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'David Creedon's Ghosts' by Eddie in Poland

23/11/2010 • Deirdre Mulrooney



Ghosts of the Faithful Departed.

In early 2008, I passed through Istanbul airport connecting on to Tblisi, Georgia. It was near midnight. I was browsing a bookshop to pass the time, when I happened upon a striking image adorning the cover of the novel 'Autumn of the Patriarch' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I knew that picture. It was from Cork-based photographer David Creedon's collection 'Ghosts of the Faithful Departed'. Now, I am no photography buff – in fact, I am almost hostile to photography – the ubiquity of cameras, the incessant recording, has diminished our ability to simply experience. Yet I had been mesmerised by the images in 'Ghosts' when I had first seen them some weeks earlier, on an internet site. They had lodged in my head.

'Ghosts' is supposedly images of homesteads of rural Ireland from a time when popular history tells us these were grey, suffocating places. I cannot say whether it was or was not. But these images of abandoned sites vividly radiating family, belonging, elegance, dignity and belief – all lost to departure. How can I describe them? Quintessentially Irish? Lingered after-images of a time lost, for all its ill and its good? Maybe stark counterpoints to John Hinde, vivid but not lurid, typical without being stereotypical, suggesting rather than telling? For being real but not ideal, each picture is haunted by layers of meaning.



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I have in fact only ever seen two of the images in person, in a British Council (yes) display in Sofia of photographers from Eastern Europe (yes). One was the vivid Green Wall. On this wall hangs an old, slightly gaudy Our Lady of Fatima, while in the foreground a bottle of Paddy's Irish Whiskey is partnered by an empty teacup. What a compressed triumvirate of old Irish life! The whiskey and tea appear almost as sacred objects, the mantelpiece an altar. The glaring Blue Bedroom with the dress still hanging in the press. The Red Fireplace supervised by a Sacred Heart of Jesus is, despite its abandonment, almost radiating as sense of being inhabited. There is still presence there. The Two Clocks, the different times suggesting past and present, or Here (home) and There (emigration). The bicycle against the yellow wall, Jesus again looking down. The warm mustard wall-paint is peeling, decay well underway. The 'High Nelly' bicycle is ancient, and even punctured, it may suggest possibilities of movement, of escape. But, on a bicycle, a rider will not get very far. Though the image did get as far as Istanbul... And as it leans there, perhaps for years, against that lazily crumbling wall, I can't help but think of Flann O'Brien's atomic theory – will the manic mingling of atoms eventually take that bicycle through the wall?

The motifs of religion, alcohol and emigration are not only part of Irish national experience, but are features of life in the three other countries in which I have worked since 1998 – Greece, Bulgaria and Poland. Take emigration. Bulgaria has lost over a million people since 1990 and the population continues to fall. Poland has lost up to two million or more, a fair whack of these to Ireland. Greece has historically been a country of emigration, with Melbourne in Australia often called Greece's second biggest city. (It is now a country of heavy net immigration). As for religion, it is well-known as a presence in Polish life. And, sometimes too, in politics. But religious observance by the population, and religion's role in political engagement, are both more complex than the international press sometimes portray. In Greece, religion and national identity have been inseparable in the traditional narrative of national self-image. A unifying thesis of religion is deeply rooted. The Greek Orthodox Church has seen itself as central to the notion of Greek national identity, itself an increasingly complicated notion. The dominant Christian religion is not so notable in the branding of national identity in neighbouring Bulgaria, but the magnificence of Bulgarian Orthodox churches which predate Communism testify that the now reviving Bulgarian Orthodox Church was once a central presence. As in Ireland, the consumption of alcohol is central to social life in Poland and Bulgaria. In Greece too, but not the same way. In my almost four years living there and innumerable visits since I have nearly never seen a Greek overly inebriated in public (wife excluded!). Perhaps the wonderful, perplexing and ultimately endearing Greek disdain for inhibition in personal expression removes the need for alcohol which more reserved types like myself have. In any case, I would guess the images in 'Ghosts' could resonate with beholders in all these countries.

Finally, some people have scoffed to me that these images are 'obviously composed'. The auteur says the photographs are taken as found and I believe him. It matters not anyway. They are heart-gnawingly beautiful. So, if you feel you are a budding short story writer and are looking for inspiration, sit yourself down in front of these images and kick-start your imagination.

Response from DAVID CREEDON:

"Just a note on the picture itself, the entire series of Ghosts of the faithful departed" were photographed as found, but a few do have a look as if they were composed. high nellie was one of these and because of this I never exhibited it when the show opened in Chicago. But a strange thing happened, the photograph was inadvertently sent to a publisher in Amsterdam who showed it to a book editor in Los Angeles and she loved it and wanted to put it on the cover of the Gabriel Garcia Marquez book. After that I had to include it in the exhibitions.

At present I am exhibiting the collection "Una Corda -the soft pedal" in New York, this is a story about Irish piano tuners who travel to Cuba every year to repair the instruments there, and next year I hope to finally publish "Ghosts of the Faithful Departed".

As for new projects I have finished a series entitled "The Last Cooper" but I am not sure when its going to come out but work from this has already been published in China and the Czech Republic."

Response to "Ghosts" from Elena Dikova, Photographer, Bulgaria: "When I visit a photoexhibition, as a rule I don't do preliminary research. I don't want to know the topic, and, if possible, I don't want to know who the author is. I just want to enjoy the piece of light captured in art which we call photography. I don't want any preconceptions, I just want the pictures to grab me, to convince me. I want them to do the talking. If they can't tell stories, if they can't stir emotions and bring back memories, the photographer hasn't done their job. No amount of text around them can salvage the day.

I was faithful to my method with „Ghosts“, too. I saw there were captions below the pictures, but I didn't read them. What I saw was captured moments of a life

Doyle

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past, a life people left behind in a hurry. The teapot covered in dust on the rack, the new dress still on the hanger – they are still here, waiting for their owners. And many other things have been left behind – the saggy couch by the fireplace, the unmade bed, the bicycle leaning on the wall, even the servicable car abandoned in the dingy garage. Oh yes, they left in a hurry. It's obvious where they have gone – on the wall hangs the American flag and beside the figure of Child of Prague lies the timetable of the New York flights. There are the two clocks, measuring the unfolding drama – one has the local time, and the other – the time beyond...

So I see clothes still in the wardrobe, many little everyday objects, photos of relatives strewn about. The sewing machine stands guard, ready to work again. Amidst all that, the most important human belonging has been left behind – faith! Each room hosts a religious image, staring back at me, bereft – the Virgin Mary, Jesus, Pope Paul IV... Oh yes, they left in a hurry, but they wanted to return someday. Back to the piano forte, the new dress and hope, symbolised by a lone lottery ticket.

"Ghosts of the Faithful Departed" told me the story of forced emigration and it saddened me. It made me think of all those times in life when someone somewhere is forced to make a desperate decision. It made me want to learn how each of these stories ended, whether some of these people came back or met with a better fate in the Big New World. And that means just one thing – a photographer's job well done.

Elena Dikova, Photographer, Bulgaria

<http://www.lalenaphotography.com>

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