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Before the Fall: Picturing Ireland's Boom Years

by Darren Campion

Mark Curran, South of the City (M50, County Dublin 2001), from the series site (SOUTHERN CROSS)

The near collapse of the Irish economy in 2007-2008 brought the period of 'Celtic Tiger' prosperity to an abrupt end, and almost a decade on, the consequences of those years are still being played out. [i] Despite official optimism it remains an open question as to what the real long-term social (as opposed to merely economic or political) effects of these events may be, though we have, of course, experienced many of them first-hand since, and they have been represented by photographers in different ways, with varying degrees of success. In this respect, the many 'ghost estates' that dotted the country quickly became a popular subject for photographic projects, but it is arguable if such work ever got close to communicating the scale of the problem, to say nothing

about the larger question of whether or not these conventional approaches could even begin to address the complexity of the underlying issues. There is perhaps only so much that pictures of boarded-up houses and abandoned buildings can tell us, serving in fact as a kind of short-hand expression for something that has remained stubbornly unaccounted for.[ii] That being said, photography can still provide a space for reflection in two respects, firstly with regard to events as they unfold, though perhaps at the expense of grasping their wider repercussions, as we saw with the collapse of the property market, and, secondly, as a kind of open-ended and perhaps even unintended archive, offering a view of the past that can be reinterpreted in light of later experience. In that sense, the medium is always balanced ambiguously – if productively – between the past and the present.

It might be useful, then, as these sites are steadily reclaimed by nature (or a new generation of developers) and the panic of collapse recedes safely into the realm of political, as well as personal memory, to look back at two photographic projects that were actually made before the watershed of the global financial crisis and its aftermath, since dubbed the Great Recession, so that we might, with the benefit of some historical distance, be able to reconsider what forces were are work in the country at that time, how they intersected with national histories, and see how we can, if possible, learn from the consequences of the looming disaster that these works in many ways pre-empt. The projects that I want to address here are *Southern Cross* by Mark Curran and *Trees from Germany* by John Duncan, both made in the years before the terminal collapse of Celtic Tiger growth, both implicitly – at times, explicitly – critical of how such growth originates and manifests itself, both examples of an approach to the medium that consists of negotiating its constraints in particular ways.[iii] This last point is perhaps as good a place as any to begin. If these works share a roughly common origin in the documentary tradition, each employs its conventions quite differently, and each makes departures from them that are equally characteristic. Duncan's project is essentially a survey of different areas in and around Belfast as the city underwent a period of rapid redevelopment. While coinciding with the height (or nadir) of the Celtic Tiger, this growth depended on a rather different set of circumstances and as such serves as a valuable counterpoint to the same period in the South.[iv]

John Duncan, Chichester Street, from the series Trees from Germany, 2003

The style of Duncan's work is formally rigorous, presenting the visible traces of urban change in images that seem to merely observe as much as they offer any kind of critical commentary. This lack of inflection is deceptive, however. Where Duncan departs from this descriptive role it is to the extent that critique has been displaced onto the articulation of his subjects, the way that the (visual) layers in the pictures speak to the tensions implicit in the landscape, not just the sadly familiar sectarian tensions of Northern Irish life, but a new sense of social and economic disjunction, layered on top of these already fraught histories. At the same time, this growth is premised less on general boom-time conditions as on the expectation of a future political stability in the wake of what seemed to be a definitive ceasefire agreement, so all these factors come into play with Duncan's mapping of the city, though this stability is somewhat contradicted by the way existing physical divides seem to be reinforced by the rapidity of progress.[v] Even within the descriptive idiom of the work, then – and indeed, because of it – forces at work within the social spaces they depict are also made visible in the space of the pictures themselves. Similarly, Curran's treatment of his subjects, while not always so 'deadpan' as Duncan's, eschews any kind of overt statement in terms of how the pictures are made; they too are plainly descriptive and seem to assume an evidentiary role for the medium.

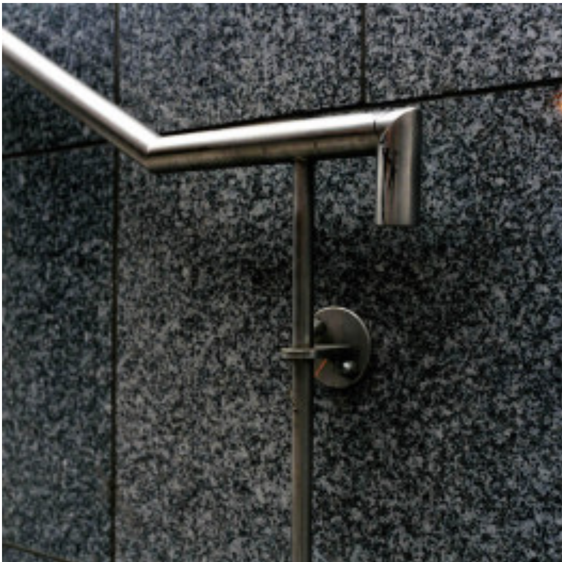
Mark Curran, Young Joe from Dublin (M50, Dublin, 2000), from the series site (SOUTHERN CROSS)

But rather than embody social tensions in what we might call a synthetic approach to the space of the picture – that is, a space bringing together many contrasting elements – Curran's main tendency is to single out specific subjects and let these stand in for the totality of those forces that he wants to address. These are presented as specimens that exemplify the larger processes they are a part of; the portraits that feature prominently in the work are a good example of this. The people are types as much as individuals, though it has to be said that they do retain their individuality – August Sander is perhaps the obvious point of reference here. In further contrast to Duncan's more linear approach, Curran's *Southern Cross* is composed of two halves (*site* and *prospect*) placed in

dialog, the first of which looks at the spread of new developments for housing and transport around Dublin, while the second is concerned with the rise of facilities for financial services in the capital. These are, in many ways, two sides of the same coin. The growth of the housing sector was fuelled by the availability of easy credit, premised on the notion that the property market could expand indefinitely, but the whole relationship was utterly vulnerable to international pressures, highlighting the dangerous circularity that united them. So, in that respect, the congruence of these elements in Curran's work is, of course, no accident. He clearly wishes to reveal the ways in which the intangible workings of high finance have all too real consequences, that they literally shape the world we live in.

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/5_financial_centre_5_2001-2/)

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/2_financial_centre_3_2000/)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In fact, the way he approaches the subject of financial markets, in *prospect*, is actually determined by how hard they are to see and to conceptualise. As photographic historian and critic Justin Carville says in his accompanying text: "although *Southern Cross* is about mapping the terrain of an urban environment, it is difficult to locate these spaces in the geography of the mind. Their very familiarity makes them alien spaces, the architecture of global capital speaks only of sameness."[vi] So Curran uses aspects of the space around the Irish Financial Services Centre to give some concrete form to the forces that operate within it, in order to elucidate the consequences of the shift from production to speculation as the engine of capital.[vii] It might seem at first as if his subjects – portraits apart – are unimportant minutiae with no relation besides proximity to whatever happens inside the Centre itself. But it is the very intangibility of those forces that obliges him to adopt such indirect strategies. The observational pictures made in this space have a metonymic function; the smallest sign or gesture is endowed with the resonance of its context and we can 'read off' its implication from the pictures. Somewhat paradoxically, then, they describe what can't really be shown. So, for example, the image of a recently planted tree that is visibly not attached to the nearby stake intended to support it takes on a significance out of all proportion to its otherwise commonplace appearance: a form of growth that isn't properly anchored and can't be

maintained. That trees should also play a significant role in Duncan's work is perhaps no surprise either, given its title, and he uses them in a similar way to Curran, as a metaphor to help organise his mapping of the city's hectic redevelopment.

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/trefro25/)

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/trefro24/)

We find them in the opening images of the catalogue, first being loaded off a lorry and then as they are placed in the newly uprooted ground. In these first two images, the contrast with the older neoclassical architecture of Belfast's city centre is striking; in the subsequent two images we have moved to the anonymous, marginal terrain of carparks and apartment blocks, places seemingly without history. In both cases, however, the effect is the same. They suggest that regeneration driven by (short-term) prosperity – and the relative peace that enabled it – is a kind

of foreign import, intended to dress up, indeed to cover up, old wounds, a non-native species unlikely to thrive in the inhospitable soil of Ulster, a place always attuned – pathologically so – to questions of belonging. Highlighting where the trees have come from, the origin of this new growth, may well be a practical fact, but it is also an indication of how he perceives the unsustainability of progress as such, in the first instance because of how it necessitates a refusal to acknowledge the painful histories being overwritten by – and yet, written into – this process of change, and secondly, because of the extent to which it depends on arbitrary and unstable forms of speculation. As with Curran, the kind of space that Duncan gives his attention to is revealing, but by taking a far broader view, he can encompass the whole fabric of the city, in keeping with what I referred to earlier as the 'synthetic' style of the work.

John Duncan, South Studios, Tates Avenue, from the series Trees from Germany, 2003

John Duncan, Whitehall Apartments, Malone Place, Sandy Row, from the series Trees from Germany, 2003

There is a form of architectural vernacular whose growth Duncan also tracks. It seems characteristic of our own specific historical moment and corresponds to the rise of speculation as the leading market practice, built quick and cheap, to be off-loaded before the bubble bursts. For all its ubiquity though, this new architecture is much the same as the imported trees that tend to populate it. The nature of these developments means they can never be organically related to the communities that inhabit – and are inhabited by – them. This parasitic relationship is what we might take as being the focus of Duncan's pictures, the unresolvable tensions between differing conceptions of a place, a familiar theme in Northern Ireland, of course, but recast here as a struggle for socio-economic as much as sectarian dominance. Across the border, Curran is alert to these changes as well. In the *site* portion of *Southern Cross* he charts the boom-time development of motorway projects and housing schemes around the capital, again using an analytical visual style that presents specific details as emblematic of these larger processes. It is significant that the developments are hardly ever shown in their entirety, as if to suggest that they – and the forces that have produced them – can't always be accounted for photographically, and that the conventions of the documentary mode are not always up to the challenge of picturing these changed social conditions. The housing and motorway developments actually become a marginal presence in these images, then, something undefined. What the pictures do focus on is revealing

enough, however – piles of raw materials, a flattened layer of tarmac, the empty fireplace of an unfinished house, the supposed centre of a home where no-one has ever lived, and maybe never will.

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/5_south-of-the-city_2000/)

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/2_north-of-the-city_2001/)

The other striking aspect of Curran's work are the portraits that feature in both sections of the project. They are all of people working at the different sites that Curran has studied, but they are quite pointedly shown not engaged in any task, even though their various occupations are in many ways the whole point of the exercise. As I already noted, these pictures have the function of presenting their subjects as types, so each is an exemplar of their particular role, meaning not just their jobs, but 'workers' as such, the embodiment of labour. For all that though, the frontal style of Curran's portraiture emphasises the specificity of these roles and their dignity, because it leaves space for a nominal reciprocity of subject and viewer; as much as his subjects are 'types,' then, they also have their own histories and their own place in the world, so the movement between these two identifications, between the individual and the type, is the actual significance of Curran's portraiture, reminding us that behind the increasing abstraction of labour there are still real lives – and that these are indeed real people, occupying a tangible space in the world. What's more, the style of these images makes direct reference to the representation of labour in the documentary tradition.[viii] The dialogue with this history is an important part of the effect that the portraits have; it marks a continuity with the ideals of a photographic practice in which the 'working class' is able to affirm its own identity. Implicit here there is also a conception of the photographer as a kind of labourer, working toward a critique of the social formation in which he participates.

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/3_anita_2001/)

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/1_ger_2001/)

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/4_stephen_2001/)

By contrast, people are largely (and conspicuously) absent from Duncan's project, though the few exceptions might be all the more resonant because of this. The first of these, an image titled *Days Hotel, Sandy Row,* shows a worker unrolling sods of turf to create an instant green area. The camera is pitched at a relatively low angle, perhaps to emphasise the amount of space the man still has left to cover. As with shipping in mature trees because the pace of development is such that there simply isn't enough time for them to grow, producing this green area has a significance beyond commonplace practicality. It is something merely spread across the surface, unrooted. Just as important is its function as an image of labour in the context of a specific historical moment defined by the kind of urban development that is outlined elsewhere in the project: against Curran's individuating portraits, Duncan's worker is largely – and deliberately – anonymous, absorbed in a particular task, which is juxtaposed with traces of those fraught histories that cannot by effaced by simple progress, if only because they are so jealously guarded. Similarly, in the image *Bell Towers, Ormeau Road*, an elderly woman uses the keypad on an elaborate gateway, presumably to access the housing complex behind. Defensive mentalities are nothing new in Belfast, of course, but the new kinds of space that this hectic period of development has produced are what we should be most aware of in Duncan's pictures, and this example is a telling one. The very act of enclosing the complex behind a wall in this way reinforces the notion that such developments don't really belong to the contexts in which they are sited and are, in that sense, a foreclosure of 'community' itself.

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/trefro20/)

(https://darrencampion.com/2017/10/24/before-the-fall-picturing-irelands-boom-years/trefro06/)

The critical judgement of the social changes that define this period is expressed by both photographers in different ways. If their relation to the history of the photographic tradition in which they are working is in many ways a critical one, they nonetheless retain a firm commitment to the value of a 'realist' approach, one that is grounded in the representation of the world as it is, but informed by the understanding that this is still the product of determinate histories and social forms. Their 'realism' is obliged to take these into account and this is embodied by the kind of formal or conceptual strategies that define the works. It is also the case, however, that the socio-economic forces shaping our world now seem so thoroughly abstract as to be all but impossible to account for, where nothing need be produced, where economies seem to have no physical expression, but rise and fall just because of some numbers on a screen, symptomatic of the

wholesale shift to algorithmic forms of management – structures of power reimagined for the digital age. It is the fundamental tension between the seeming intangibility of these forces and their lived expression that both projects manifest. But regardless of how obscure such social or economic conditions might now seem to be, Curran and Duncan are trying to make them visible, to map out how they govern where we work, where we live, the ways in which we interact with each other – in short, the fact that these forces are not at all separate from the reality of our lives, but actually make them what they are.

Ireland's recent history is like a case-study for how the volatility of financial markets and specific patterns of development serve as markers for the emergence of a distinctive historical period, one where cycles of boom and bust are accelerated to the point of near frenzy, whose dominant mood is one of anxiety, and which has as its most immediate symptom the kind of reckless speculation that facilitated our own disastrous property bubble.[ix] For us now, the subtext of these pictures has become the knowledge that, through a series of craven political decisions, the developers and financial mandarins would escape almost without consequence from the catastrophe they had had done so much to create, while the burden of reconstruction would be borne by ordinary citizens. And although the effects of Celtic Tiger growth can't be readily extrapolated to the situation across the border in Northern Ireland, where investment was fuelled by the expectation of political stability following the peace process there, in terms of how social space reflects the forces that are at work in any given historical moment, Curran and Duncan both mark a strikingly similar set of tendencies, tendencies that would be redirected by the global economic downturn just a few years later, but not fundamentally altered. How wide-spread the effects of the recession actually were is in itself testament to the fact that these changes are not solely the product of local forces, but operate on a much larger scale as well. For both artists, there is the prescient sense that the formation of this new social order – one that is, in many ways, the logical endpoint of capitalism's own inherent energies – would come at a very steep price indeed.

[i] The label 'Celtic Tiger' describes a period of sustained growth in the Irish economy that began in the early 1990s and continued at unprecedented levels up until its peak in around 2000. After that it was sustained by a property bubble, driven in turn by uncontrolled lending, and collapsed in 2007, with recession being officially declared at the end of 2008 under the impact of a global financial crisis. These dates are partly based on Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pgs. 537-542, and for the collapse itself, see pgs. 552-554.

[ii] I don't mean to suggest this isn't an important topic, just that its treatment has been, for the most part, rather superficial. Also, because images of these 'ghost estates' were such a staple of newspaper coverage during the height of the crisis, familiarity has long since blunted their impact. There are some exceptions, however, such as Martin Cregg's project, *Midlands*, along with Anthony Haughey's *Settlement*, and perhaps further, definitive accounts will be revealed in time.

[iii] Mark Curran, *Southern Cross*, Gallery of Photography, 2002, and John Duncan, *Trees from Germany*, Belfast Exposed Photography, 2003. Both are exhibition catalogues.

[iv] Although the north-east of the country was traditionally more developed, especially with regard to the industrial sector, this was seriously hampered by subsequent civil strife, so that overall it lagged well behind the south during these 'boom' years. But, while the growth that Duncan charts was in many ways a localised phenomenon, it also, as I argue above, signifies a distinct historical trend.

[v] For an account of the peace process in Northern Ireland, see Bartlett, *Ireland: A History*, pgs. 554-579.

[vi] Justin Carville, *Arrested Development* in Curran, *Sothern Cross*. (The catalogue is unpaginated.)

[vii] *Southern Cross* initiated a larger cycle of projects for Curran, who has since gone on to address the subject of financial markets in greater detail, using a variety of extended approaches including sound and data visualisation. For some background to this first stage of the work see: https://themarket.blog/2012/11/02/southern-cross-1999-2001/ (https://themarket.blog/2012/11/02/southern-cross-1999-2001/)

[viii] For more on the history of how labour has been represented in (and out of) the documentary tradition, see John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday*, Manchester University Press, 1998, most especially chapters 1 – 4.

[ix] In his short essay *Postscript on Control Societies*, Gilles Deleuze argues that the kind of historical 'disciplinary' society that his friend Michel Foucault had described was passing away – just as Foucault himself thought it would – and was being replaced by a different social formation predicated on diffuse systems of control, with chronic indebtedness being just one pertinent example. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin, Columbia University Press, 1995, pgs. 177-182.

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