

When I create pain, I create beauty

A letter to a Young Poet

XXXIV

The sense of 'solitude' since my childhood. In spite of my family, above all when surrounded by my comrades - the sense of a destiny eternally solitary. Yet a taste for life and for pleasure which is very keen

*Charles Baudelaire*¹

Joe Duggan's most recent works, shown here for the first time, mark a departure and a development. The new photographic tableaux reveal darker, more complex fantasies coming to light in the work. They are set in the night. This is not the night in which we sleep, but another, internal dark night which may be experienced more profoundly than previously in Duggan's work. It is the solitary night of which Baudelaire speaks in relation to family and to ones comrades, but it is also the space of the work, most beautifully and succinctly designated in Maurice Blanchot's short essay 'Sleep, Night'.² *In the night everything has disappeared*³, and now the artist may begin to fill the void with hallucinatory objects, to develop a language of his own. It is the photographic *day-for-night*. Elsewhere day has become night, the maternal female a streetwalker and the pet dog a wolf, the guinea-pig a rat. When the street tart assimilates herself into the media representation of herself, when we think we know what she is, what she looks like and where to find her, what happens to the allure, when life becomes a perfunctory playing out of given roles? Duggan does not attempt to give any answers, but perhaps to provide a series of more colourful questions, albeit in the guise of open-ended stories. They take the appearance of grim fairy-tales as adult *comedies humaines*. They are, as Raymond Chandler once said of his noir, dark with something more than night.

The humour too is dark, in the Baudelairean *absolute comic*⁴ sense, which is *not the same as the comic, although it includes the comic...It can be*

¹ *My Heart Laid Bare, XXXIV*, in *Intimate Journals*, Charles Baudelaire, Pan Books, London 1990, p28

² *The Space of Literature*, Maurice Blanchot, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p264.

³ *ibid.*, p163.

⁴ *The Essence of Laughter*, Charles Baudelaire, in *The Painter of Modern Life*, Phaidon Press, p154.

*present even when nobody seems to be laughing.*⁵ It is a low, debased kind of humour; humankind at the hands of nature, or, more specifically, human nature. It's not pretty, although in Duggan's work, it is this appearance of some kind of superficial beauty which is the initial draw. Nevertheless, the images verge on the sickly-sweet, *like a breath of warm summer air*,⁶ the emphasis here being on the *sick*.

Duggan has until recently been working with a large-format plate camera, a tool which, despite linking his practise to the early, equally heady days of photography - in particular Victorian family portraiture - also aligns his work with the fine detail and luxurious appearance of the mass media; the billboard, the fashion shoot, the ad, the blockbuster. There is also a strong link to recent American photography, to Jeff Wall, Di Corcia, Gregory Crewdson, early Bernard Faucon- in terms not only of subject matter, but also in scale and technique. The pictures shine, the colours are heightened. Duggan's technique produces the appearance of a re-enchantment of chemical photography, no mean feat in the contemporary climate of digital and cultural mass media seemingly complete re-assimilation of 70's, 80's and 90's fine art critiques. It is with this experience of working with large-format film that Duggan has most recently, for this new body of work, begun to work with a digital camera and, consequently, with digital manipulation. Expensive hired backdrops are replaced digitally; *back-dropping*, so to speak. Digital image manipulation programmes were developed out of photographic principles and are thus best understood by those who come to it from chemical photography. Or, to put it another way, mastery of the darkroom is the best foundation one can have in order to come to digital manipulation. Despite argument that digital manipulation is the offspring of painting, it is the photographer who is best equipped to deal with it, technically, if not conceptually.

In as much as many modern artists have embraced Surrealism's imagery and technique, so too has the mass media, perhaps moreso. Duggan's practise is itself more informed by media appropriation of Surrealism than by the original artefacts of the late 19th and early 20th century. It is perhaps a wise move, to approach it in this way, if one wants to avoid the common pitfalls of nostalgia and sentimentality. Joe's work can thus be seen, in a broader, generalised context, as a continuation of work made in Britain throughout the Nineties, rather than any kind of direct reaction to it; informed by the media, by a culture of capitalist-led desire and gratification, highly finished, surrealist. There is currently an air of anticipation as to what young British artists will do now that the Nineties are over and Saatchi's collection has been housed and thoroughly

⁵ *Play, Drama, Enigma*, Jean-Francois Chevrier, in *Jeff Wall*, cat. Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, p13.

⁶ *Baudelaire*, Jean Paul Sartre, Gallimard, 1946

institutionalised in the old wood of County Hall. The shift, in the context of what Duggan is doing, is slight and perhaps necessarily so. Artists develop their practise slowly and methodically, from the inside, so to speak. A practise reveals itself over time as a natural response to what is happening around them both personally and socio-politically. Joe is shifting and responding and, most crucially, developing his project from the inside, from a point of inquiry, curiosity and self-examination. In conversation Duggan is quick to point out that he came to photography from poetry. One senses his excitement for the photo-poetic project as being similar to the Surrealists initial embracement of the medium, and also of cinema, as the medium of poetry, made to measure, born ready to wear the Surrealist coat of prosthetic arms.

'When I create pain, I create beauty, like father, like son', was the preliminary, and subsequently abandoned, title of one of Duggan's early series' of highly colour-saturated photographic tableaux. In the final version the title becomes a shorthand that others used to describe the work to the artist ; *'Like father, like son'*. What was thus left out, but in fact not at all abandoned by Duggan, was the playing out of the fantasy of masculine vulnerability in the domain of the visual. To look at the works in this early series from the perspective of what, for this viewer, must be the full title, one sees a level of integrity and investment which may otherwise be overlooked.

*Should I tell you, who have guessed it no more than the others, that I have put my whole heart, my whole affection, my whole religion (in disguise), my whole hatred, my whole misfortune into this atrocious book? It is true that I will write the contrary, that I will swear by the gods that it is a book of pure art, of imitation, of imposture, and I will be an arrant liar.'*⁷

Joe's pose makes it quite difficult to know exactly *when he means and what he's lying*. This slipperiness follows Joe into the photographs. Duggan himself is a constant presence in the pictures, providing a thread back to self-portraiture as romantic self-discovery. His performance in the pictures is generally fairly casual, a kind of degree zero acting. He wears what he usually wears; like Woody Allen he simply steps onto the set as he comes, in slacks, a comfortable shirt, a sports-jacket, glasses. He is apparently ordinary. The man on the street. Duggan is *being* himself, but, like Dorothy, he has gone inside his fantasy and, once there, wanders around, looking for a way out. As Roland Barthes observed, the only way to get out is to go in deeper. Such is the nature of any therapeutic activity.

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, Letter to Ancelle, 18th February 1866

The image of Duggan as ‘man on the street’ is useful in terms of how he manages to keep us at a certain and specific distance. Like the man in the street, Duggan brings multiple sources to play in his tableaux: visual and cultural histories are sifted through the unconscious mind via magazines, posters and postcards rather than the original works of art, the media and its representation of masculinity (as onslaught), television, retro, revival, entertainment tonight, theatre via ticket-selling in the box-office. It’s all fairly shallow as far as direct experience of the *original thing* goes, and Joe seems to like it that way, at that kind of distance, often seen from his bike as he cycles around on his way from A to B and back again, always in search of something, or a location, ideas, opportunity.

He doesn’t like making references to painting, despite the use of painted or, more recently, photoshopped backdrops, reminiscent of the back grounds of many an 18th or 19th painting. He is convinced that the reference is neither relevant (because, so he says, he doesn’t think about it like that), nor interesting (to him). For him they are film and television backdrops and nothing more than that. That is their significance. In person he denies much of the mystery elements in the images. He tells it like a story, he reads the images for me as if from cover to cover, from beginning to end, as if it were simple. They become highly autobiographical. For Duggan the point is the looking; for the viewer, the point is the looking at the pictures. Any text comes in second place. The point is the viewer looking at the picture. Anything else is either superfluous or maybe, at best, just a bonus. Duggan is interested in direct experience regarding his work, in a reawakening of the media saturated/sickened body by means of a shining strange picture, with its particular kind of strange familiarity. In his essay on Baudelaire, Sartre notes that;

For the rest of us, it is enough to see the tree or the house. Absorbed as we are in contemplating them, we forget ourselves. Baudelaire was the man who never forgot himself. He watched himself seeing, he watched in order to see himself watching. It was his awareness of the tree or the house which he watched, and things only appeared to him through his awareness, paler, smaller, less touching, as though he saw them through a pair of opera glasses. They did not point to each other like a signpost or a book marker...Their immediate mission was to bring the individual back to self-awareness...⁸

In some ways Duggan fits this description; this restless, self-conscious flaneur, seeking out ways of watching himself proceed and most of all, develop his project: the poetics of man’s relationship to his environment, or as Bataille describes, *‘poetry itself as the failed relationship of the*

⁸ Baudelaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, Editions Gallimard, France, 1946

subject to the world.⁹ Sartre's description of Baudelaire's experience of things appearing 'paler, smaller, less touching, as though he saw them through a pair of opera glasses' is itself not only theatrical -a miniature world as if seen from the back row - but also hallucinatory, an unreal place which is at a distance, thus observable but also unavailable. It is this cool, ultimately emotionless distance which Duggan uses to produce uneasy effects. The allure of the window-display mannequin is no longer safely behind glass, but out on the street, as is the child. Nothing is safe; behind every billboard lies the possibility of wealth, obsession, self-annihilation. In the realm of pictures, for Duggan there is no apparent difference between roasting a leg of lamb or roasting a baby¹⁰, it's just a question of how you package it. Susan Sontag has recently reassessed her earlier essays on photography¹¹, in which she has come to criticise this form of Baudrillardian nihilism as ultimately bourgeois and politically inadequate.¹² Perhaps the problem here is that these opposing arguments have nothing to say about each other, they allow for no between. This is not the time am I am, alas, currently not the man for the job of figuring out this difference. Regarding the pain of Duggan, it's all in the work, more or less visible depending on the success of the individual piece, but constantly a factor as far as intention is concerned. In brief, I would say that there is an underlying implicit politic, rather than Sontag's current, possibly naive, conviction in the necessity of an explicit political message. In the field of the visible nothing is so simple. As Brecht so fundamentally asserted, one can add any text one likes to an image and its impact is adulterated by the words to their own particular cause. When I create pain, I create beauty. Like father, like son.

Duggan continues to work with mannequins, in particular a small boy, ever-present in his work since 1999. Estimated as being aged about three, things exist for the child as monomers: dog, cat, fox, bird, beach, ball, tree, man, woman, wolf, rat, crow, Joe. Through the child's eyes the audience begins to read things in this way again. A re-enchantment occurs. The props are things, often fallen things. Photographically and psychoanalytically speaking they become real things, the things which turn our stomachs like milk. In her essay on Sartre's novel *Nausea*, Iris Murdoch writes that 'things are delivered from their names, They are 'there', grotesque, stubborn, huge, and it seems crazy to call them seats or to say anything about them whatever...Existence had lost the

⁹ *In a sense poetry is always the opposite of poetry*, in *Literature and Evil*, Georges Bataille, Marion Boyars, London, 2001.

¹⁰ *Bahtkin and Cultural Theory*, ed. Ken Hirschkop & David Shepherd, Manchester University Press, 1989, p182

¹¹ *On Photography*, Susan Sontag, Penguin Books, London, 1977

¹² *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag, 2003; see also the poet Fenton's column on the subject of Sontag book in the Guardian Review, Saturday 5th July 2003.

*inoffensive air of an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things.*¹³
The child's symbolic order is relatively undeveloped and words exist as objects do; they are things to be played with, moved around, discarded, but no longer abandonable.

However quick one is to recognise that, apart from Joe himself, all the other figures used are inanimate, there is a moment during which this cognition has not yet taken place. This is the viewer's moment, this realisation, this loss of pride for the audience which can be quite off-putting. The feeling of being had. It's a nod to the magical experience of the early days of photography. There's nothing new in tricking the viewer in this way, but what Duggan does is to simultaneously reveal to the unsuspecting audience how it's done. It's all there, in fine detail. Duggan is not rendering the animate dead through the future anterior (tense) of the photographic, but quite the opposite; he is bringing to bear on the already dead a living countenance/appearance, as living as Joe at least. These new images are unsettling because of Duggan's hybrid use of photographic technique and subject matter. Despite the slowness of the process of rehearsing, shooting, and printing, the photographs tend to remain weighted subject-wise towards the snapshot (small personal moments etc.). Interest is in the everyday rather than the epic, whereas the form they take -these large, pristine, fine quality prints - is that of a more grand ideal.

If poetry is the beautiful failure of the subject-object relationship, the objects with which Duggan works exist for him in order that he might see himself. The object of poetry (beauty) is to reveal the subject (pain), only through the appearance of its ultimate failing. This is the poet's fate. In 'Literature and Evil', Georges Bataille, like Duggan, uses the image of the child to describe the impossibility of the poet:

*Here we are confronted with a difficulty similar to that of the child who is free to deny the adult, but who cannot do so without becoming an adult in his turn, and thereby forfeiting his freedom.*¹⁴

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¹³ Sartre; *Romantic Rationalist*, Iris Murdoch, Fontana, London, 1977, p13.

¹⁴ *In a sense poetry is always the opposite of poetry*, in *Literature and Evil*, Georges Bataille, Marion Boyars, London, 2001 p45