

IMMA
EAST GROUND GALLERIES
24 OCTOBER 2020 – SPRING 2021

Northern Light: The David Kronn Photography Collection



Introduction

We are delighted to present *Northern Light*, the third exhibition at IMMA drawn from the exceptional collection of modern and contemporary photography put together by Dr David Kronn over the past 25 years. The David Kronn Collection is a promised gift to IMMA and comprises more than 1100 photographs ranging in content from 19th-century Daguerreotypes to works by award-winning contemporary photographers.

Northern Light presents work by photographers that examine the history of the conflict in Northern Ireland specifically and places it alongside other contemporaneous events internationally. As the U.K. prepares to leave the European Union in 2021, it is opportune to reflect on the shared history of Ireland and the U.K. as 2021 also marks the centenary of partition and the civil war that ensued. In the hands of such accomplished artists exhibited here, concepts of borders (real or imagined) and the consequences of demarcating territory are engaged with incredible sensitivity and imagination.

The exhibition begins with the present day and sublime images of the landscape; however, these images also hold secrets as various infrastructures, particularly of surveillance, reveal themselves. The second room displays images of landscapes that were sites of atrocities and conflict; the highly aesthetic photographs at odds with their content. Room three reflects on the impact of conflict on children and civilian communities. Room four presents images from the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland and offers a salutary reminder of our recent past. The Troubles were photogenic, and problematically so. But what this collection shows us, is that the most remarkable photographers are precisely the ones who managed to steer clear of voyeurism, of the immediate appeal of the 'sublime violence'; those who managed to express what ran beneath the surface.

Artists include: Abbas, Bill Armstrong, Bruno Barbey, Ian Berry, Gilles Caron, David Farrell, John Hinde, Michael Kenna, Eric Luke, Tony O'Shea, Gilles Peress, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, Paul Seawright, Arthur Siegel, Rosalind Solomon, Chris Steele Perkins, Amelia Stein, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Donovan Wylie.

Room One

The concept for this exhibition emerged from conversations with Donovan Wylie and his new 'Lighthouses' project. Since the Brexit referendum in 2016 when the U.K. voted to leave the E.U.; Wylie has photographed lighthouses from the U.K.; Ireland, and Europe on the days of Brexit votes in the Westminster House of Commons. As we live through these historic events, we cannot foretell the future, but the Good Friday Agreement and the peace that is brought will be tested by the return of border infrastructure on this island.

Wylie's practice has systematically recorded the dismantling of the infrastructure of the conflict in Northern Ireland since 1998; specifically that of the Maze prison and the Watchtowers. In this room, we see the infrastructure of surveillance in Ireland and beyond in images that are both sublime and threatening.

Until relatively recently Northern Ireland was defined in photography by images of The Troubles. Photojournalism of the 1970s created a tradition showing youths throwing petrol bombs, collapsing buildings and British soldiers in riot gear. Photographers from the North like Wylie and Paul Seawright represent a new tradition of 'art-documentary'. One characteristic of their work is that it avoids portraits of people. This is partly because the people of the North immediately become categorised by their identity: Catholic/Protestant and nationalist/unionist. The new tradition implies the presence of people but does not portray them. This avoids labelling individuals as representatives of their whole community and creates an objective space from which to consider the subject in a more profound way.

Room Two

This room examines the theme of the landscape that is impacted by violence and conflict. None of these images were taken in Northern Ireland but reflect on its history in diverse ways. David Farrell's photographs from his series 'Voracious Nature' were taken in Co Meath at a site where victims of paramilitary violence were buried, in death exiled from their homes in the North, an added punishment with medieval echoes. Belfast-born Paul Seawright travelled to Afghanistan as an official war artist commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to document the war there in 2002. His images show traces of people who have recently passed through these landscapes. The 'ticks' marked on the walls of 'Room' indicate that the (Allied) army has recently passed through and cleared the area marking it 'safe'. At times he also references the history of war photography. 'Valley' references a photograph from the Crimean War (1855) titled 'The Valley of the Shadow of Death', which shows a cannonball-strewn gully not far from the spot immortalised in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." That haunting image, which for many evokes the poem's "Cannon to right of them,/ Cannon to left of them,/ Cannon in front of them" as the troops race "into the valley of Death," also revealed to the general public the reality of the lifeless desolation left in the wake of senseless slaughter. Long considered one of the most important photographs of all time, it has been quoted by other artists like Bill Armstrong seen in this room.

Room Three

This room examines themes of community action and the impact of conflict on children. Here we see the twin issue in this exhibition of what attracted David Kronn to these images. Kronn's professional specialism as a paediatrician and medical geneticist informs the substantial and empathetic theme of childhood throughout his collection. He says, 'The plight of children living through the Troubles were always on my mind'. Indeed, children are a salient aspect in many of these photographs. Women and young children are coming out of their doorways, observed by soldiers and in the streets bringing their children to school. A young boy stands beside a soldier who is crouched at a street corner, gun raised; young boys cover their faces to avoid recognition; a toddler carried by his father chews on the barrel of a toy gun. Barely visible a woman walks with them, her face framed by their heads, her hand with pointing index finger gestures to a dark stain, like blood, on the pavement around which are trod boot prints; a group of youths in a close-up action shot throwing petrol bombs and stones.

These visceral images depict ordinary people living in highly charged situations, in streets of violence where what side you are on or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, threatens daily life.

Room Four

This room contains images, primarily from the 1970s, by press photographers who came to Northern Ireland during The Troubles from countries as diverse as France, Iran, Morocco and the U.K. These images came to define how the Troubles in Northern Ireland were seen internationally – typically with Catholic youths coming into conflict with security forces. Some photographers came with assumptions about what images of conflict might look like and so are somewhat imitative of images from Vietnam or riots in the southern United States. These images show how The Troubles were photogenic, but problematically so. Here we see that the greatest photographers were the ones who managed to steer clear of voyeurism, of the immediate appeal of the 'sublime violence': those who managed to express what ran beneath the surface.

Sometimes these photographers played a key role in the making of Irish history. Some of them also played a key role in justice. The photographs that Gilles Peress made on January 30, 1972, in Derry, before, during and after the massacre of "Bloody Sunday", were used as evidence during the trials that ensued. His photographs – and his contact sheets – proved that the civilians shot by the British army were not, in fact, armed, as the army had claimed.

Now, as we look back on our recent history from the standpoint of 2020, these images show us the importance of preserving the fragile peace on this island.

Acknowledgements

Exhibition curated by Seán Kissane
Curator Exhibitions IMMA

Catalogue

A fully illustrated catalogue is available with texts by Dr David Kronn, Christina Kennedy and Pauline Vermare. Available in the IMMA bookshop €15.00

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Front Cover:

Gilles Caron,

*Derry 13 August 1969. A policeman in flames, burned
by a Molotov cocktail thrown by protestors.*

Gelatin silver print, 25.3 x 20 cm,

The David Kronn Collection

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