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The darker side of 'Irelantis' was lost on us a decade ago

FINTAN O'TOOLE

CULTURE SHOCK: IF YOU leave Ireland, at least through Dublin airport, one of the last things you'll see are the ads for a mobile phone company that line the air bridge. They show deliberately jumbled images of New York and Dublin, smoothly spliced together to make it look like the distance (cultural as well as physical) between them has been eliminated. And this visual trick is now almost a cliché of Irish advertising. It seems to have a particular kind of appeal to our globalised, displaced sensibilities.

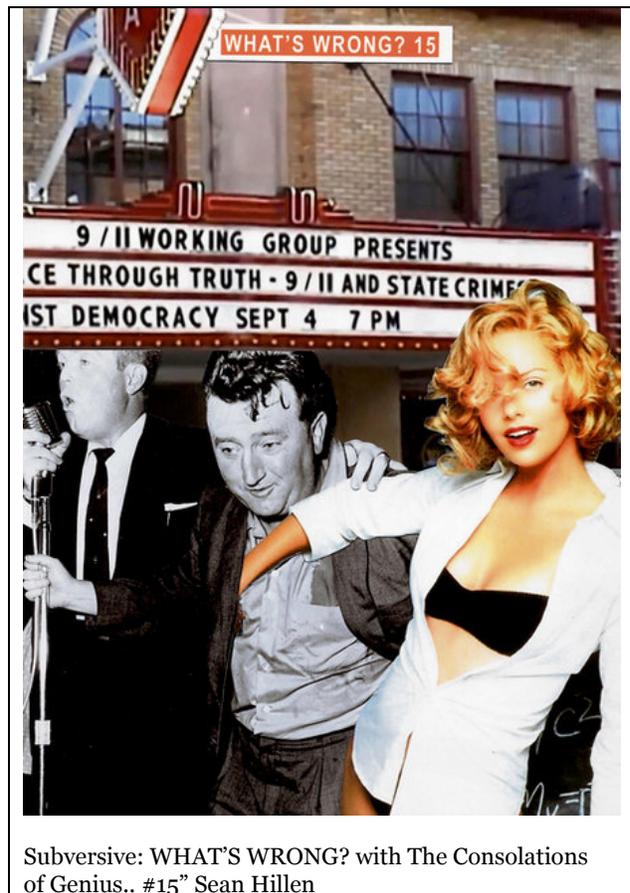
The interesting thing about these ads is that it's possible to be pretty sure where the original idea came from. They are a sanitised and adulterated version of Sean Hillen's brilliant photo-collage series, *Irelantis*. From 1992 onwards, Hillen created funny, startling and disturbing images by working ancient monuments like the pyramids of Giza or the Colosseum into John Hinde postcards of a bucolic Ireland, often in an explicitly apocalyptic context.

Hillen's surreal juxtapositions had both an intellectual and a popular appeal. On the one side, Roy Foster and Luke Gibbons used them for the covers of important books. On the other, Bank of Ireland commissioned ads from Hillen, showing ATM machines embedded in the Blarney stone, a dolmen and a round tower. (These ads, incidentally, are a fine example of the virtual impossibility of satire in Ireland.)

In 2004, Hillen even achieved a kind of official sanction when his work was among that exhibited at the European Council headquarters in Brussels to mark the Irish presidency of the EU. Increasingly absorbed into the mainstream as he thus was, it became too easy to forget that Hillen is a subversive and genuinely disturbing artist.

There's nothing particularly radical about Hillen's basic techniques or impulses. The idea of "yoking opposites together by violence" is central to the metaphysical poetry of the 17th century. Collage has been a primary method in the visual arts at least since the Cubist, Dadaist and Surrealist movements of the early 20th century. Sergei Eisenstein's use of montage (the juxtaposition of conflicting images) in cinema both reflected and influenced this interest in collage.

What's different about Hillen is that his adoption of collage is rooted in very specific experiences. The less well-known work he did before *Irelantis* remains the best expression of what it felt like to be in Northern Ireland during the Troubles – the co-existence of two worlds, one of violence, repression and obscenity, the other of banal provincial normality.



Subversive: WHAT'S WRONG? with The Consolations of Genius.. #15" Sean Hillen

Hillen grew up in Troubles-era Newry, and it dominates his early work.

His photomontages from the 1980s and early 1990s, in *Four Ideas for a New Town* and *LondoNewry, A Mythical Town*, splice together postcard pictures of London with images of the conflict in Northern Ireland. They are witty but they're not funny – even now, they look savage and bitter and retain a genuinely satiric power. It is easy to understand why Hillen's work was so often removed from exhibitions in those days. It is uncomfortable and deliberately discomfiting.

This is not to say that Hillen's imagination was confined by the immediacy of politics.

The early work is saturated in popular culture (cowboys, Indians and TV detectives) and also driven by madcap puns. The series *Newry Gagarin*, inspired both by the pun on the name of the pioneering cosmonaut and by the co-incidence of his return to earth with Hillen's own birth, prefigures the visionary exuberance of the *Irelantis* collages.

There are representatives of some of these series in Hillen's new show at the Oliver Sears gallery in Dublin and they help create the context for his more recent work. They do this by making you wonder how on earth Hillen ever came to be seen as the nearest thing to a licensed visual punster for the Ireland of the Celtic Bubble.

Even if you look again at those well-known *Irelantis* images, they are not at all the same as they were a decade ago. Back then, their humour was the most obvious thing about them. They seemed to make some kind of sense of a postmodern, hyper-globalised Ireland in which space and time were jumbled up together. Their wit and invention made this condition seem like something we could live with.

What you see now in the *Irelantis* images, however, is above all the approach of the apocalypse. The montages are full of explosions, inundations, precipices, whirlpools, lightning storms and earthquakes. There is a haunting image of the Stephen's Green shopping centre in Dublin as a Hiroshima-style ruin. Fabulous inventions they may be, but Hillen's creations now seem weirdly prescient and ruefully realistic.

With this clearer sense of where Hillen is coming from, the new work seems less of a leap. It is dark and strange, but perhaps not much more so than most of what he's done before. It has two strands. One is made up of images that insert pictures of collapsing buildings from the 9/11 attacks into John Hinde postcards of Ireland. The other, longer series, called *What's Wrong? with The Consolations of Genius* weaves together three disparate sets of images: pictures from 9/11 conspiracy websites, photos of Irish literary giants (Joyce, Beckett, Kavanagh and Behan being the most prominent) and pin-ups of women (Angelina Jolie and Charlize Theron among them) in sexually provocative poses. Each is surmounted by the phrase *What's Wrong?* from the 1950s children's puzzle game.

These collages are more enigmatic than anything Hillen has done before.

They are not anchored either in the political realities of his early work or in the notions of Ireland and globalisation that hang around the *Irelantis* series. But they are, as they are surely intended to be, powerfully disorienting. They destabilise the image of the literary saint that has become so central to official Irish culture. They induce the dizziness of an online world in which the cerebral and the sexual, truth and conspiracy theory, continually collide. They are not likely to inspire an advertising campaign or be taken up as semi-official images of Irishness. And that, presumably, is the point.