



John Gerrard, modernist ruins and the deceit of endless growth

John Gerrard's projections exploit 3D rendering technology, which is more commonly seen in gaming, to build an eerie virtual world that explores the decline of a utopian ideal



Aidan Dunne

Visit John Gerrard's *Cuban School* at the Absolut Festival Gallery in the Galway Arts Festival and you find yourself positioned between two vast animated digital projections. In each, you seem to move slowly around the edges of a decaying, dilapidated, modernist structure. The two building complexes are alike, both fundamentally based on prefabricated concrete panels, their appearance recalling the spartan functionalism of 1960s architecture, both incongruously sited in vegetative, rural settings. Although they appear all but abandoned, stick around till nightfall and a caretaker appears in each to turn off the lights.

The projections have a curiously enhanced quality that makes you look twice: a solid, sculptural presence so that you feel you are negotiating a real space rather than scanning images flashing past on a screen. As indeed you are, for Gerrard employs technologies normally associated with military, scientific and gaming applications, building complex, real-time 3D simulations and creating virtual worlds rather than, say, sequences of images in a conventional sense. His digital animations

or "virtual sculptures" follow the clock, and neither begin nor end, strictly speaking. They exist in real time. They are disconcertingly, thrillingly strange because, rather than the usual associations with violence and fantasy, he harnesses the technology to artistic ends.

Speed is also a factor. Whereas gaming is, for the most part, frenetically fast, he slows things down to a startling degree, so much so that what you see can appear static at first glance. The moody, heightened realism of the imagery and the eerie, gliding sense of movement that develops make the experience hypnotic. The feeling that we are looking at the decline of a utopian ideal comes across strongly and unmistakably, but Gerrard doesn't fill in the blanks for us: is it revolutionary Cuba, the modern movement or the false promise of perpetual industrial growth that is fraying and fading before our eyes? One thing is for sure: things fall apart.

Formidable building

Gerrard came upon the formidable building in the earlier of the two works, the *Community 5th of October School*, when he visited Cuba in 2009 (the second is the *Sancti Spiritus School*). "There's great material poverty in Cuba and it was in the midst of a petrol crisis, with hardly any traffic on the road, so we kept giving lifts to people. One of the people we picked up invited us for coffee so we turned off the main road and pretty soon, within 20 minutes, we encountered this alien structure in the landscape."

What struck him particularly was that this "functional ruin" in an agrarian set-

ting was an emphatically modernist structure that had, essentially, become disconnected from the energies that kept it intact. While some commentators have interpreted the *Cuban School* works as "a critique of the regime", and he acknowledges that one could have plenty of critiques of the regime, that wasn't his intention. He liked the buildings' battered resilience, their managed decline. When the fall of the USSR cut off resources, he says, people improvised. "They burned wood rather than oil in the boilers, for example, and used ladders rather than lifts."

The flow of energy, how it fuels industry and technology and encourages our relentless exploitation of natural resources to the point of catastrophe, are some of the long-term preoccupations of his work. The *Cuban School* works, completed over several years since that initial visit, have never before been screened side-by-side. Their showing, he observes, forms his first exhibition in Ireland since *Dark Portraits* at the RHA Gallery in 2006.

He's delighted to be in Galway: "I wouldn't belabour the point, but I love the way the energy of festivals can animate a space. The Absolut Gallery occupies a (notionally retail) space that came into being driven by consumerist demand, and was then left becalmed by the economic collapse. So there are parallels between the subject of the work and the space it occupies here, which I like."

Prior to his 2006 RHA show, he mentions his Gallery of Photography exhibition in 2003 as being especially significant for him. That, the RHA, and many other appearances in solo and group shows, generated enthusiastic responses well beyond the art world per se.

Look farther afield than Ireland, and his exhibition schedule is extraordinary. Appearing only slightly daunted, he acknowledges that it's demanding: "I'm on the road a lot." Without hesitation, he points out that his 2009 exhibition at the Venice

Biennale, *Animated Scene*, "was amazing" in terms of generating attention. Together with a new work, it gathered several pieces he had made centering on the American dustbowl in the 1930s. Underlying a series of virtuoso simulated animations was the implication that industrialised farming methods had left the country open to environmental devastation. The impact of *Animated Scene* was phenomenal. It touched a nerve, as his work often does.

'A 3D epiphany'

Born in Dublin and still under 40, Gerrard studied at the Ruskin School of Fine Art and Drawing in Oxford. "In my last year at the Ruskin, I discovered the 3D scan and that, in a way, was an epiphany." He had happened on a technology that allowed him to do something he really wanted to do. "To me, it indicated a way that an image could be an object. The crucial point was that it wasn't two-dimensional. It persuaded me to commit to a 3D digital space."



Then came stasis. "I went to pursue the idea in the US [at the Art Institute of Chicago] and I failed, I couldn't figure out how to develop it." Another epiphany came when he went to Trinity College in Dublin, however, to complete an MSc in digital media. It wasn't, as you might expect, a technological breakthrough. "It may seem odd, but doing the MSc expanded my sense of technological craft and collaboration: you had to work collectively." It has shaped the model of how he's worked since.

"As it happened, it was only in Austria that I managed to approach what I had in mind. I discovered that there was a new media research studio." It was exactly what he was looking for. The Gallery of Photography show in 2003 was the first outcome and everything since has flowed from that. He continues to be based between Vienna and Dublin and has worked with several collaborators, including Werner Poetzlberger, his long-standing producer. The minimum team for a work now involves Gerrard, Poetzlberger or another producer, a modeller and a programmer. One could add designers and architects on a routine basis, and recent projects have involved up to 20 people. It is, as he notes, quite like a film-production process but the work is fundamentally "post-cinematic".

None of his work is supposed to represent the final word on anything he addresses and he relishes the feedback it generates. That includes everything from voluminous philosophical literature to a Cuban blogger who elaborated on the institutional abuse within the schools featured. Gerrard encourages response: "The more illumination the better. For me the schools are, palpably, anxious objects."

Cuban School by John Gerrard is at the Absolut Festival Gallery, Headford Road, until July 28th. irishtimes.com/culture/galwayartsfestival.com

Digital space: the *Cuban School* works were inspired when John Gerrard, below, left a main road on the island and 'encountered this alien structure in the landscape'. GERRARD PHOTOGRAPH JACOB POLACEK

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