



Willie Doherty  
*Ghost Story* 2007  
 video still

## Willie Doherty

Fruitmarket Gallery Edinburgh 25 April to 12 July

Lonely country paths, shadowy figures, bullet holes: Willie Doherty's first solo show in Scotland suggests an exhibition firmly in territory that the artist is well known for – his exploration of place, memory and legacy that evokes Northern Ireland's traumatic history while also moving beyond it. Yet among a compelling selection of films and photographic works, the most telling aspect of this exhibition is a dialogue between two video installations that make a remarkable, uncanny 'return home'.

A room of large-scale glossy cibachromes that solicit uneasy narratives of threat, violence and murder sets the tone for the show. Works such as *Uncovering Evidence That The War is Not Over I*, 1995, and *Small Acts of Deception II*, 1997, act as a gateway between the video installations *Ghost Story*, 2007, and *Buried*, 2009, shown in adjacent rooms. The same country track photographed in *Small Acts of Deception* makes an eerie return in *Ghost Story*, likewise *Buried* moves deeper into a wood that appears 'on the edge' of *Ghost Story*. *Ghost Story*'s haunted – and possibly hunted – narrator reverberates with *Re-Run*, 2002, in the upper gallery, a double-screen projection showing a man seemingly trapped in a nightmarish run without end. Cibachromes of derelict rooms, such as *Abandoned Interior III*, 1997, invite a forensic eye, and appear opposite a sequence of monochrome photographs of Belfast's sparse roads and deserted streets. Two of these have double dates, so captions such as *The Westlink, Belfast 1988, 2008*, point to the significance of the artist revisiting past material. 1988 was also the year in which Doherty made a memorable critique of photographer Paul Graham's *Troubled Land*, 1987: 'He didn't have the insider knowledge to recode anything. All he has done is "represent".' (*Creative Camera*, December 1988). Doherty's distinction between artworks that 'recode' as opposed to 're-present' remains relevant. This is not only to challenge the impulse to look to his monochromes for a visual juxtaposition of past and post-conflict Belfast. What is more revelatory is the way in which the artist 're-codes' sound to allude to contemporary processes of erasure.

This is inherent in the artistic shift that has taken place between *Ghost Story* and *Buried*. In the former work, the country path that is *Ghost Story*'s reoccurring location is intercut with others that are on the edge in more ways

than one: backstreets, woods, pedestrian underpasses, deserted car parks. As the camera travels slowly through these spaces, a man's voice-over talks of 'invisible matter that won't be contained'. The viewer listens to his allusions to terror, violence, death and metaphors of haunting. In *Buried*, there is no narrator and the location of the wood has an eerie stillness, punctuated by the movement of mist, or a grub oozing out of a tree trunk. Images of a discarded coat, string tied around a tree and other debris make visual connections to the narrator of *Ghost Story*. The ambient sound heightens the ambiguities of *Buried*: the viewer is unsure whether they have arrived late at a scene of sinister activity or somewhere more innocuous. Deeper into the wood, the sound seems to have shifted – to the edge of decipherability. The sound of distant voices and the possible hum of a helicopter are not reassuring. The earth surface moves: this fragile moment fires a chain of association where horror stories involving the return of the dead evoke, more disturbingly, the 'disappeared' of Northern Ireland. This is also strangely reminiscent of that famous moment in Chris Marker's film *La Jetée*, 1962, in which a fleeting scene is momentarily animated within a story told in still images. In *Buried*, the connotations of haunting, and the tensions between film and photography, are given a poetic and political force.

*Ghost Story* uses sound to deliver fragments of narratives and its narrator's partial testimony invites the viewer to fill in the gaps, while in *Buried* this gives way to an unsettling soundtrack that is just on the edge of recognition. It can be argued that the recordings of Bloody Sunday, which transpire to be the source, have been recoded by Doherty as a way of speaking about the 'unspeakable'. Perhaps it is no coincidence that *Buried* helps to make manifest the lingering agony of those connected to 'the disappeared' in a culture that is anxious to say it is time to move on; it is an artwork to be experienced alone in the dark. *Buried* shows how an artist can return to a place, in both geographical and archival senses, and recode it to produce artworks that simultaneously reflect upon – and resist – the process of erasure and forgetting. ■

NICKY BIRD is an artist. She is currently a PhD co-ordinator at Glasgow School of Art.