Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

Willie Doherty: DISTURBANCE
A Resource for Teachers

6 September 2011 to 15 January 2012

Willie Doherty
Dead Pool II
2011
C-print mounted on aluminium with non-reflective Plexiglas
122 x 152 cm
Courtesy of the artist/Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
© 2011 Willie Doherty
Welcome

As part of Dublin Contemporary 2011, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane has prepared a retrospective of the work of internationally renowned Irish artist Willie Doherty. This resource is intended to provide an introduction to the exhibition *Willie Doherty: DISTURBANCE* and some of its themes. It offers information, ideas for discussion and activities for visiting teachers to use with secondary level students. Some of the activities or discussion questions can be used to prepare for the visit and to complement the process of viewing the exhibition itself, while others are more suited for use after the students have visited the gallery. They are designed so that they may be adapted to your individual needs.

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- Introduction
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Introduction

Willie Doherty was born in 1959 in Derry, Northern Ireland. Much of his work has been shaped by his experiences growing up in a society deeply divided by political and religious conflict and of being forced to deal with feelings of oppression and fear. At the age of twelve Doherty bore witness to Bloody Sunday (30 January 1972): the trauma impressed upon him, among many things, the unreliability of the photographic medium. He observed firsthand the discrepancy between the media’s representation of the events and the events themselves. Much of the work in this exhibition explores the distortions that inevitably occur in the representation of reality. Many of Doherty’s photographs, video and film installations can be read as comments on the multiplicity of meanings hidden beneath the supposed objectivity of an image. Doherty draws his viewers’ attention to the distinction between an image as a document intended to record an historical moment and an image as the product of a strategic process dictated by artistic and political concerns. Doherty’s work is often inconclusive and destabilizing, leaving the viewer unsettled and unsure; this is intentional. He encourages his viewers to question their faith in their powers of perception, and to consider the determining role their own subjectivity plays in the viewing of an image.

*Willie Doherty: Disturbance* includes a series of early photographic works from the 1980s. It also features *Ancient Ground*, a film shot in 2011 on location in the peat bogs of Donegal, which addresses themes of liminality, memory and loss, and the tension between the past and present. The exhibition includes the films *Buried* (2009), *Segura* (2010) and *Three Potential Endings* (2009), a video filmed in the uncompleted Dublin docklands. While Doherty no longer addresses issues of division and conflict as directly in these later works, he remains interested in the manifestation of socio-political realities in the natural and constructed landscape,
and continues to interrogate the relationship between landscape, memory and media representation.

Keywords

Mass media, appropriation, manipulation, truth, reality, memory, representation, history, past and present, transcendence of time and space, repression, fallibility, unreliability, trauma, connotation, cultural codes, record, landscape, fear, surveillance, objectivity, subjectivity.
Willie Doherty

*Protecting/Invading*

1987

Black and white photographs with text
Diptych, each: 122 x 183 cm
On loan from the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin
© 2011 Willie Doherty

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**Background**

In the late 1980s, Doherty produced a series of black-and-white topographical images of Derry and the surrounding area overlaid with text. Inspired by artists such as Ed Ruscha (b. 1937), John Baldessari (b. 1931) and On Kawara (b. 1933), he began using the juxtaposition of image and text to approach and question the political and social realms.

Doherty’s early mistrust of the reliability of what is assumed to be an accurate historical record evolved into an interest in exploring the inconsistencies and ambiguities in the meaning of images in his artistic practice. In *Protecting / Invading*, Doherty addresses the way in which images disseminated through mass media influence our interpretations of events and people. Rather than pursue a more
‘accurate’ or ‘factual’ representation of the political landscape, however, he questions photography’s inherent claims to truth and the very possibility of authenticity.

Works such as *Protecting/Invading* are distinguished in part by their impersonal and seemingly objective aesthetic. Both familiar and strange, Doherty’s works appropriate techniques of reportage and surveillance to remind his viewers of their ubiquity in society and to draw attention to the ways in which the media first constructs and then influences our perception of places and events.

At first glance, the format of these two works reminds us of photographs we might find in a newspaper, with the overlaid text suggestive of a news caption. Upon closer inspection and further reflection, however, we realize that the similarity ends there. Doherty is interested in ambiguity rather than clarity, subjectivity rather than objectivity. The diptych structure raises issues of division. It also reminds the viewer of the flawed nature of photography’s documentary status and the possibility of opposing interpretations of events and the images that represent them.

**Discussion**

What is the impact of using black and white photographs? What emotional response does it elicit?

Why do you think Doherty chose these particular words? Do they seem to complement or contradict the image?

What feeling or atmosphere is represented?

What makes the work powerful?

What is the difference between a piece of art and a document? Is there one?

**Activities**

Find an image in a newspaper or a magazine, and come up with your own caption. How does the caption change the meaning of the image?

*Grayscale (2)* is a painting by the Irish artist Elizabeth Magill. Compare the two artists’ representations of the landscape. While the subjects are similar, is the effect on the viewer the same? Why or why not? How might you choose to represent a similar subject and provoke a similar emotional response in a viewer?

Elizabeth Magill
*Grayscale (2)*
2005
Collection: Dublin City Gallery the Hugh Lane
Willie Doherty
Native Disorders I
1991
C-type photograph with text mounted on masonite
114 x 152 cm
Courtesy of the artist/Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
© 2011 Willie Doherty

Background

Much of Doherty’s work begins with the consideration of a specific place, and the signs of history and memory inscribed within it. *Native Disorders I* consists of a close-up photograph of a barren and inhospitable landscape, devoid of life. Not even vegetation emerges from the jagged surface of the rock. The words *PRIMITIVE LINES* and, in a larger font, *LOATHING* are superimposed on the unyielding surface. As with many of Doherty’s works, the atmosphere of oppression and uncertainty is palpable.

Since he first began exhibiting in the early 1980s, Doherty has continually returned to Bloody Sunday, and the problems of representation, surveillance, and the unreliability of the photographic medium it raised. Traumatic events produce an abundance – possibly a surfeit - of images in the media. These highly mediated images become, for many, the primary mode of experiencing or understanding the event, however partial or distorting the images may be. Many people view the media
as an objective and reliable source of information, just as many are inclined to view
photography as a relatively trustworthy form of representation. Doherty calls
attention to the dangers of such simplistic views. For the artist, this image provides a
far more accurate account of the event and its effects than any of the vastly
reproduced photographs that appeared repeatedly in the news coverage at the time.

Discussion

How does the title of the work relate to its content?
Why do you think Doherty chose this format and medium for this subject?
Why do you think Doherty chose this particular font, colour and size for the text?
What effect does the photographic medium have on the viewer?

Activities

Research the conflict in Northern Ireland and identify critical events. How have these
events been recorded by the media? Are the images that remain today a reliable
source of information? Is photography ever truly objective?

Compile a series of images that you think relate to the word loathing. Use a variety
of media and provide an explanation for your choices.

Gather a series of iconic media images. What types of events are portrayed? Are they generally of people, or of landscapes?
Willie Doherty
*Native Disorders III*
1991
C-type photograph with text mounted on masonite
114 x 152 cm
Courtesy of the artist/Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
© 2011 Willie Doherty

**Background**

While Doherty’s early works were primarily black-and-white, in the 90s he began working with colour photography. For Doherty, a work of art must function as a document of a specific place, and the socio-political issues embedded within it, but it must also satisfy certain aesthetic requirements. In *Native Disorders III*, Doherty uses the vibrant, lush, multifaceted green of the mire to engage his viewers visually and emotionally. The work also makes reference to the cultural codification of the colour green as synonymous with Irish Nationalism.

**Discussion**

How does this image compare with the previous work?
How would you describe the texture, colour and tone of the work?
How do the text and image related to each other?
Activities

Doherty grew up in an atmosphere of constant military surveillance. Today, we are exposed to more pervasive and far more subtle forms of surveillance. Consider these various forms of surveillance. Count how many CCTV cameras you encounter throughout the day, how often you are asked to provide your personal information on the internet, or how often your physical location and internet search preferences are recorded and analyzed.
Willie Doherty
*Dead Pool II*
2011
C-print mounted on aluminium with non-reflective Plexiglas
122 x 152 cm
Courtesy of the artist/Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
© 2011 Willie Doherty

Background

In *Dead Pool II*, part of Doherty’s *Ancient Ground* series, he departs from his earlier textual approach. No words disturb the deep, iridescent blue of the water or the glimpses of green within the heather. No words are required to imbue the image with a palpable sense of foreboding. Doherty positions the viewer so that they are surveying the land, as though searching for clues at a crime scene. The search is destined to fail, however, for the crimes that have taken place leave no tangible evidence. Here the landscape is scarred by absence rather than presence. Bogs, positioned on the margins of society, have long served as sites for the disposal of bodies and the concealment of crime. A fitting subject, therefore, for Doherty, whose images capture the elusive traces of destruction and the memories of human trauma that remain embedded in the landscape.
Discussion

How does this image compare with Doherty’s earlier works, such as the Native Disorders series?
How would you describe the texture, colour and tone of the work?
What emotions would you associate with the colours of the image?
How does the title relate to the content of the work?
Is it relevant to consider whether the image is beautiful? Why?

Activities

While Doherty draws on his own experiences and memories from his childhood, his work moves beyond the specific to address the universality of trauma. Compile a series of images from the news that portray trauma and conflict. How do these compare to Doherty’s portrayal of similar subjects? Which do you find more effective? Which do you think provide a more authentic account?

Imagine what might exist beyond the frame of the image: using whatever medium you like (oil paint, watercolour, charcoal etc.) extend the image.
Willie Doherty

Segura (2010)

Colour, sound, single screen installation
Duration: 10 minutes
Original format: HDCAM
Screened 25 October – 20 November 2011
© 2011 Willie Doherty

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**Background**

In *Segura*, shot in Murcia, in the south of Spain, Doherty continues his exploration of the interplay between urban and rural landscapes. Despite his lyrical, meditative approach, he confronts issues such as pollution, unemployment and water shortages. According to Doherty, ‘[his] strategy was to walk in the city, the landscape, trusting that some evidence of these issues would reveal itself.’ Avoiding any form of linear narrative, Doherty captures the land and the traces of human presence scattered across it in a sequence of striking scenery. The camera acts as an apparently passive witness, observing rather than intervening in the landscape. Ambient sound captured during the filming serves as the only soundtrack. From the opening shot of flowers waving in the wind (the video closes with a parallel shot shrouded in darkness), Doherty alternates between images of nature undisturbed and images of the unmistakable signs of human industry. The repetitive imagery becomes, for Doherty, a metaphor for entrapment within an endless cycle of suffering. Some shots provide pure aesthetic pleasure - the sun reflecting on the rippling surface of a river, leaves wavering gently in the wind, the play of dappled light on concrete - while others, seamlessly integrated, prove far more disturbing.
Discussion

How would you describe the atmosphere of the film? Does it feel like a documentary, or a piece of art? How does one distinguish between the two? Is the distinction important? Did you enjoy watching it? Why or why not? What were some of the most striking images?

Activities

Write a text that could accompany the film. It could be a script of the conversation between several characters, a poem, or a story. In what way would the addition of text alter the experience of the film?

Choose a song that you feel could serve as a soundtrack for the film. Explain your choice.
Questions that apply to the exhibition as a whole:

What role do the media play in today’s society? How do the media generally depict conflict? Can media coverage ever be objective and unbiased?

Which work did you find the most powerful and why?

What overall themes can you identify that connect the works in the exhibition?

Glossary

Diptych: a work of art presented in two panels
Liminality: relating to an intermediate state, phase, or condition; in-between, transitional

Schedule of Willie Doherty Video Works on view in Gallery 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date Range</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Duration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6th September – 2nd October 2011</td>
<td>Buried 2009</td>
<td>8min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th October – 23rd October 2011</td>
<td>Three Potential Endings 2008</td>
<td>11min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th October – 20th November 2011</td>
<td>Segura 2010</td>
<td>10min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22nd November – 11th December 2011</td>
<td>Non-Specific Threat 2004</td>
<td>7:46min</td>
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<tr>
<td>13th December – 1st January 2012</td>
<td>Sometimes I imagine It’s my turn 1998</td>
<td>3min</td>
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<td>3rd January – 15th January 2012</td>
<td>Blackspot 1997</td>
<td>30min</td>
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</tbody>
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Ancient Ground (2011) is on view in Gallery 11 for the duration of the exhibition.
Willie Doherty: DISTURBANCE, A Resource for Teachers, written by Niamh Byrne Rodgers.

Bibliography

Willie Doherty: DISTURBANCE, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane (2011)

Seamus Heaney has written many poems inspired by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. These include The Toome Road, Punishment, The Wood Road, Whatever You Say Say Nothing. Collections of his poems include North (1975).

Planning Your Visit

Guided tours of the collection and temporary exhibitions may be booked for schools and visiting groups with a minimum of two weeks’ notice. Tours cost €25 per group up to a maximum of 30 people. For an additional cost, it may also be possible to book a sketching tour, or combined tour and workshop, during your visit.

Lectures and Film Screenings

For details of our public lectures and film screenings exploring the exhibition Willie Doherty: DISTURBANCE go to www.hughlane.ie/education

For further information on the Hugh Lane’s Education and Research programme, please contact:

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