Seán Hillen was born in 1961 in Newry, Co. Down, studied at Belfast College of Art, the London College of Printing and the Slade School of Fine Art. He first became known for photomontage works based on his own documentary photos from the era of the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’, made over the period 1982-93. In the 1990’s he moved to Dublin from London and began a new series of collage works collectively titled ‘IRELANTIS’, which has since also become well-known and widely admired. Reproductions of many of the pieces now grace the covers of contemporary academic publications, particularly on Irish subjects.

He has also executed several commissions and collaborations including videos; stage design; advertisements; title graphics for BBC TV; permanent sculptures; an education project with Amnesty International, and special effects and props for theatre.

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How and why did you become an artist? Do you have any specific reference artists that inspire you?

There are a few different dynamics, I can see now, to what happened. I became an artist partly ‘by default’- in that I suspect I’m no good for anything else, or at least could never see the point of merely ‘having a job’. I was an unusual child, for instance read intensely and omnivorously- in fact I recently discovered I ‘have’ Asperger’s Syndrome to quite a high degree. The many traits which come with this, some positive and some less so, definitely contribute to falling into an art/creative/technical role in life, somewhat out of the usual order.

One interesting aspect of the Asperger’s I believe is having a highly-or-over-developed sense of justice and feeling an obligation to improve or ‘cure’ the world, personally, and not being able to shirk the responsibility. Others possible traits which must have had a part include having a high emotional sensitivity and a heightened visual sensitivity. I was known as a ‘little professor’ as a child, loved taking things apart (and sometimes putting them back together again), and became a sort-of-successful inventor for a while, winning prizes and making and losing decent sums of money. When I did a proper
IQ test out of curiosity, I couldn’t understand the results - I scored as minor genius, despite not being able to answer some of the questions at all. On looking at the detailed results I had off-the-scale high scores on visual-spatial problems but low-to-zero results for some mental arithmetic puzzles etc. I never understood that until post-diagnosis.

I do love language and words and thought at first I might become a writer, but fate intervened: I had first become a (pretty bad, so a bit frustrated) painter as a teenager, (I remember watching Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh in ‘Lust for Life’ and being wildly inspired..) but there were my grandfather’s and father’s cameras (old folding 620’s etc.) around the house, which I first became interested in as objects, but when I finally rewound some 120 film onto a 620 reel and made some photos and saw the results, I think I was quickly addicted to the immediacy and magic of the process, the scope for recording and for communication.

A second aspect must certainly have been growing up in the Northern Ireland conflict, in a life-and-death situation often enough (or too much!) where I felt I needed to do ‘Something’ and also presenting a ready set of subjects.

I took the B/W photos from the conflict era, (which have since become a Permanent Public Collection after lying in a carrier bag for 20 years), out of frustration but also self-consciously as a young artist. The problem which presented itself, whilst I was studying at media & art schools was that ‘documentary photography’ was rarely seen as ‘art’ and secondly that the media had already been saturated with photographic coverage of the conflict and there was little-to-no room to get them seen. Also the best practitioners like Giles Peress and Don McCullin etc. had already ‘done it’ and were a hard act to follow.

The artists whose work I liked and was probably influenced by were the British Pop artists like Peter Blake, Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton and that generation, probably because I’d grown up in the ‘60s, the early ‘consumer age’ here and the cultural references were more familiar than those of the American counterparts.
I also liked, and still do, ‘serious’ religious art from Giotto to El Greco, probably because of the passion obviously behind it. And of course all the great Masters of history, probably for the same reason. I was an intense young person with intense experience and looking for a medium suitable. I’ve always felt let down by art that is merely ‘decor’ although I do recognise a transporting and redemptive power in sheer beauty. But for me Art had to ‘mean something’ and if possible to leave you feeling (or actually) different, changed by the experience of it. That is my measure for ‘good art’.

The Troubles series make the world more fantastic but equally terrifying. Why did you decide to use photomontage instead of plain documentary photography?

Originally out of frustration because I couldn’t get my photographs seen, and because they were also subject anyway to editors and more open to the preconceptions of the audience, which for me at that period was actually a London/UK audience primarily, and I wanted to charm & shock them out of their (I felt) inaccurate and propagandised preconceptions about Ireland, Northern Ireland and the conflict.

The revelation for me was the work of John Heartfield, but my work of that period has a slightly or quite different tone to his- it has a ‘Pop’ sensibility and also has I hope often a kind of visionary aspect, the sense of Immanence. Also it’s quite intensely personal as well as ‘public’, and made for a gallery rather than a newspaper or poster.

Then I realised it was in ways a superior medium for me, that the result could be that much more complex and multi-layered, suitable to the complexity of the subject.

Do you think that a hybrid art represents in a more accurate way the hybrid identity that Northern Irish were suffering?

Certainly: “Two places at once” as Seamus Heaney put it in his opening speech: but also my growing interest in and concern at the ability of the System in power to ‘project’ a ‘reality’ of their own choosing, and the ability of people to buy into it; especially when it confirms or coincides with their pre-existing programming. It’s a concern which has carried into ‘Irelantis’
where the ‘fiction’ is a playful one of my own invention which riffs on pre-existing myths (even to the point of the source material- the highly-constructed postcards of John Hinde, and the highly stylised National Geographic version of reality, my favourites being a few postcards of images of ‘replica’ buildings etc, themselves complex fictions already.. and into the recent work about the weird world post-9/11, where many (like myself) profoundly doubt the mass-media-promoted version of ‘history’ and suspect it to be a mediated and intentional tissue of lies, and ‘cognitive dissonance’ is a common experience.

It is quite usual in photography to find self portraits of the artists, however, most of your work on the Troubles only features people on the street and even your parents, but not you. Where do an independent self stands in the context of the conflict that stroke Northern Ireland?

I think you could argue that all my work, but especially the ‘Troubles’ stuff, is actually autobiographical but the work of someone who ‘invented themselves’. Interestingly that is a bit of a trope amongst the several of my ‘artistic heroes’ who are the Irish authors; Wilde, Joyce, Yeats & Beckett- who A. All lived in the complex colonial/post-colonial world of ‘Ireland’ and B. by the way also had Asperger’s, a condition which actually carries the experience of feeling a perpetual ‘outsider’ and having to invent yourself.

By way of argument I’d offer ‘Londonewry’; a parody of Newry, London (where I lived & worked for around 13 years) and Londonderry/Derry... and then in many of the ‘Newry Gagarin’ collages I actually collaged my own face into the ‘spaceman’ figure, though people often don’t realise. And the ‘Gagarin’ joke itself is profoundly autobiographical, based on the fact that I was born within an hour of his landing back on Earth.
So it is there, but often buried. All of the work in fact is rooted in personal experience, from the earliest to the latest ‘political’ work, which was inspired by the controversy over who actually did the Omagh Bomb (for which I designed the official Memorial) and losing an acquaintance in the 2005 London Bombings, which many including me suspect was a ‘false flag’ event and not as presented. If I had not the direct experiential knowledge I would probably not have bothered, dared or risked my career in ‘going there’.

Didn’t Joyce write “wipe your glosses with ‘what-you-know’”? 

Irelantis possibly stands out as an escape from this personal involvement, but then it is a personally-invented universe!

How do you think that being in/from a certain place allows you to create? I mean, what resources were there in Northern Ireland to develop as an artist in contrast with England? I did used to feel a little sorry for the middle-class students beside me in college who had nothing to drive them but anger at their parents... whereas I had a small war to fuel my play. So it gave me motivation, and a subject. Interestingly though Northern Ireland of course fell under the UK ‘Welfare State’ which paid around £30,000 on my education but coming from from a pretty poverty-stricken working-class background I would probably never have attended art school had the grant system not been in operation as it was then, or had I been born in the Irish Republic. Now the grants have been replaced by loans so it is possible I wouldn’t be able to do it.. on the other hand given my natural unworldliness and lack of financial sense or caution, I would probably do it again if I got away with it.

Did you got inspired to do your montage work while in Ireland or in one of your visits/stays in London? Did you find your vision different from what the media presented as the reality of the conflict when you were a student in London? 

I think I’ve sort of answered this in previous replies, but to be specific; I used to point out to people that Newry was a 45-minute airflight
from London (though it took a couple of hours to get to and from the airport on both sides) and it was precisely the physical nearness and political & ‘psychic’ difference that fuelled the work, and there was a process of feeling my way into those pictures but it did ‘catch fire’ pretty quickly. Oh yes, my ideas differed profoundly from the British (and Southern Irish) media representations, which tended to try to frame Irish (Republican) violence as ‘mindless terrorism’, and anyone who might try to explain or excuse it as a reprehensible ‘fellow traveler’. And on the other side presented British State violence as ‘peacekeeping’ although it was I believe very cynically very different from that.

As we are learning now the UK secret State was very actively involved in running ‘Loyalist’ sectarian violence (as well as trying to derail Nationalist political violence by penetrating them with double-agents to organise atrocities and assassinate individuals they couldn’t control). This is what is now known as the ‘Dirty War’ and follows a pattern originated in British Colonial practices and copied by other States, most notably the US with their ‘School of the Americas’ and support for dictatorial regimes in Latin America.

**The religious theme is quite present in the photomontages, does it have a further meaning than the conflict between Catholic and Protestants?**

Oh, yes, actually I never ever thought of it in those terms, but perhaps what you are seeing is that it was indeed a mischievous ‘framing’ of the conflict as between the ‘noble savage’ Irish and the ‘politically expedient’, sophisticated and psychopathic-militaristic UK State. But I also meant it as indeed slightly ‘mystical’, expressing something like ‘immanence’, the presence of the ‘Godlike’ aspect leaking out in the everyday world, albeit the heightened reality of the conflict... This is the aspect that I ran with when I moved into Irelantis.
Which, in your opinion, was the situation and the role of the visual arts during the Troubles? (in terms of popularity, themes used,...)

Actually the fact is that the visual arts were shockingly mute for two reasons: Firstly was a blanket self-and-establishment censorship of the subject. It was considered extremely ‘bad taste’ to make any art engaging with political issues. Not entirely surprising as the society itself was incapable of open discussion, being embroiled in active conflict. The conflict was the original ‘Elephant in the room’, and Northern Ireland the place described in a poem by Heaney as the place, where “whatever you say, say nothing.”

In fact, again, I’ve only discovered lately that dozens of artists made work engaged in and related to the conflict. This was completely ignored by the institutions, outside of a few favoured individuals who produced work guaranteed to support the official positions, even up to very late. And today the most favoured and supported artists are ones whose works says very little or nothing ‘controversial’; indeed that would be the main sin.

My own work from the period was to my knowledge (having been told since by some of the people involved) widely and ruthlessly censored, to the point that very little of it was acquired by public collections with a very few exceptions. And it is now widely dispersed in private hands. Also, my work in particular was kept until very recently out of the very few publications on the subject by the National Museum (IMMA).

There is no public collection of ‘Troubles Art’ in Northern Ireland outside the recently generated online database. And There is no intention of producing such a collection, with only piecemeal collecting by a couple of British Museums, including the Imperial War Museum, (who were themselves refused the money, for the first and as far as I know the only time in their history, to acquire my collection of photomontages a few years ago), and the local Museum in my home town Newry who recently acquired a few. There are none of mine from this period in any public collections in the Republic, with the recent acquisition of the photos by the National Library a notable exception.
How effective were the visual arts in portraying Ireland and Northern Ireland during the latter part of the 20th century?

I think I have sort of answered that in the previous reply. But in terms of Ireland in general I suppose that the visual arts have been the ‘Cinderella’, being a culture rooted in language and music with even theatre exceeding the currency of the visual arts.

That said, there has been a sudden mushroom of the visual arts since the ‘Boom’ period. But there is little tradition of ‘politically engaged’ or even historically-aware work, rather, the visual arts are more associated with decoration and acquisition.

It could be noted that the artists most valued by collectors (who are largely not well informed in my opinion) are those mostly from the last century who provide an unchallenging mirror back to the culture.

Irelantis to me is a perfect portrayal of postcolonial and pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Is this series a continuation of the Troubles or a counterpart representing the two sides of Ireland?

Thank you. That’s an interesting question. It perhaps is both. I sometimes describe it as ‘the antidote’ to the earlier work, an attempt to completely escape the paradigms of the conflict and of course it coincides with my move around 1993 (indeed the time of the ‘ceasefires’) from London, where the conflict was still daily news, to Dublin, where it was steadfastly ignored as much as possible.

It was perhaps an attempt by me to exceed my earlier ‘frames of reference’, to exceed the boundaries and categories of the conflict by inventing my own, expansive (since only limited by the imagination) paradigm. Of course some of the issues which underscored the ‘Troubles’ work are still active in Irelantis; the idea of what is ‘real’ and what is ‘truth’ and the obsession with identity. However a playful approach to history replaces the pained one.
If you can tell, what are you working on at the moment?
Well, I perhaps again tried to leapfrog out of my own self-created tropes and habits and also to exceed or at least confound expectations in some way—so from a longterm interest in the ‘anomalous’ and ‘weird’ aspects of reality and experience, and a curiosity about what lies behind the curtain of ‘reality’, I have been for several years photographing the sky in a slightly intense way... to the extent of maybe 1/2 a million photos, wearing out 2 semi-professional cameras.

It is both a real ‘investigation’ of the clouds, a slightly playful (or is it serious? I would quote George Bernard Shaw: “The joke is; I’m serious!” ) ‘investigation’ by photographs of the clouds on the premise that I suspect I see patterns in them that shouldn’t be there...

Of course I’m aware of ‘pareidolia’ and similar phenomena, and also that an Asperger trait is to see patterns that others don’t. I’m a bit overwhelmed by the volume of them, so the couple of webgalleries I’ve made with them only have a tiny fraction of the interesting images. I did a show with my own dealer of them last year for which I printed around a thousand of them, costing around €3500 and (it being a private gallery with a doorbell) only about 320 people attended over the month or so... so as I joked, I could have given them €10 each and not bothered. The galleries are at triangularclouds.com and rectangularclouds.com.

Also, I’ve been fishing for UFO’s.. and caught some (with the camera!). I’m not sure what I’m going to do with them, but starting and intending to incorporate them in new collage works, one of which is the recent “WHAT’S WRONG? with Willy’s Grave #1” I have a few ideas for new collage series but will know better soon I hope. I have, for better or worse, a pattern of 2 or 3 years inbetween bursts of work so am itching and hoping to get collaging again. We’ll see...

See more by Seán Hillen at:
seanhillen.com
or
in Seán Hillen’s full gallery on Flickr

WHAT’S WRONG? with Willy’s Grave #1