

(Sigh) The Beloved Country

Language, Race, Religion, Soil. When mixed together in the wrong proportions, the ingredients for nationalism can become a recipe for conflict. At least one, if not all, of these components is the source of tension in the troubled nation-states of Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Whereas the social dimensions of place are susceptible to the same migratory patterns of the people inhabiting a given geography, soil still remains the basis for homeland. Needless to say, strong sentiments over a particular piece of the good earth have made definitions of nation-state conservative by default. However, in the face of an increasingly global, post-agrarian economy, the longing for *patria* has become a somewhat displaced romantic construct. What lies behind many of these struggles is an unjustifiable and literally ungrounded nostalgia. Nowhere is this more the case than in Northern Ireland, the home of photographer and video artist Willie Doherty.

The tragic history of this tiny portion of land is much larger than its geography implies. Although 1969 marks the date of Northern Ireland's current "troubles," assigning a genuine beginning to the conflict is impossible, for it has a sedimentary history. Repeated failure at resolution has become violence that is institutionalized politically and, over time, socially. Whether it is a photograph detailing the corrosion surrounding the bullet holes in a car door, the rusted shell of a fire-bombed automobile, a weathered cement roadblock, or an abandoned roll of chain link fence, the narratives embodied in the artifacts Doherty documents have become chillingly commonplace. Set within Ireland's idyllic landscape, these artifacts also attest to Ulsterization, special military measures meant to rid urban areas of the Irish Republican Army. The search, seizure and internment tactics used by Northern Ireland's militia not only generated a great deal of sympathy for the IRA, it also made Northern Ireland's rural countryside the site of guerrilla warfare, giving a whole new meaning to the expression "political scenery." Whereas the conflict operates as a conservative, idealizing force in the representation of Ireland as a land worth fighting for, Doherty's work counters the myth of the fighting Irish with traces of that very reality. Vehicles abandoned by the roadside late at night, lone boot prints in the mud, and car tracks that veer off the road into a verdant nowhere, Doherty's work quietly but provocatively documents evidence of the violence that has transformed Ireland's bucolic landscape into a site of unease.

The conflict, however, only reinforces what was already a deeply rooted nostalgia. Since the 1850s Ireland's population has steadily declined. Exile and emigration are, in fact, the true source of the Irish landscape's symbolic value. A tradition of exodus has resulted in a neo-romantic sense of homeland, making Ireland, in part, an invention of those who left. Between its politically charged present and its tradition of exodus, Ireland comes across as a lawless, but nonetheless, picturesque frontier whose myths are imbued with traits similar to the American West. In *True Nature*, Doherty has shifted his focus away from the ashes of conflict harbored by the Irish landscape, toward a nostalgia constructed by both its current residents and a Diaspora several generations removed. Doherty's installation is a five part video projection of footage shot in Chicago and Ireland. It is accompanied by an audio track derived from a series of interviews with Chicagoans of Irish descent. The multiple viewpoints and fragmented voices refer to historical experience that through re-telling exists only as myths. These in turn become inseparable from perceived and imagined personality traits and wider national characteristics. A landscape of violence, a landscape of violent nostalgia... (Sigh) The Beloved Country.

Opening Reception
Sunday, March 7
from 4 to 7 pm
featuring an artist talk
led by cultural
critic Fintan O'Toole.

Willie Doherty

True Nature

March 7 – April 18, 1999

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
Phone: (773) 702-8670
<http://www.renaissancesociety.org>

Museum Hours:
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12 - 5 pm
Closed Mondays

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Willie Doherty

True Nature

March 7 – April 18, 1999

Opening Reception

Sunday, March 7, 4–7 pm

Featuring an artist talk led by cultural critic Fintan O'Toole from 5 to 6 pm. O'Toole is the author of several books including *Lie of the Land*, a collection of essays that appeared in the *Irish Times* and *The Guardian*. O'Toole is currently a drama critic for *The New York Daily News*. This event is free and will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 307, directly below the gallery.

Related Events

Slide Lecture and Presentation

Willie Doherty
Monday, March 8, 5 pm

Doherty will give a slide lecture and presentation on his work at Gallery 400, located at 400 S. Peoria. This event is free.

Concert
Michael Svoboda, trombonist and alphonist.
Tuesday, March 9, 8 pm

Svoboda is one of Europe's most sought after talents. His solo trombone work and alphon performances have become legendary as has his recording *The Alphon Special*. Come cry and sigh with the breathtaking sounds of this virtuoso whose music is in and of itself a landscape. He will perform original compositions as well as works by Adriana Hölsky, Luciano Berio and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Come hear "a tongue-in-ear homage to the complex simplicity in our simply complex world with alphon, didgeridoo, conch shell, trombone and garden hose." This event will take place in the gallery. \$5, \$3, students and members.

Reading

Joan Mathieu
Sunday, March 14, 3 pm

Mathieu is the author of *Zulu; An Irish Journey*, a beautifully written account of her travels and encounters throughout Ireland and Brooklyn as she searched for the reasons why people leave Ireland and its effects on those who remain. Humorous and elegant, it is a stunning portrait of the people, place and the complex nature of late twentieth century emigration. This event will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 425, down the hall from the gallery and is \$5, \$3 for members and students.

Lecture
Caoimhín MacGiolla Léith
Sunday, April 18, 3 pm

Léith is a professor of Gaelic literature at Boston College. He has written extensively on Irish art and his reviews have appeared in *Artforum* and *Flash Art*. He will present a lecture on Doherty's work. This event is free and will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 425.

Lecture

Patrick J. Duffy
Sunday, April 11, 3 pm

Duffy is the author of *The Landscapes of Southern Ulster; A parish atlas of the Diocese of Clogher*, a detailed survey of Southern Ulster Parishes including an incredibly rich account of their cultural histories. Duffy's work has appeared in numerous anthologies including Brian Graham's book *In Search of Ireland*. Duffy is currently a senior lecturer at Maynooth College, County Cork. He will give a talk entitled "Writing Ireland; Literature and art in the representation of Irish place." This event is free and will take place in Cobb Hall, Room 402, down the hall from the gallery.

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