

# Keeping it surreal

Nothing is what it seems where Dermot Seymour is concerned, be it his art or his complex family history, says MICHAEL ROSS



Like Murphy lived on the other side of the Shankill Road from Dermot Seymour, Murphy was older by five years; by the time Seymour was in his early teens, his neighbors had already earned a reputation as a hard man. One day, Seymour was in a club in the Protestant enclave when Murphy came over to him and insisted that Seymour had hit Murphy's sister. Seymour hadn't touched the sister; Murphy just wanted to start a fight or, more precisely, inflict a beating.

"Another little girl said to me: 'Lenny's in one of his moods; you'd better get out of here,'" says Seymour. "The girls who gave me the warning later blew up McGlark's bar [blown by the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1971, killing 15 people] and committed the Abbey Road Factory murders [in 1974, when the Ulster Freedom Fighters shot two teenage workers in Cox Avenue], so he was no angel."

Murphy had joined the UVF at the age of 18, by 20, he was the leader of an 11-strong gang, the Shankill Butchers, who committed 18 notoriously savage murders between 1972 and 1977. "He was fantastic even as a young lad," says Seymour. "Everybody was aware the Lenny and his friends were heavy characters."

Later, when the Shankill Butcher murders were taking place, I was at university, I used to drink in the Glades bar in the city

center and had to walk back through Smithfield to get to my accommodation. You'd be very conscious of the Shankill Butchers cruising around looking for victims. They lifted Protestants by the necks because they assumed that if you were walking through Smithfield you were Catholic.

"I don't think it had any harmful effect on me. Growing up, you looked at things in a mad way because you came from a mad place, and to that extent it affected my art. I still see the world the way I see it back then, in a mad, surreal place. But you don't realize a place is mad until you get away from it."

If anything runs through Seymour's life and work, it is the peculiarly myopic realism that he attributes to growing up in a dysfunctional society filled with paranoia and contradictions, where nothing was as it appeared to be. "There's a stereotypical view of it on the outside, that it's a place of straightforward sectarian conflict," he says. "But when you're inside it, it's complex and absurd; nothing would surprise you about it. The most trivial thing has dirt, surreal quality, and that defines paranoia you and becomes the way you see things."

"It's a state of constant bewilderment. That's the wound you carry from growing up there. I think everybody in the north has a wound, whether you show it or not, whether it's a wild way of looking at things or something more literal. I don't resent it."

Born in 1956, Seymour grew up in a secure family environment, relatively insulated from surrounding poverty, the house hold income coming from the Harford and Wolff department and therefore virtually guaranteed for life. "I'm the youngest of four children. My father, who is dead, was a plumber in the shipyard," he says, though it now cuts his family background is altogether more complicated than this thumbnail sketch suggests.

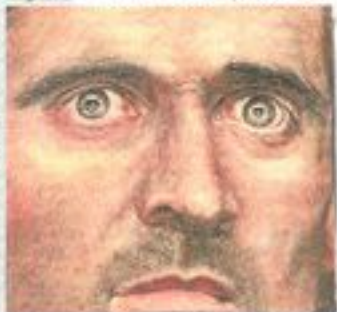
After studying art at the University of Ulster, he graduated during the hunger strikes, opting to stay in Belfast and paint rather than avail himself of the only other career option at the time — emigration.

When he was 26, he eventually left the Dublin, teaching at the college of art in Dun Laoghaire. Sports in New York and Monaghan followed, before he settled in Mayo with his wife, the artist Alice Maher. Throughout, he has remained in the same class-

room of themes to do with alienation and disjuncted narratives. He paints familiar objects but renders them hyper-real and deeply strange at the same time.

"You see everything through the eyes of your fantasist years," he says. "Even down here, everything I see now I see through southern eyes. It's like your accent; you never lose it."

"I'm working with the obvious, which is a thing I developed while still in the north. It comes from the Andy Warhol thing of painting familiar objects, but it's the north as additional territorial signifier. So, for instance, in the north if you see a cow, it



isn't simply a cow. You ask: whose cow is that? It becomes a ritual symbol."

His new show, called *Eyes*, moves beyond the fractured narratives of earlier paintings, in which several stories unfolded at the same time. The latest work looks more like conventional portraiture, but is characteristically alienated, the subjects' eyes, far from being windows to the soul, staring out invaders. As ever, the relationship with Seymour's work involves looking at something that simply looks back, with nothing implied or promised beyond that.

"Eyes say so much," he says. "What the artists and the business in the show have in common is their stare." The known figures include Ray Kinnear, Reg Empey and, more daringly, Dermot Laidie, whose 2004 conviction for the manslaughter of Brian Murphy in 2000 was quashed on appeal. "I was fascinated by that face and those eyes," says Seymour. "But it's not a portrait of Dermot Laidie — it's this is Border Eyes, because Laidie is from Monaghan, but who the subjects literally are is irrelevant."

Again, the striking thing about the new portraits, as with Seymour's earlier work, is the restless sense of distance that they communicate. The world they denote is one in which discrete individuals stare out at their surroundings, always marooned within themselves, with no possibility of genuine intimacy with others, it begs the question of whether this sense of distance between him-

Significant others: Seymour, left; the works *Border Eyes*, right, and *Cork Eyes*, below



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self and the world is Seymour's daily, lived experience.

"Yes, definitely," he says. "There has always been a distance between me and things. It's down to a combination of things. Growing up in the north. My mother committed suicide when I was nine months old. I was raised by my aunt and uncle, so I never knew her. And maybe that plays its part in what I do. My siblings: they were actually my cousins, so they became my brothers and sisters."

"I was an only child — she was in her forties when she had me. And probably she had postnatal depression, which nobody had an idea about back in 1956. And he himself wasn't really that well either — he had suffered a lot during the war. He was in the army and was caught the first day at Dún Laoghaire and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp in Poland. So I'd say he wasn't the greatest person to be married to. Prisoners in the stables were used as slave labour, so he'd have been out in the Polish winter lifting turkeys all day long."

"I was aware of it [his family history] from an early age. My family were straight with me and filled me in on what the truth

was. I rarely saw my biological dad; my relationship with him wasn't great. He was a telephone engineer."

"He used to occasionally visit because he had to pay maintenance, but he was a great man for the boys, so half the time he'd have no money. You'd have to wait on horses to win before he could pay the maintenance."

"He was a flower figure, I never really knew him. At Christmas, he'd bring me a big turkey present, he'd stay for the dinner and then go off again. It was a very distant

relationship. He was a lot older than my foster father. It was like having a grandfather."

"He's long dead; he died in 1971, when I was 14 or so. In retrospect, you could say that I had a lot of early loss, but to be honest I didn't notice this loss. Maybe there's something there and that's why it comes out in the art. There is a kind of loss in all my work; maybe that's where it's from." □

*Eyes* is at the Kevin Keogh gallery, Dublin

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