



# Searching for evidence

The unthinkable is precisely Seán 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*.

'Seán's montages have a *currency* among sociologists', chuckles UCC's department head, Kieran Keohane, who used Hillen's *Bóthar* image for his book, *Collision Culture*; 'they're what Walter Benjamin calls *denkbilder*, thinking images.' Recently, Keohane had Hillen speak at a conference, where his pictures were dissected by such luminaries as UCC's influential Professor Arpad Szakolczai, Raffaella Baccolini, Harald Wydra and Bernhard Giesen. John O'Brien declared Hillen a 'post-modern Jeremiah' whose work 'exudes *liminality*': 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, bristling 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 Heatley, 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 daring *jamais vu*, 12th of July Orange jamborees; the annual Catholic Mass Rock ceremony up the Mourne Mountains; the vast Derry funeral (and attendant riots) of republican hunger striker Patsy O'Hara; and the deathly swoon of a hospitalized boy, his head dented by a plastic bullet. In 2010, these pictures were acquired by the National Library.

Studying art at Belfast and the Slade, Hillen spliced such photos into his *LondoNewry* collages; garnishing the grimness with the miraculous, and impudently transplanting the militarized squalor into metropolitan London. As oddly as these pieces read now, in the 1980s, they were live, and packed an outrageous comic punch. Perhaps naturally enough, London art institutions icily disdained them, until curator Angela Weight bought a number for the Imperial War Museum.

Moving to Dublin in 1992, Hillen jettisoned the politics, and took flight into his lastingly popular *Irelandis*, a cataclysmic Hy-Brasil of impossible wonders. Newgrange sweltered alongside Apollonic temples; skies terminated in gigantic earthrises; glaciers ground down Henry Street, while ATMs nestled in the legs of dolmens – all antic humour, with a set of fruit-pastille colour schemes that sugared the brain.

But Hillen modulated his tone for the crystalline memorial

he designed, with landscape architect Desmond Fitzgerald, to the still scandalously unresolved Omagh bombing: 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 picture-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 *Irelandis*, red-headed kids gathered meteorites, peasants now collect smouldering 9/11 dust, as

**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**

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 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 Intercepts Natives Carrying Home Evidence Of Controlled Demolition In Sackville St* (Fig 2), as American tanks chunder to encircle peasants hauling suspect panniers; and Daniel O'Connell awaits the pulverization of 1916 from atop his monument. Meanwhile, in *No Evidence of a 757 near The Ha'penny Bridge?* (Fig 3), the Pentagon collapses ruinously into Liffey Street.

Interestingly, other than three pieces in the Ulster Museum's 'Art of the Troubles' last year, Hillen's *LondoNewry* has never aired in Belfast. When the Golden Thread hosts its '35-year survey show' of Hillen next summer, reactions will be interesting to monitor. ■

Seán Hillen 'Gathering Evidence' series Lewis Glucksman Gallery, UCC, Cork until 6 September. Visit [HYPERLINK "http://www.seanhillen.com"](http://www.seanhillen.com) [www.seanhillen.com](http://www.seanhillen.com) for more exhibitions/developments.

Mic Moroney is a freelance writer.



1 SEÁN HILLEN b.1961  
SEARCHING FOR EVIDENCE IN  
THE ROSE GARDEN, TRALEE

2 NO EVIDENCE OF A  
757 NEAR THE  
HA'PENNY  
BRIDGE, DUBLIN?

3 SQUADRON OF BRADLEYS INTERCEPTS NATIVES  
CARRYING HOME EVIDENCE (OF CONTROLLED  
DEMOLITION) IN SACKVILLE ST, DUBLIN