



'Under the Radar'  
installation view

## Belfast Round-up

MAC • Platform Arts • Catalyst Arts

How might one devise an exhibition about Northern Ireland without referring to Northern Ireland or featuring any artists from here? This was the intriguing proposition considered by guest curator Greg McCartney when developing **I will go there, take me home**, currently showing in MAC, Belfast. Following this curatorial thread, McCartney discerningly assembled the work of three male artists, each born in the mid 1970s, who prominently deal with themes of aftermath. With a nod to the dark, post-industrial soundscapes of the late 1980s, the exhibition's title reads as an almost impassioned plea, continually referring us homewards. Coming from post-apartheid and post-communist contexts, the artists collectively convey a violent sense of displacement and apocalypse through their work. Shifting relationships with the 'homeland' are fractured and in a continual state of flux. Growing up in Nicolae Ceaușescu's propagandistic Romania, with cultural life censored by the political regime, Adrian Ghenie, unsurprisingly, seems fascinated with history. Aerial and nuclear warfare, including the figures and vessels of military history, feature as potent icons of 20th-century visual culture. Ghenie's working methods are disclosed in *Stigmata II*, 2010, where shards of photographic collage are stripped and overworked with paint, depicting a catastrophic scene of atomic explosion. Compositions are strongly permeated with classical, art historical and biblical references, while cinematic influences are also present. The wide-screen, kinetic landscape of *The Blow*, 2010, contrasts with the static monochromes of *Stalin's Tomb*, 2006, which appear fuzzy around the edges like bad television reception. Embodying both humour and tragedy, the creamy lather

which defaces Ghenie's subjects in the 'Pie Fight Study' series seems to channel Laurel & Hardy in referencing iconic slapstick moments in cinematic history. South African photographer Pieter Hugo presents three separate bodies of portraiture. 'The Hyena and Other Men' comprises a series of startling photographs documenting Nigerian 'itinerant minstrels' and their muzzled hyenas, each appearing as powerful as the other in desolate and ruined landscapes. In a similar vein, his 'Permanent Error' series documents young men in Ghana's Agbogbloshie dump, where obsolete technology is discarded by the West. In one ghastly scene, penetrating blood-shot eyes appear as luminous as molten fire against the smouldering, toxic abyss. Conjuring a lighter note, his 'Nollywood' series presents portraits of actors from Nigeria's film industry captured off-set but retaining their respective theatrical roles, costumes and props. Such partly fabricated *mises en scène* effectively blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, documentation and artifice. Taking root in MAC's sunken gallery, Olaf Brzeski's extraordinary *Dream – Spontaneous Combustion*, 2008, initially seems to memorialise a dark moment of human annihilation, such as 9/11 or Hiroshima's nuclear attack. However, the familiar paranormal trope unfolds, probing the phenomenon of self-ignition and the destructive powers of the subconscious. I recall the enduring image of Wile E Coyote in pursuit of Road Runner: upon lighting the TNT fuse, in keeping with the laws of 'cartoon physics', the hapless predator is burnt to a cinder yet his scorched silhouette remains poised in the moment preceding his downfall. It is the inevitability of it all, for Wile E, living a life anaesthetised to violent acts, the victim of his own apathy. Like the two other artists showcased at MAC, Brzeski's artworks simultaneously retain and deconstruct the legacy of formal classical training. Brzeski's lumpy forms and gnarled, decomposing surfaces are in a state of becoming

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something more beautiful, denoting an exceptional maker who is almost unbearably of our time.

The square, floor-to-ceiling columns and boarded windows of Platform Arts' expansive third-floor gallery recall the post-industrial music warehouses of the late 1980s, such as Manchester's Hacienda nightclub. Moody and rough-hewn, the space provides a suitable backdrop for *Silent Valley* – a post-minimalist sound, sculpture and light installation by **Liam Crichton** which takes its title from the Silent Valley Reservoir, responsible for channelling Belfast's water supply from the nearby Mourne Mountains. Working in collaboration with Ricki O'Rawe, the artist captured field recordings which formed the basis of a multi-layered musical score. The resulting electro-industrial soundscape is transmitted in the gallery through a series of stacked and wall-mounted Marshall amplifiers – a fitting medium, given that the reservoir's brick-built overflow strongly resembles a giant speaker cone. Produced in stereo format, the steadily pulsing audio pans the entire space, skimming several glass panels that act as vitreous membranes while also reflecting passing figures. As resident studio artist and current co-director of Platform, Crichton has accumulated extensive knowledge of the space, enabling him to carry out a series of architectural interventions: spotlights are rewired to point upwards and strips of fluorescent lighting splice a protruding corner like a dazzling smile. Using seriality as an aesthetic reference point, steel-framed boxes are constructed around three consecutive pillars. Post-minimalist tendencies are further evident in the use of everyday materials, pivotally retaining evidence of the hand-made. The installation's most defining element is a whitewashed drape which hangs on the back wall. In a literal sense, the rippling folds of stiffened fabric might represent cascading water. However, to my mind, the piece functions as a formal compositional device, marking an art historical threshold between classical sculptural traditions and the emergence of 'anti-form' sensibilities – a dichotomy which underpins increasingly globalised contemporary art, and one that may be worthy of further scrutiny as the artist continues to refine his language.

Astutely selected by guest curator Michele Horrigan, Catalyst Arts members' show **Under the Radar** showcases the work of seven artists, highlighting 'unnoticed situations within the city'. Monumentalising the inventive messages commonly scrawled on unwashed vans, Andy Parker worked with an enamelling company to produce the weighty and effective artwork *No, No, No, No*, 2000. In a similar semiological vein, Jim Ricks appeared at the launch wearing a white T-shirt emblazoned with the word 'Facebook' in a generic typeface and comparative shade of blue. This obviously fake logo alludes to the ambiguous trademark protection laws that surround the ubiquitous production of counterfeit merchandise, particularly in Asian countries, where rudimentary 'approximations' are more commonplace than

dutiful copies – the audacity of such lazy forgery appears farcical to western consumers. Further commentary on garment production is provided by Tonya McMullan, who carried out structural adjustments to women's work-wear shirts purchased from high-street retailers. With a third sleeve expertly inserted (and verified as intentional in an illustrated tag), the clothes currently hang in the gallery but will later be smuggled back onto shop rails by the artist in a guerrilla-style act – a covert intervention reminiscent of last year's 'cry for help' labels dubiously concealed within Primark clothing. Paul McAree provides an incisive artistic commentary on the legacy of Ireland's financial collapse with his photographic series '9 Dumb Acts at the location of the Irish Glass Bottle site in Dublin Docklands', 2015. Wearing a dunce's hat, the artist enacts silly poses embodying the perceived incompetence of Irish politics that resulted in Ireland being dubbed the 'Wild West of European finance' during the Celtic Tiger years. Relying on Catalyst's directors to reassemble bricks from a recently demolished building within the gallery setting, Amanda Rice's sculptural gesture benefits from the insights provided in her accompanying audio work. A former employee of a defunct County Mayo factory, relays the tender story of a graffiti-covered wall, removed from the factory and stored in a shed, in an effort to preserve the 'personal human stories' memorialised on the wall. Charlotte Bosanquet's endearing film *Spacemen in the New Lodge*, 2015, was developed in a working-class, Catholic community in north Belfast. Filmed at low level with a hand-held camera, the first scene depicts a brigade of children, dressed in home-made spacemen costumes, walking through a familiar place as if colonising an alien landscape. The sunshine captured in the film combines with the gallery's abundant natural light to bleach colour from the screen, creating a nostalgic feel. With the skyline dominated by several residential tower blocks, the brightly coloured, foam-matted playground seems anachronistic. Evolving thinking around the importance of children's play must have influenced the upgrading of the Brutalist concrete playground which almost certainly accompanied this postwar, modernist housing estate. Jane Butler's partially off-site project demonstrates her interest in documenting abandoned urban sites, including a nearby vacant billboard. One corner of her photograph hangs in the gallery, presenting the billboard's weathered surface in macro detail. The complete, full-sized image will be transposed onto a different billboard in east Belfast for a two-week run, conjuring intrigue in the new location. As cited in the curatorial statement, Catalyst 'floats upon the transitory and provisional nature of contemporary urban life in Belfast'. With notably mismatched architecture currently being masked by a large-scale redevelopment of the city centre, it is unusual and refreshing to see a series of exhibitions which so purposefully pick at the fabric of this place. ■

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