

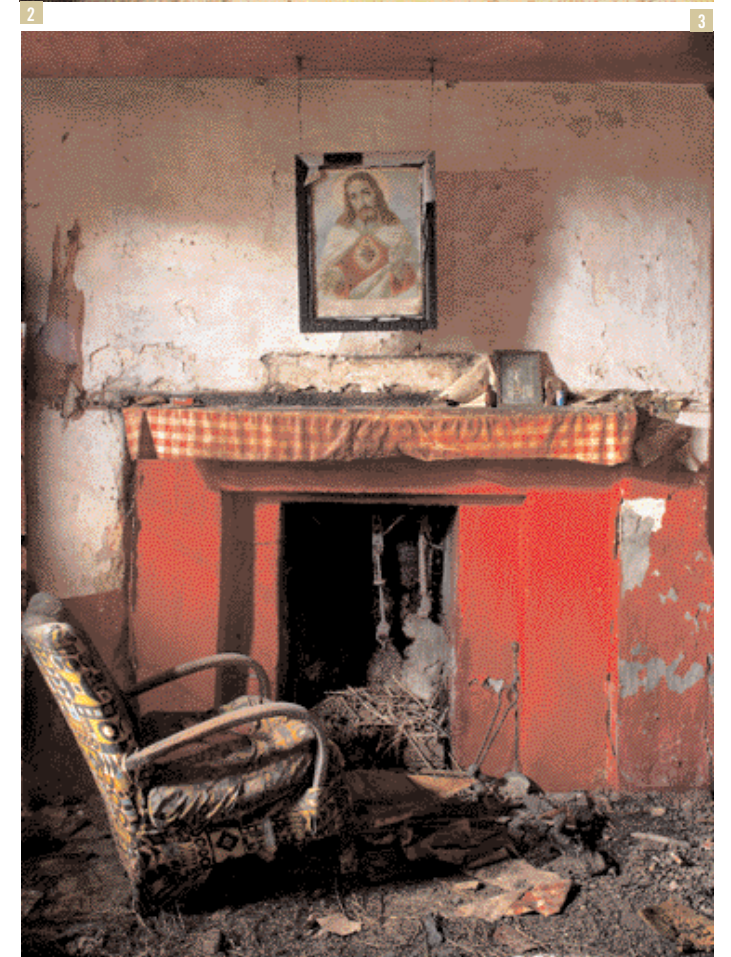
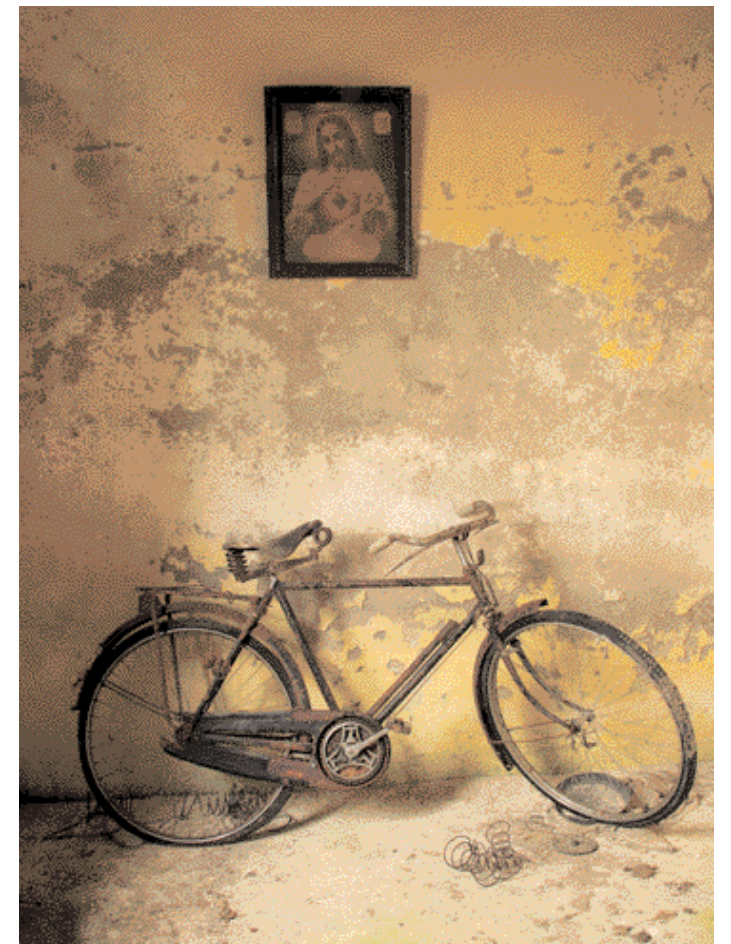
Ghosts of the Faithful Departed

SIÚN HANRAHAN examines David Creedon's haunting photographs, where abandoned possessions in empty dwellings serve as talismans of remembrance

David Creedon's 'Ghosts of the Faithful Departed' evokes an Ireland that was; times that seem to have been simpler, an era in which families and communities were decimated by emigration and comforted by a pervasive religious faith. The photographs are unstaged – taken in abandoned (predominantly) domestic interiors untouched by the photographer – capturing apparently forgotten traces of lives lived, in spaces that have not yet been reclaimed and renovated. And yet, the documentary impulse that emphasises the 'taken as found' dimension to the images is complemented by a strong aesthetic sensibility. The photographs have been made with a clear eye for quite formal, planar compositions and a keen sensitivity to colour and texture.

Across the photographs of 'Ghosts of the Faithful Departed', the compositions are emphatically simple, often sparse, and yet each is remarkable for its richness of detail. In *Sewing II* (Fig 4), for all the details of daily life captured within the frame – the gilt framed picture of Pope Paul, the (near pristine) treadle operated Singer sewing machine, the wireless radio sitting on its work surface, and the barely glimpsed dresser with its display of best china still intact – the basic composition is simple, the single flat plane of an interior wall dominates, even if softened by the faded pattern and folds of its collapsed wallpaper covering. Thus are we sparingly told of the importance of the Church and the self-reliance required in a community without significant disposable income. Geographical isolation is hinted at and pride in what possessions have been accumulated is attested to. Even in *High Nellie* (Fig 2), a particularly spare composition, there is a poignant revealing of a bygone social structure. An old bike is propped against a paint-flaked interior wall, directly beneath a framed picture of the Sacred Heart. Again, the importance of the Church is marked but it is the central importance of the bicycle that is worthy of note. Despite its age, and the rust that has accumulated, the bike has clearly been cared for – the pump still sits in its place along the bicycle frame. And in noting its final resting place, I am reminded of Flann O'Brien's *Third Policeman* and the 'becoming human' of a bicycle through extended use that sees it in by the fire, away from the wind and rain.

Creedon's images are richly coloured, and yet within each the palette is restrained – the colours are strong but the overall range and balance is subtle. In the *Infant of Prague* (Fig 5), layered spaces – sitting room and hallway – are compressed to give a bold flat composition; the picture plane is divided in two; a darker, largely flat red and cream panel to the left, a broad off-white with blue panel to the right, interrupted by a headless Child of Prague framed by its red cape. Within each panel there are variations in colour, tone and texture but across the whole there is continuity: the red of the left panel (the red paint of the hallway) is echoed in the statue's cape; the strong blue undertones of the right panel resonate with a slight staining of the statue's gown and upper edge of the left panel (the flaked paint of the ceiling above the door). The cream of the right panel is picked up in the cream of the statue's gown and the barely visible mantelpiece. Even in *Pope Paul* (Fig 7), a detritus-filled photograph, the colour is intense but the overall palette is controlled. The red-brown of





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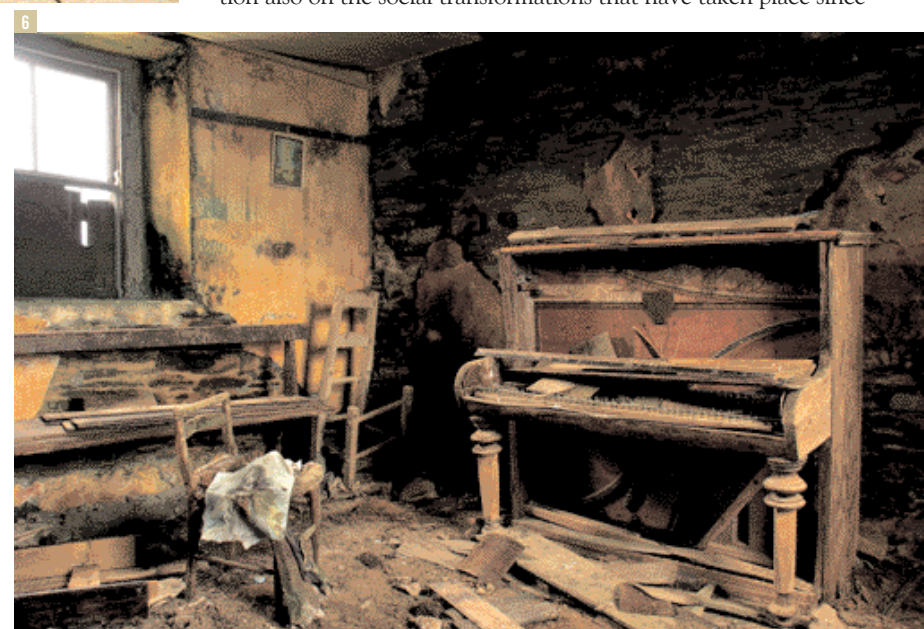


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in pictures such as *Hat Grip* and *Heart of the Home* (Fig 3). Turning toward what is evoked by these compositions, a train of thought unfolds from the figuring of presence and absence in Creedon's photographs. One of the most explicit images in this regard is *The Return* (Fig 1). A close up of a travel chest with one of its three heavy metal clasps obscured by a United States Lines address-tag, this image clearly connotes a history of Irish emigration, to the US and elsewhere. In the 1950s and in the decades preceding and following it, there was a haemorrhaging of people from Ireland's shores; and while this trunk, and its cabin class travel companion, returned to Ireland many did not. Thus the images invite us to remember those who left and, perhaps more particularly, the social consequences for those who stayed behind. Furthermore, the very stillness of images such as *Sewing II* and *Calendar* – their sense of time suspended – invokes by contrast the relentless pace of the contemporary moment, and so invites reflection also on the social transformations that have taken place since

the back wall is echoed in the red of Pope Paul's cape and a page-marker of the bible, and in the rich brown of the wireless and the glass medicine bottle. A creamy sepia tone ranges from the ochre of the wireless trim and Celtic pattern of the framed prayer to Our Lady, to the paler tones of the aged newspapers and the yellow tones of the right-hand wall, and is sparingly punctuated by patches of blue and hints of green.

Finally, space tends to be compressed in these photographs, giving a shallow picture plane in which subtle variations in texture enliven the surface – from flat planes to the dense but fine busyness of a dusty accumulation of bits and pieces. This play on texture is quite subtle within *Infant of Prague* and more dramatic



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the time to which these images belong (for better and worse).

Following this train of thought, and observing the ruined traces recorded in the photographs, we are invited to reflect upon what remains and what is gone. There is the accident of what is left behind when a space is abandoned, of which objects come to signify an era, which vanish without trace, and which move forward with us in time so as to not yet belong in images such as these. And, in the curious centrality of religious imagery in these photographs of our past, there is an invitation to reflect on the fleetingness of certainties – those of yesteryear and those of today.

In evoking the traumas and transformations of our history, the high hopes of those who left our shores and the slow painful transformations experienced by those who stayed (transformations greatly enabled by the money and goods sent home by those who made their way elsewhere), the images also invite association with our contemporary experience of migration – immigration – and what lies in its wake. The presence and absence figured in the images may be reversed; for all those recently arrived to forge a future in Ireland there are families and communities suffering their loss. The lone chair of *Heart of the Home* (Fig 3) seems to have belonged once to a busy home; one invested with great pride, with gingham trim around the edge of the mantle and a carefully suspended picture of the Sacred Heart. Our past is other people's present.

Returning again to questions of presence and absence in Creedon's photographs, and reviewing the series of associations they invited for me, I am reminded that there is what is visible

in these photographs – what we see – and what we imagine or 'realise' in response to what we see. And I am led to revisit the photographs' role as documents.

These are singular images, standing for but detached from their context; freed to function as poetic evocations and talismans of remembrance. Thus they evoke our past and invite reflection, a testament to our negotiation of what it is to remember rather than documentary evidence. Creedon emphasises that these images were not staged, these compositions were simply there to be found by a discerning eye. And yet they are staged – selected, picked out – they have been detached from their context and rendered beautiful.

So what is the significance of the fact that these images were not staged, that the placement of objects is not of the photographer's doing (only the framing is his)? What does this authenticity serve to guarantee?

For me, that these photographs are not staged does not matter. The poetry and beauty of the photographs would not be diminished by their having been staged. What does matter, to me, is what we 'realise' through the images. It is what the images stage that matters, the meanings that they hold open or anchor and those that they don't. ■

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David Creedon, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed*, Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray, Co Wicklow, 6 March–5 April. The exhibition has been chosen by the British Council to take part in their touring exhibition 'Living Together'. The exhibition will be launched in London as part of the International Summit, March 2008. It will then tour throughout Europe between April 2008 and March 2009.

1 (*Overleaf*)
DAVID CREEDON
The Return
64 x 71cm 2006

2 (*Overleaf*)
High Nellie
55 x 76cm 2006

3 (*Overleaf*)
Heart of the Home
57 x 71cm

4 *Sewing II*
76 x 56cm 2006

5 *Infant of Prague*
76 x 47cm 2006

6 *Piano and the Sacred Heart*
76 x 50cm 2005

7 *Pope Paul*
76 x 33cm 2006