

THROUGH THE EYES: GERARD BYRNE

IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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Gerard Byrne's (b. 1969, Dublin) exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art includes five projects that span from 2003 to the present. Over the last decade Gerard Byrne's work has become familiar to an increasingly wider public both nationally and internationally. His recent project *Case Study: Loch Ness (some possibilities and problems)* (2001 – ongoing) is currently presented at the 54th Venice Biennale: *ILLUMINATIONS*. Another recent work and his largest work to date, a five screen film projection titled *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010) was recently exhibited at the Renaissance Society, Chicago and also forms part of the exhibition at IMMA.

Byrne's work is primarily lens based, in film, video, and photography. The photographic projects are generally characterised as historical site related projects made over several years. The film/video projects involve reconstructing particular historically charged conversations originally published in popular magazines from the 1960s – 1980s, with the intention of testing the 'cultural present' within which the work is encountered in the gallery, against the 'present' evoked in a magazine article from the recent past. Byrne's work actively exploits the ambiguities inherent in historicising the legacy of cultural forms from theatre, to photography, or to magazines all of which have traditionally been accorded the role of representing society to itself.

His projects often use texts from different sources as the starting point and they in turn become the scripts on which the film-works are based. Byrne never adapts the texts from their original source; so when the text becomes a de facto script it often seems 'unnatural' when acted. His video/film works are often associated with Bertolt Brecht who was associated with epic theatre; a theatrical movement arising in the early to mid-20th century. The Brechtian associations stem from his experimentation with historical events or texts and his re-presenting them so that they are re-valued. Both Brecht and Byrne's are pre-occupied with critiquing bourgeois culture and highlighting key events in history through everyday scenarios that are indicative of a larger social picture. Byrne's reconstructions concentrate on the period of the 1960s, which was a revolutionary period in politics, science, sexuality and social consciousness.

New Sexual Lifestyles (2003) part of a trilogy of works that take articles from *Playboy* magazine as its starting point is in the IMMA collection. The piece re-enacts a panel discussion that included intellectuals, libertarians and bohemians published in the September 1973 issue of *Playboy*, in it the characters discuss their own sexual preferences, religious oppression and the notion of the nuclear family. The setting of the piece is the Goulding House, Wicklow (1972) that was built by the architects Scott Tallon Walker, who pioneered modernist architecture within the Irish landscape. The photographs that are exhibited with the video piece are interior shots of the Goulding House. The architectural settings throughout Byrne's film and video works are significant and provide an important backdrop to the actor's re-enactments. Although, there is no direct connection between the texts and the locations, there is an acknowledgement of the continuing exchange of ideas and influences of North America to Europe especially in terms of the 'International Style' of architecture.

The second piece in the exhibition that references *Playboy* magazine, the work *1984 and beyond* (2007) is a three-channel monitor piece that includes twenty black and white photographs of contemporary America. The photographs are reminiscent of iconographic photographs by Walker Evans or Lee Friedlander from an earlier time, and they provoke questions about how we imagine or perceive time visually. These questions are further posed in a text quotation that cites the ideas of Jonathan Edwards, America's most influential early thinker, which proposes ideas of a-historical time. The central video element is based on a panel discussion between a dozen science fiction writers, including Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Poul Anderson, Rod Serling and Robert Heinlein whose projections of the future appear to a contemporary viewer as sometimes lurching from the ludicrous to prescient and back again. Edited in such a way that there is no narrative arc, but a perpetual present of discussion, the debates abruptly move between different period locations; the sculpture pavilion designed by Gerrit Rietveldt for the International Sculpture exhibition in 1955 in the Kröller-Müller museum in Otterloo and the Provinciehuis built by Hugh Maaskant from 1959-71, also in the Netherlands provide a strange future anterior setting for the discussion.

Subject, exhibited in similar format to the two previous works discussed, references the brutalist campus architecture of Leeds University, built by Chamberlin Powell and Bon architects in the late 1960s period. The Leeds campus, an important development in the post-war opening up of universities, is treated in *Subject* as a sort of enigmatic ruin of mid-20C societal aspirations. The work cites a diversity of written texts, all dating from the period within which the new university was launched. Despite their eclecticism, all of the texts share a history—culled as they were from the holdings of the university library dating from the period of campus development. Each text also shares a status; in some form each is the transcription of spoken words, and as such, can be understood as a sampler of discursive communal speech of the time. The texts sources include *Union News* (1967-70), the poetry journal *Poetry and Audience* (1960s), the poetry collections *Wodwo* (1967), and *Crow* (1970) by Ted Hughes, which combine to form an episodic script, enacted by an ensemble cast of actors portraying students from the period. A wall text, part of the work, quoting English Historian E.P.Thompson, prompts the viewer to reflect on the video material presented, as a reflection on the fundamental abstraction of terms like history, society, and class.

The five screen video installation *A thing is a hole in a thing it is not* (2010) is a visual essay, based around the subject of Minimalism¹. It is a cinematic re-enactment of the art historical objections to the movement put forward in critic Michael Fried's seminal text 'Art and Objecthood' that was first printed in *Artforum* in June 1967. In an art historical irony, Fried's critique inadvertently established the principle ideas by which Minimalism would subsequently be understood. Fried was very critical of the theatricality of minimalism and felt it denied the viewer a sincere aesthetic experience. Each of the five videos revisit moments of the literature that surrounded this movement; a live recording of a conversation between the leading practitioners of the movement Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Frank Stella, an inspirational epiphany experienced by another artist Tony Smith's while driving on an unfinished New Jersey turnpike, Robert Morris's sculpture *Column* (1961): a performance that conflates sculpture with theatre; a variety of scenes in a museum where minimalist artworks are being viewed and finally a film that depicts the writing of a personal letter of recommendation from film-maker Hollis Frampton on artist Carl Andre, another leading figure of the movement. Projected in an elaborately staccatto fashion where images appear and instantly disappear, the installation heightens a sense of the temporal and spatial circumstances of the gallery space within which work is encountered.

Case Study: Loch Ness (some possibilities and problems) (2001 – ongoing) consists of a series of photographs, ephemera, wall texts and a 16 mm film. The film is of the loch and its surrounding landscape, narrated by stories that have been collected over the years of sightings of the elusive Loch Ness Monster. The photographs act as a document of the surroundings; stumps and of objects in the landscape that could be construed as being something other than what they are. In some the proposition appears to be that the monster may at any moment appear. The vitrines containing the twigs and the photograms re-enforce the sense of an archive. The myth surrounding the Loch Ness Monster has persisted over the years and is indicative of belief systems, of what we pertain to be true or existing, despite that element of absence. Byrne cites ‘how the project can move beyond the representational mode and attain an allegorical capacity’ as the subject is historically absent.

In his introduction to *Understanding Brecht*, Stanley Mitchell states that the, ‘The possibility that history might have been different will inspire a *tua res agitur* in the minds of present-day spectators: history may now be different, it is in your hands, even though the means at your disposal are slight and the qualities required of you are perhaps undramatic and unromantic. Hence, in recovering the past, the epic dramatist will ‘tend to emphasize not the great decisions which lie along the main line of history but the incommensurable and the singular’². In keeping with this line of inquiry Gerard Byrne’s reconstructions allow for a shift in the interpretation of the interstices between the past and present. The multifaceted nature of his work and his means of translating it to his audience is not only engaging through its aesthetic appeal but also through its subject matter. Byrne’s in-depth engagement with his research is what gives his works credence in his exploration of abstract ideas and the human experience. There are nostalgic aspects to his work when exploring the utopian visions of the future from a 1960s perspective but what it demonstrates is that the social mores of each epoch vary but there are underlying similarities that are still relevant and that we can relate to in our present experience.

MARY CREMIN
CURATORIAL CO-ORDINATOR

¹ Minimalism describes movements in various forms of art and design, especially visual art and music, where the work is stripped down to its most fundamental features. As a specific movement in the arts it is identified with developments in post-World War II Western Art, most strongly with American visual arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Prominent artists associated with this movement include Donald Judd, John McLaughlin, Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Anne Truitt, and Frank Stella. It is rooted in the reductive aspects of Modernism, and is often interpreted as a reaction against Abstract expressionism and a bridge to postmodern art practices.

² Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock, NLB, London, 1974, p. xii

Gerard Byrne represented Ireland at the 2007 Venice Biennial and Lyon Biennial. In 2008, he represented Ireland at the Sydney Biennial, the Gwangju Biennial and the Turin Triennial. Recent exhibitions include a solo show at Centre d'edition contemporaine, Geneva, Milton Keynes Gallery, UK, Renaissance Society, Chicago, Lismore Castle, Co. Waterford, and the Glasgow International Festival of Art. Recent group exhibitions include *You have been there* at Galerie Marian Goodman, Paris, *Seventh Dream of Teenage Heaven* at Bureau for Open Culture, Ohio, the Malmö Konsthall, Sweden, and *Slow Movement* at the Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland. Byrne's forthcoming exhibitions include a survey exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Performa 11, New York and Documenta 13. He is currently exhibiting *Case Study: Loch Ness (Some possibilities and problems)*, (2001 – ongoing) at ILLUMInations, curated by Bice Curiger, at the 54th Venice Biennial. He lives and works in Dublin.

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Opening times:
Tuesday – Sunday: 10am – 5.30pm
Except Wednesday: 10.30am – 5.30pm
Sunday & Bank Holidays: 12 noon – 5.30pm

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A fully illustrated catalogue is available with afterword by Enrique Juncosa, Director, IMMA

