

FERGUS JORDAN UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS

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Catalogue

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Under Cover Of Darkness

We can find many explanations for our fear of the dark, but all are fundamentally grounded in our anxiety at confronting the unknown and unknowable. At the simplest level, moving through blackness heightens apprehension towards the potential for bodily harm through confronting a physical world that cannot be safely negotiated. Darkness has further come to signify the scariest unknown of all, the nature of death. The absence of light brings to our consciousness the ungraspable reality of the absence of life. In Christianity the light of life is equated with the light of salvation, with Christ fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy: "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." [Matthew 4:16]

Fergus Jordan's photographic exploration of Belfast's black spots of sectarian strife at night attempts, albeit within the safe confines of a well-lit white art gallery, to recreate the vulnerability experienced when finding oneself in such a situation. The normality of urban wandering is made sinister by the defamiliarising of the recognisable. This is enhanced through his manipulation of his images, disorienting our perception by removing the logic of visual comprehension.

In a number of images, the sources of illumination have been removed, streetlights Photoshopped out to conceal the means of our already limited understanding of our location. The potential for an imaginary easing of our anxiety - by moving within the light source - has been denied and we find ourselves in the unreal world of Magritte's *Empire of Lights*, outside of the comfort of cause and effect. The signs of light and dark, of good and evil, of life and death, have been thrown into confusion and we no longer have the opportunity to imagine ourselves in a convincing way within the depicted space of the photograph.

This alienation - this Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* - forces us into a critical reading of the content of Jordan's work and a re-examination of our relationship with the ominous position in which we are placed. The varying levels of comfort or anxiety we feel when walking through overtly sectarian areas of Belfast is simultaneously heightened and lowered through the obscuring of their signs of demarcation. The superficial trepidation engendered by our one-step-removed viewing of the photographs' distorted nighttime - like the set of a sixties Hammer Jack the Ripper movie - is punctuated by the recognition of the blurry fluttering of Union Jack bunting or the just-discernable "UTH" and "FTP" painted onto an interface barrier. Our own positions are brought into focus by the out-of-focus signs of division.

The flip-side of Jordan's engagement with street lighting is the issue of surveillance - both of state security and the distanced scrutinising of one community by another. The north retains its mutual suspicion and our continuous watching and being watched is a significant determining factor in the lives of its people. This division of the north's populace is, of course, an important element in state

control and the maintenance of the political *status quo*. Town planning makes a significant contribution to this and street lighting plays its part in the movement and observation of its citizens. Jordan has observed the commonality of the smashing of lights in the areas in which he works, saying that this is "an act of rebellion against authority, a means to resist against institutional and policing forces". In his removal of street lighting in his photographs, he is challenging the manipulation of public movement through his own manipulations of the cityscape. His digital smashing of these lights brings to mind the story told by Wilhelm Liebnicht, remembering a drunken pub crawl down London's Tottenham Court Road with his friends Karl Marx and Edgar Bauer. While running from a group of xenophobic English men, determined to attack the three Germans, Bauer

stumbled over some paving stones. 'Hurrah, an idea!' And in memory of mad student pranks he picked up a stone, and Clash! Clatter! a gas lantern went flying into splinters. Nonsense is contagious - Marx and I did not stay behind, and we broke four or five street lamps - it was, perhaps, 2 o'clock in the morning and the streets were deserted in consequence. But the noise nevertheless attracted the attention of a policeman who with quick resolution gave the signal to his colleagues on the same beat. And immediately countersignals were given. The position became critical. Happily we took in the situation at a glance; and happily we knew the locality. We raced ahead, three or four policemen some distance behind us. Marx showed an activity that I should not have attributed to him.

Adolescent behaviour from middle-aged men, perhaps, but the smashing of the gas lamps saved them from a bigoted attack and assisted their escape from the police. The misdemeanour was self-concealing and the quarries' negotiation of familiar city streets in blackness secured their safety and freedom, through the removal of an important means of observation.

Jordan's use of darkness and light, then, provides a multiplicity of dichotomous references. Dark and light, known and unknown, comfortable and uncomfortable, safe and dangerous, all are simultaneously clarified and blurred, provoking our critical engagement. He guides us through areas we have walked through in our everyday lives, challenging our preconceptions. On one hand, he makes them more dangerous and ominous with his psychological manipulation, playing on our fears and disallowing the familiarity which eases discomfort. On the other hand, he removes from his images the conditions which facilitate our manipulation by the state. Our experience of the photographs is analogous with the misbehaviour of our friends in the Tottenham Court Road. They are images which give a utopian insight into a potential for an autonomous perception of our urban environment.

Colin Darke







Entry (2011)



Darkness and the other, II (2010)







Blacklight (2011)



Watching, Belfast (2009)





Previous pages: Enhanced visibility (2009)

On the periphery of the New Lodge, X (2010)



Mutual Distrust (2009)



On the periphery of the New Lodge, IV (2009)

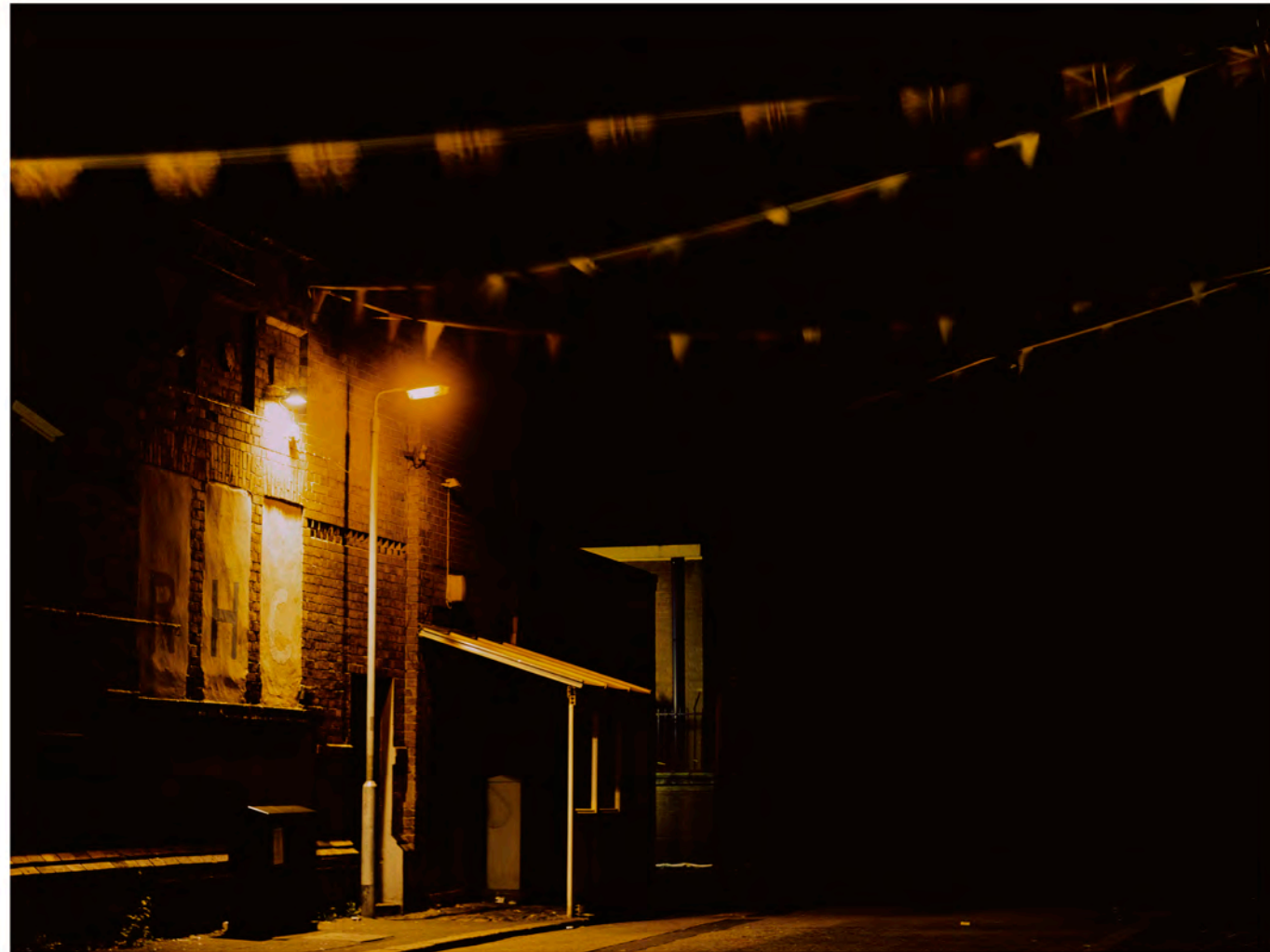


On the periphery of the New Lodge, VII (2010)



Displacement (2010)





Unknown territories, Belfast, V (2010)



Dark corner (2011)



Watching, Belfast, III (2009)



Watching, Belfast, VII (2009)





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Fergus Jordan

About the Artist

Fergus Jordan is an artist based in Belfast, Northern Ireland where he is currently completing his PhD at the University of Ulster. His research study 'Under Cover of Darkness: Photography, Territory and the City' is an examination of the photographic representation of the City at night, with an emphasis on the key visual characteristics and unique spatial relationships of nighttime in Northern Ireland.

About the writer

Colin Darke is an artist and writer, based in Belfast.

About the publisher

Allotrope Press is an independent art publishing press founded in Ulster University by artist Keith Winter and writer Emma Dwan O'Reilly. Their quarterly self-titled publication aims to address themes through word and image and become a work in itself through its numbered print-run. The editorial process of Allotrope involves a making and remaking of meaning, with artists writing or responding visually to a different reading of the word or a figurative understanding of the theme. Allotrope Press will begin to release an academic small book series and an emerging artist book series over the coming months.