Willie Doherty

Matt's Gallery

It worked. For days after seeing Willie Doherty's new video installation, I walked the streets of London gripped by involuntary suspicion - wondering about cars idling quietly at the ends of poorly lit alleyways, doing double takes at vaguely conspiratorial street corner meetings, trying to pick out surveillance cameras hanging above urban junctions.

Belying the long arm of its impact, the Only Good One is a Dead One is a simple project: a darkened room, empty but for two videos projected on adjacent walls accompanied by a voice-over. A rambling tape-loop speech, the soundtrack documents the interior monologue of a man vacillating between being the hunter and the hunted, between a vivid fear of becoming the victim of assassination and a violent fantasy of carrying out a murder himself. Although like all Doherty's work, the piece is clearly a meditation on the murky malevolence of the political traoubles in Northern Ireland, The Only Good One... works on less specific and more widely engaging levels as well, activating deep-seated universal emotions by playing off the paranoia, anger and desperation that lurks inside all of us at some time or another.

The formal construction of the video sections provides succinct accompaniment to the textual component of The Only Good One... One scene is a shaky handheld video document of a drive down a pitch black country road winding through featureless rural landscape. The other is a view of the activity on a quiet urban street captured by a camera secreted in a parked car, the image distirted by exaggerated night-time blur and surveillance camera pixillation, in which distant human figures are robbed of identifying characteristics and every oncoming car’s headlights seem to signal impending danger.

The construction of the installation employs numerous strategic conceits which heighten the tension, most obviously the layout of the room, which forces the viewer to face one video wall or the other - as a result, one of the images is always just visible out of the corner of the viewer’s eye. I found myself repeatedly glancing back to the surveillance projection from the more active, if repetitive, image through the windshield of the moving car. Like an agent on a stakeout, I tried to catch the significance of a movement or a light, lingering on the number plate of a vehicle emerging from around the corner, suspiciously surveying a group of figures.
gathering beneath the dully phosphorescent halos of the
distant street lights for some vaguely sinister assignation.

These images both derive from and feed into archetypal
scenes of terrorism and political violence, now familiar to
those outside the conflict looking in, from both fictional and
journalistic sources. Several of Doherty’s goals are met by
this simple realisation. It reminds us of how very little of the
Northern Ireland conflict is really experienced by the average
non-resident. What we get instead is a string of dissociated
images, a trail of visual and contextual mediation which winds
ever farther away from the incident, not to mention the
impetus behind it - the abandoned car by the side of the road,
the row of house windows pierced by gunfire, the bereaved
relative, the grainy mugshot, the courtroom drawing, the
talking head summary. This disconnection between these
visual artefacts and the complexities of the socio-political
reality of the ‘Troubles’ is made more insidious by its
consistent repetition and by the inurement that it generates in
the viewer to the deeper motivations of the actors within the
conflict.

An examination of this disjunction has been at the heart of
much of Doherty’s work, particularly his photo/text pieces,
which employed formal strategies superficially similar to
those of Barbara Kruger or Hamish Fulton. Yet Doherty’s
underlying plan is at variance with either of these polar
distinctions - closer to Kruger’s socio-linguistic deconstructions
than to Fulton’s warmly romantic naturalism, but ultimately
more edgily specific than both, and requiring more of the
viewer than either. The Only Good One... is, structurally,
simply an animation of both the images and the words he has
regularly employed: just as viewers read Doherty’s still
photos through the veil of text, they interpret the moving
video within the atmosphere of his spoken words, each
element interposing itself within the interpretative territory
of the other. In the same way the repeated phrase ‘I worry
about driving the same route everyday....maybe I should try
out different roads.....alternate my journey. That way I could
keep them guessing’ activates the driving video, segments like
‘I feel I know this fucker....I know where he lives, his
neighbour... his car...I’m sick of looking at him’ suffuse the
unremarkable street scene with meaning, frost its every
inocuity with dread.

As this is being written, the British papers have been filled
with daily reports of escalating sectarian violence and
political confusion in Northern Ireland, codifying new visual
and verbal additions to the vocabulary of the conflict:
Shankill, Greysteel, Hume-Adams. As if to provide a
illustration of Doherty’s thesis, the new images pile up next to
equally ambiguous semantic rubble - the decimated ‘Loyalist’
hideout without any loyalists inside; the shot-up ‘Republican’
pub where both Protestant and Catholic blood pools together
on the floor; talks that aren’t talks; the voices of leaders
dubbed in by actors; misleading statements that are just
editing errors. That Doherty makes his work from such
deperate confusion should neither be seen as a diminishment
of the importance of the events, nor as an attempt to elevate
artistic expression beyond its real power. It is, rather like the
best of all artistic gestures, an expression which gives voice to
the individual in their capacity as a member of the larger
community.

By putting viewers in touch, however peripherally and
artificially, with the context that drives both perpetrator and
victim, Doherty places us closer to the conflict, and
temporarily draws aside the curtain of approved images and
words that obscures the outsider’s experience of the insider’s
world. The contradictions that lie behind the veil complicate
our understanding precisely because they are closer to the
intricate truth of the situation. Indeed, one of the most
ambiguous phrases from the soundtrack has seemed to linger
the longest: ‘I saw a funeral on TV last night. Some man who
was shot in Belfast. A young woman and three children
standing crying at the side of the grave....Heartbreaking.’
Could this non-sectarian expression of remorse, seeming to
belong neither exclusively to the attacker or the attacked,
ultimately be the voice of hope?

Jeffrey Kastner

---

Frieze
3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270