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Derry Stages Its First Willie Doherty Retrospective

Twice nominated for Turner prize, artist examines nature of memory through hometown's troubled and bloody past

by Charlotte Higgins

The streets of Derry, this year's UK city of culture, were once a zone of surveillance, control and frequent violence rather than touristic idling. Now they "look liked they've been Hoovered", according to one visitor, who recalls the place in less pacific times; and the city is preparing for all the jamboree of the opening of the Turner prize exhibition on 23 October.

But in a gallery on Patrick Street the wind still tugs the litter over wasteland and the streets glower with unspecified threat. This is the retrospective of photographic and film work by the twice Turner-nominated artist Willie Doherty, who was born in the city, witnessed the Bloody Sunday killings at 12 and has made Derry and its travails the major concerns of his art since 1985. The new show, titled *Unseen*, is a first: never before has a substantial exhibition of his work been held in his hometown.



A detail from Willie Doherty's film *Remains*, in which the camera lingers on a burning car as a dispassionate voiceover describes a trio of kneecappings. Photograph: Willie Doherty/Matt's Gallery

However, any hope of a lifting of the mood in Doherty's recent work is dashed with his new film, *Remains*. As the camera lingers on a burning car, the flames burning bright against the night, a dispassionate voiceover describes a trio of kneecappings. Two, we are led to understand, took place in the 1970s. The third seems to have been meted out in the very recent past.

The fictitious work is based, said Doherty, on real events. He said of the most recent: "A father from a prominent republican family in Derry was told to bring his son and another boy, a cousin, to a certain place to be kneecapped." This was a punishment for drug use, an activity the IRA saw itself as policing.

"It had happened before that a father had been told to bring in a son to be kneecapped or expelled from the city or be murdered," Doherty said. "So I used these locations and the idea of the generational nature of the conflict, how it passes through families and how there is a vicious circle that people get caught up in."

The artist does not tackle the Troubles directly, as a documentary maker would, but aslant, like a poet, making noirish films or photographs of the city's hinterland, sometime accompanied by text, that seem to

Alexander and Bonin

vibrate with dread. While the work in Unseen is intensely local – visitors to the exhibition have only to step outside the door to come upon his settings – the work, he says, reaches for a wider meaning too: memory, "and how things become distorted, and how the landscape becomes enmeshed with images and thoughts and ideas". He is "trying to find the cracks within the language", and chisel out an alternative to the "compressed, restrictive" language of the media.

The formative event of his life as a person and an artist was watching from the back bedroom window of his family's terrace on Chamberlain Street as British troops opened fire on marchers on 30 January 1972 – Bloody Sunday. "It seemed to take the usual pattern of a riot," Doherty said. "But suddenly the crowd changed, and were retreating with a speed and an intention that was different from normal." On a patch of waste ground he could see people trying to climb over a fence in their haste to escape, but then an army vehicle drove right into it such that "people were tossed into the air". Soldiers "started shooting at marchers and shooting up into the flats".

Then came news reports that contradicted what he had seen. "It did have a profound effect," he said. "My father wasn't a republican; we weren't a politicised family. We had been brought up to trust what we heard on the BBC news." Local lads not much older than him began to join the IRA. "It had a devastating impact on this whole community for years to come. I think what happened a couple of years ago when David Cameron made an apology was a very significant event in terms of partially drawing a line under it. But it's still ongoing. A year ago the police said they would further investigate the individual soldiers who fired the shots – but to date no one has been questioned."

Doherty has been criticised for dwelling on such things: some critics say he has lost his subject since the 1998 Good Friday agreement, that he is in a rut and ought to find fresh material. But, says Doherty: "It's not finished. If you live in this place you realise that the settlement that has been worked out as a result of the Good Friday agreement is dysfunctional. Essentially we are still a very sectarian society and there doesn't seem to be the political will to deal with it."

Another way of looking at why he makes his kind of work is, he said, "because I live here and I am interested in contributing as an artist to a public debate. That's what I think about so that's what comes out: it's as simple as that."

- Unseen is at the City Factory, Derry, until 4 January.