

A duty to document dereliction

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A number of photographers are focusing on abandoned homes and workplaces, applying a documentary style that allows the true narrative to shine, writes **AIDAN DUNNE**

CAMILO JOSE Vergara's benchmark project *American Ruins*, published in book form by Merrell in 1999, is a sequential photographic documentation of abandoned, decaying and disappearing tracts of urban North America. Not America of the dim distant past, but America now, in our own era.

It's a brilliant, pioneering example of what might be called the archaeology of modernity. Vergara's images vividly demonstrate that when economic activity fluctuates, so do populations and the entire architectural infrastructure they inhabit – an infrastructure that so easily creates the illusion of permanence.

This fact is also evident in another more recent work, *The Ruins of Detroit*, by two French photographers, Yves Marchand and Romain Jeffre, published by Steidl at the end of 2010. Over the previous five years the two visited Detroit, as the car industry there continued a long period of decline, recording the staggering scale of decay, not just of the industrial landscape but also of the wider municipal, commercial and cultural fabric of the monumental city.

Two recent Irish publications can be seen in the light of these renowned exemplars. Deirdre O'Mahony's *Abandoned Clare* (Abridged) and David Creedon's *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* (Collins) both consider local instances of dereliction and decay.

Abandoned Clare, which has a magazine format, comes under the umbrella of Abridged, an ambitious "art/poetry initiative" based in Derry and active since 2004, with some 23 projects notched up to date, with Gregory McCartney as project co-ordinator.

O'Mahony's photographic exploration of abandoned sites in Co Clare, together with a short introductory text, forms a compelling portrait of small-town and rural Ireland at a particularly testing time.

It is not an exercise in nostalgia, though there is inevitably an elegiac quality to some of the stories that emerge, such as that of Paddy Cahir from Rinnamona, whose repertoire of practical and craft skills was truly exceptional.

We see his stone-built workshop, inside and out, at Kilnaboy in images that concisely convey a wealth of information about a time, a way of life, an individual, a family and a community. Several unoccupied houses are depicted, in varying stages of dereliction. There are the remains of a co-operative mushroom farm at Tubber, and a lace-making factory, pre- and post-demolition, at Ennistymon. Abandoned schools indicate a dwindling population.

O'Mahony, an artist whose projects are generally site-specific, set out not to lament "a lost utopian past but to stimulate, provoke and provide evidence of other ways of doing things". Set against such symbols of economic decline as photographs of a closed travel agents and a ghost estate, this suggestion may seem a little perverse, but it is borne out by the work.

The photographs show a world in transition, as detailed by Vergara, referring to the historical layers underlying what we see now. They also confront us as questions about what might form, in O'Mahony's words, "a sustainable future for rural communities".

She first exhibited the photographs in X-PO in Kilnaboy last year, a venue she established in 2007 to cater for cultural and social activities and projects of several community groups. *Abandoned Clare*, she notes, elicited an extraordinary response from its local audience, so the project doesn't end with the publication but will continue. The original photographs and a related archive can be seen at X-PO.

More lavish and conventional in form and presentation, *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* is a substantial, handsome hardback. It has its genesis, Creedon writes, in his chance discovery of an abandoned house when he was a passenger in a car driving through rural Co Sligo. "For no reason, I asked my friend to stop the car." He found the house was being used as an animal shelter. Upstairs, amid remnants of occupancy, he discovered a pink dress still hanging in a wardrobe.

The experience set him on a two-year quest to find and photograph the interiors of similarly abandoned dwellings. Often they contained remnants of their prior inhabitants, not just furniture and the ubiquitous picture of the sacred heart, but personal items such as clothing, cardboard suitcases, letters and souvenirs.

Each house enshrines a story or, rather, some fragments of a story. Often the story relates to emigration but not in the obvious sense. Instead, Creedon sees the departed occupants as having been, mostly, those left behind, or returned emigrants.

Hence a foreword by Dr Breda Grey, who has compiled "an oral archive of interviews with people who had stayed in Ireland in the 1950s".

Creedon is a fine professional photographer with a conventional pictorial aesthetic (he currently features in the Taylor Wessing Photographic Prize exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London). *Ghosts of the Faithful Departed* contains many strong images of dilapidated interiors, yet there is a distinctly theatrical quality to the framing and lighting that often gives the photographs the feeling of being commercial assignments. Is there any harm in tending towards a pictorially contrived rendering of the past? The book will probably strike a chord with quite a wide audience and has the potential to be popular.

Yet it's interesting that the work of Vergara, Marchand and Jeffre and, in *Abandoned Clare*, O'Mahony, doesn't try to ratchet up the emotion of the subject matter at all. In fact they consistently step back and aim for a high level of pictorial objectivity. In this they exemplify and reflect a major strand of modern and contemporary art and documentary photography.

And despite this, in allowing the subject matter to speak for itself, as it were, leaving it free from the emotionally expressive aspirations of the photographer, they don't drain their material of emotion.

The emotion is still there, but we are freer to make multiple interpretations of the images, to read them as looking to the future rather than as being consigned to a closed narrative of a distant past.

Abandoned Clare by Deirdre O'Mahony, published by Abridged is available at X-PO, Kilnaboy and from deomahony@gmail.com and abridged@gmail.com

Ghosts of the Faithful Departed by David Creedon is published by Collins

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