

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Gerard Byrne

16 April – 26 June 2010



'Images or shadows of divine things'

A Different Country

It is so dry here. Things never disappear, never rot, are not washed into storm drains or blown into gutters. Sometimes it feels like the moon, where a flag unfurled four decades ago still hangs in the vacuum. The pale stone facing on these walls remains unstained, pristine. Chrome does not rust. Rubber does not perish. Paint does not peel from timber.

There is no weather. The cold and the heat are the same, indifferent to us and equally tolerable. Only wind and moisture could dramatise the atmosphere, and allow us to feel the air on our skin. We have neither.

The grey concrete roads are flat and deeply cracked; heavy skins of cement cannot flex or give, so, at some unnoticed moment in the long forgotten past, simply tore apart when the earth shifted beneath them.

These curbs are high—eight inches from road to footpath—and, though they are made from the same grey concrete as everything else, are often painted white, yellow, green or red. Colour is the pedestrian's defence against rampaging rivers of traffic. Walk beside a road and you are invisible to the faces behind windscreens—in a different country.

Overhead, matt black telegraph cables and power lines are suspended everywhere, swooping back and forth across streets from gutters and in and out of trees. Though the wires carry rapid impulses, they themselves are a constant image of suspended dilapidation. And the telegraph poles! Thick as a man's waist, and tall as redwoods. Their lower eight feet bristle with half-removed metal staples, where paper notices have been torn away.

Strips of thick, harsh grass do not grow, and nobody mows them. They serve as unnatural barriers; you could walk across them but nobody does. Plants in raised containers grow in hard, deterrent spikes and weeds only seem to emerge from concrete. The

sky is colourless and there are no birds.

Each building sits oblivious to the next. In front of each, a wide-mouthed steel box for letters is fixed to the painted fence, like a border control booth. A tap drips into a wide porcelain sink that is no longer glossy, perhaps never was. The light switches are bone coloured and blocky and protrude from the walls; plug sockets are so small that you miss them entirely. Metal pull cords dangle from light fixtures, swaying in the breeze of the fan above. The woodwork—doors, window frames, skirting boards—has been over-painted so many times that it appears bloated, childlike. Wires, stapled into the corners of walls, are carelessly disguised.

Stayprest Permatex Everlast Longlife. Water resistant. Polyester acrylic naugahyde acetate rayon and nylon. Plastics. Patent leather.

Windows are washed monthly, with vinegar and newspaper. The fly screens fitted over every opening, however, are harder to keep clean. Handles open with wide movements, and click shut decisively. Bathroom doors are locked with a small, central button or a twisted knob. The heavy front door closes cleanly and tightly and is locked twice.

This is the place that I recognise in Gerard Byrne's *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (2005–ongoing). It is not the America that I now live in or the America I have visited as a tourist; nor is it the America of the past. It is nevertheless real, and it endures. Byrne's photographs are proof.

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