Above: Four Ideas for a New Town #3 1987

as we all are, out of an ache for some kind of ‘wholeness’, in a world where the comfort of wholeness, and simple wholeness is denied. These photomontages embody these tensions, and embodiments is what they are; they’re not illustrations, they’re not posthumous to some idea - they aren’t quite ‘conceptual’ in that sense. - I have a sense in them, which I miss in other work, of something working underneath the surface; ...These works aren’t just witty and allusive, but they’re full of attachment, and full of effect’. Heaney also talks of the ‘sheer visionary longing’ of Hillen’s perspective, he is perpetually searching.

The compression of disparate elements in a collaged legible town or city scape is compelling. In ‘Londonwry, A Mythical Town 6,’ 1985, Hillen has combined a photo he took in the early 80s at the Newry Canal Festival with a cowboy on his rearing steed. The western theme continues in ‘Four Ideas for a New Town 3’; 1987; ‘I was interested for a long time in using a cowboy & indian metaphor (when I was a child we played ‘cowboys and indians’ & ‘proves and brits’ interchangeably). I read eventually that a lot of American Cowboys were Irish...My guess about the K.O.B. on the wall is that it’s a ‘tag’ by someone in the King’s Own Borderers, I have the impression that soldiers in the past were given spray cans to overwrite republican graffiti’. My favourite collages are both on the Gagarin theme; ‘Gagarin’s Room’ and ‘Newry Gagarin crosses the Border’. In terms of the latter, ‘This...is one of the last two ‘political’ montages I made. Yuri Gagarin was the first man in space. I was born about an hour after he landed, and couldn’t resist the Newry Gagarin pun & opportunity for pictures. The image of Gagarin is from a Ladybird book, the illustrations in which I’ve always enjoyed - so clear - gouache, I believe, from photos. It’s a cross section of this capsule with him in it. It’s a bit like the experience of driving through this border checkpoint in a car at night’.

Hillen lives in a house and studio designed by architect Tom de Paor. He admits that formerly he felt immune to the influence of architectural design but now he is highly aware of its potential. The artist’s interest in architecture is demonstrated in the collaged works – whether this is manifested in the buildings of the streets of Northern Ireland or in landmark structures in or out of context. Hillen feels architects are not didactic and have no desire to moralize. Instead their interest is more in ‘denkbilder’ or ‘thinking images’, the potential of architecture in its real and reproduced forms. Walter Benjamin’s ‘denkbilder’ were not only unforgettable sites of reminiscence; they were moments of inscription at which his discourse exercised its full palette of descriptive, analytical, allegorical, and performative potential.

Morphomata-Tagung an der Yale University, 2012. Hillen’s collages could certainly be described as ‘denkbilder’ also.

It is remarkable that through Hillen’s singular vision of the real world combined with the world of possibility, we can relate to the absurdity of it, to the proverbial castles in the sky, for nothing is as we know it. The vision of things is peculiarly the artist’s own and yet we feel we understand it and it makes sense on a different level. This singularity of the visualisation compares to William Blake’s notion of lucid acuity; ”If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.” It is also enhanced by the fact that it is uniquely the artist’s own perspective. As viewers we can relate to, even understand aspects of this viewpoint but it could only have been articulated through the hand of the artist and his direct experience and imagination.

As Aldous Huxley observed in The Doors of Perception; ”We live together, we act on, and react to, one another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves...By its very nature every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude...The things and events to which the symbols refer belong to mutually exclusive realms of experience.”

Marianne O’Kane Boal

Sean Hillen’s 100 works is on in the Golden Thread Gallery until 11th March, 2017.