Searching for evidence

The unthinkable is precisely Séan Hillen’s territory, writes Mic Moroney of his collaged images that juxtapose grim incident with postcard pretty scenery.

What is it about Sean Hillen’s quasi-hallucinatory collages that so excites academics? His pictures have graced the covers of works of art criticism, anthropology, ethnography, Irish Studies and cultural commentary, books by Roy Foster, Luke Gibbons and Michael Casey, former Central Bank chief economist; conference papers from the Merriman Summer School to the international Utopian Studies Society; even Sheila Lindsay's *Time Travels of an Irish Psychic.*

Séan’s montages have a *currency among sociologists*, chuckles UCC’s department head, Kieran Keoghane, who used Hillen’s *Bizarre image* for his book, *Collision Culture*; ‘they’re what Walter Benjamin calls denkbilder, thinking images.’ Recently, Keoghane had Hillen speak at a conference, where his pictures were dissected by such luminaries as UCC’s influential Professor Arpad Szakolczai, Raffaella Raccolini, Harald Wydra and Bernhard Giesen. John O’Brien declared Hillen a ‘post-modern Jeremiah’ whose work ‘excuses immobility,’ a shimmering concept of thresholds, transfiguration, disruption; amongst other suitable terms like mimesis, schismogenesis, carnival, the sacred and the sociopathic figure of the Trickster.

Born in 1961 in the mainly Catholic-nationalist border town of Newry, Hillen’s life dawned under British Army helicopters, breasting surveillance towers, the local menace of the IRA, and within them, double-agents like ‘Kevin Fulton’. When Hillen was twelve, he hung about with a lad who later blew himself up assembling a bomb; and he recalls young Kevin Healey, shot dead by a British soldier. After such incidents, riots were routine: housing estates barricaded, nightly gunfire between IRA and Army.

As a teenager, Hillen began photographing, with dating *jamais eu*, 12th of July Orange jamborees; the annual Catholic Mass Rock ceremony up the Mourne Mountains; the vast Derry funeral (and attendant riots) of republican Daniel O’Connell awaits the pulverization of 1916 from the innard walls of a tatterdemalion tenement are stained with the lives of former inhabitants, as a tornado of flying debris rips at the horizon.

Invasion looms in a *Squadron Of Bradleys Intereacts photos into a memorial garden, via other heliostatic mirrors, into the sculpted heart inside a glass column at the explosion site.* Since then, Hillen’s *Searching for Evidence* pictures have puzzled over the obscenity of 9/11: how could something of this magnitude slip through? How did the colossal Twin Towers pancake so perfectly into their own footprints, as did Building 7, which suffered no structural damage? Many architects and engineers have concluded these were controlled demolitions.

And so, where once in *Ireland*, red-headed kids gathered meteorites, peasants now collect smouldering 9/11 dust, as the Twin Towers blaze and sputter their toxic payload into the misted Kerry hills. In the breathtaking Evidence of Controlled Demolition at The Rose Garden, *Tralee* (Fig 1), an armed wall of a tatterdemalion tenement are stained with the lives of former inhabitants, as a tornado of flying debris rips at the horizon.

Hillen was not insensible to the failures of security forces to prevent the Omagh atrocity (despite warnings from informants) or charge those responsible (despite GCHQ monitoring phones used in the attack). Sensitized since youth to State spooks and the pervasiveness of security forces’ infiltration of paramilitary death squads, he had also been shocked at the slaughter in London’s ‘7/7’ of pictures; a researcher Miriam Hyman on the bus at Tavistock Square. Then emerged the inconsistencies in official accounts; the prior surveillance of at least one attacker. The terror had indeed crept back into the dreamworld.

TWO INNOCENT GIRLS GAZE AT THE ROSE BEDS, AS THE LAVA OF RUINATION LAPS AT THEIR HEELS; A TORNADO OF FLYING DEBRIS RIPPING AT THE HORIZON

He designed, with landscape architect Desmond Fitzgerald, an elaborate arrangement of 31 mirrors which bounce sunlight from a memorial garden, via other heliostatic mirrors, into the sculpted heart inside a glass column at the explosion site.

Hillen was not insensible to the failures of security forces to prevent the Omagh atrocity (despite warnings from informants) or charge those responsible (despite GCHQ monitoring phones used in the attack). Sensitized since youth to State spooks and the pervasiveness of security forces’ infiltration of paramilitary death squads, he had also been shocked at the slaughter in London’s ‘7/7’ of pictures; a researcher Miriam Hyman on the bus at Tavistock Square. Then emerged the inconsistencies in official accounts; the prior surveillance of at least one attacker. The terror had indeed crept back into the dreamworld.

Since then, Hillen’s *Searching for Evidence* pictures have puzzled over the obscenity of 9/11: how could something of this magnitude slip through? How did the colossal Twin Towers pancake so perfectly into their own footprints, as did Building 7, which suffered no structural damage? Many architects and engineers have concluded these were controlled demolitions.

And so, where once in *Ireland*, red-headed kids gathered meteorites, peasants now collect smouldering 9/11 dust, as the Twin Towers blaze and sputter their toxic payload into the misted Kerry hills. In the breathtaking Evidence of Controlled Demolition at The Rose Garden, *Tralee* (Fig 1), the*...*