the disruption to the land by

unfettered development and zoning. Several images have a sense of stealth, the lens at a remove as it takes in the disturbance of clay and earth, the discarded heaps of builder's rubble in a tension between nature and man-made grit. Despite the absence of people, it underlines how human and political agency acts on the landscape. His images recast this emptiness as an emblem of the economics of excess and emigration.

'Settlement' as a title suggests a focus that is both local and global; settlement as colonization of the land, or the foundation of community, or even an agreed pay-off in a business or legal transaction. And, as Haughey himself suggests, it is also 'the negotiation of a European political and economic settlement that will define future generations'. Each image is numbered rather than titled, further avoiding romantic conventions of timeless placenames.

Haughey's work is consistently concerned with latent tensions, unresolved histories and displacement – from war to emigration, whether in Bosnia, Kosovo or Northern Ireland. Showing alongside 'Settlement', 'UN(resolved)' is a new, multi-sited HD film reflecting on the 20th anniversary of genocide in Srebrenica. Despite a UN Security Resolution declaring Srebrenica a 'safe' area for Muslim refugees, 8,000 men were executed. In Haughey's film, survivors' accounts and testimonies dovetail each other. 'In post-conflict countries, memory is also highly contested,' he says. In this work photographs and film act as a catalyst for remembering. Memory here is not fixed but rather a process of revisions

and re-imaginings, in a constant, quiet, intense recall. In one striking image in the film, the name Tito can be seen inscribed high in an abandoned factory as layers of history reverberate through these empty spaces (Fig 4). Another stark image is of a disused cultural centre, its walls pebble-dashed with bullet holes (Fig 2). Haughey's work, sometimes described as 'late' or 'cool' photography, frequently revisits sites of conflict, in a more analytic and engaged process after the media have left for the next war-zone. His practice is neither a passive documenting nor the 'hot' blast of media attention. As in Mahon's poetry, the potential of art to bear witness and remember dispossessed and forgotten voices informs Haughey's practice. And, despite the often melancholic and tragic subjects, his images draw these lost and fractured narratives into the light.

They are begging us, you see, in their wordless way,

To do something, to speak on their behalf

Or at least not to close the door again.

Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!

Haughey's images and visual cadences seem an eloquent response to the poem's call, whether in the dark hinterlands of the Celtic Tiger's collapse from which he conjures a strange beauty, or in the stark horror of the empty theatre of war. Images that develop and transform the horror of history and, like all great art, bear persistent witness. ■

Anthony Haughey 'Motivational Deficit' until 17 January 2015, Crawford Art Gallery, Cork; 'UN(resolved)' Limerick City Gallery of Art, 16 January – 13 March 2015.

Stephanie McBride is a director of the Gallery of Photography.

HAUGHEY'S WORK IS CONSISTENTLY CONCERNED WITH LATENT TENSIONS, UNRESOLVED HISTORIES AND DISPLACEMENT – FROM WAR TO EMIGRATION, WHETHER IN BOSNIA, KOSOVO OR NORTHERN IRELAND



1 ANTHONY HAUGHEY b.1963 SETTLEMENT XV 2011 lambda C-type print 100x120cm

2 PILICA CULTURAL CENTRE BOSNIA 2014 where prisoners were executed, from the video UN(resolved)

3 SETTLEMENT III 2011 lambda C-type print 100x120cm

4 POTOCARI BATTERY FACTORY 2014 site of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide from the video UN(resolved)