

# Family guy

Photographer Joe Duggan has moved from documenting the world around him to an inner world of darker fantasies, finds Jacqui McIntosh in Limerick

Joe Duggan: *The Family Man*  
Limerick City Gallery of Art  
Until 28 August 2007

A FATHER WALKS with his son on a seaside path, casually throwing a football in the air. This scene, from Joe Duggan's Like Father, Like Son series of photographs at first appears to be like an image from countless family albums. In another photograph, a man out for a walk with his family stops to pat a dog in a park. On closer inspection the image gradually begins to deconstruct – the family is in fact a collection of mannequins, the park a painted backdrop, and even the dog is stuffed. Central to each image is Duggan himself, who not only constructs these artificial realities, but inhabits them in the role of father.

The Family Man, currently on show at Limerick City Gallery of Art, includes works from Duggan's 1999-2000 series Like Father, Like Son, and his later Family Man series. In Like Father, Like Son, the father-son relationship is explored through a series of images which show Duggan interacting with a child-mannequin. Duggan is seen ushering the child to bed, conversing with him in the park and as he puts washing in the machine.

"I wanted to represent a person's



emotional being and not have their character get in the way of that", says Duggan of his use of mannequins. "Real people would have limited the work and my intention." There is tenderness within these images and a naturalness which

Duggan explains as, "part of the deliberate intention to mislead the viewer into a false judgment, to deceive them momentarily. From this the image starts slowly revealing the different layers and then draws the viewer deeper into the work."

The Family Man series is more ambitious, not only in scale but in scope, involving more complex staging and a bigger cast of characters. Whilst many of the images in the Like Father, Like Son series appear to be shot on location – a sea-side path, a park and domestic interiors – reality has been further subverted in these later works by the use of theatrical backdrops. As before, Duggan takes on the role of father but the images show a transition,



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from a father-son relationship to a man with more responsibilities. Many of these images show Duggan confronting the gaze of a variety of female mannequins – a pregnant wife, a young girl with a dog, a prostitute on a street corner. There is an undercurrent of tension beneath the veneer of the happy family unit, the images suggesting contradictory emotions. The aspiration towards an idyllic family unit sits alongside all the things that threaten to dismantle it – temptation, frustration, and perhaps even boredom.

Duggan's intricately constructed and



skilfully photographed images draw comparison with the work of artists such as Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson. Whilst Crewdson's stylishly dramatic images are like stills from an unmade movie, Duggan sees the dramatic quality within the everyday. It is onto these seemingly ubiquitous and generic scenes that we project our own psychological

dramas. The subtle narrative and tensions within the work are created partly by our need to make sense of what is in front of us, our imagination filling in the gaps. And so Duggan's blank stare in the image Family 1 could be interpreted as passivity or even cloaked disdain towards the female figure who provocatively throws her head back against a tree. Everything is open to our own interpretation and this in itself is part of the works' strength. The photographs, installed in two galleries on the lower floor of Limerick City Gallery of Art, combine to create an excellent and engaging show.

Most recently Duggan has turned to photographing objects and the construction of still lifes. "The family man series was in part about looking at the world around me", says Duggan,

"while my work at the moment is less about people but about an inner world dealing with darker fantasies, in a way they are about looking at what's behind the image."

Film, painting, theatre and the everyday images of mass media and advertising (or as Duggan describes them, "fantastical, idealised, apparently normal

views of life") have been hugely influential on him. Staged photography has been a way of expressing what he describes as "the thin line I felt between fact v fiction".

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