

Joe Duggan

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Graham, C. **Indebted for the existence to the inessential: On Three Irish Artists'** in *Viewpoints: Theoretical Perspectives on Irish Visual Texts*, edited by Emma Radley and Claire Bracken (Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), pp. 155-168



Over the last twenty years, Ireland has undergone significant transformation and, as a consequence, notions of Irish identity and nationality have been in constant flux. For this reason, it is a timely moment to consider visual representations, both past and present, of Irish cultural life, and contribute to conversations about questions such as: What kind of iconic currencies does Ireland have? How should we see them? Are there specific ideological frameworks operating when we imagine Ireland? Can we imagine Irishness differently?

In Joe Duggan's exhibition *Family Man*, which was shown in Limerick in 2007, there is a photograph that is, at first sight, one of a happy, even banal, normality (Fig. 10.1) It is an image of paternal contentedness, and of a father's symbolic connection with his son as a younger version of himself. The father and son are dressed similarly, the son is looking up to the father, they are connected by the string on the kite that they are about to fly, and they look to be about to attain the freedom symbolised by the kite. So positive and wholesome, indeed, is this image that it seems to barely qualify as art at all, other than through its size and its placement in an exhibition space. Of course, all is not as it appears, and Duggan's 'family man' is struggling with more than a kite on a windy day. His son, and the rest of his family, are fictions. They are stage-managed falsehoods, devoid of any identity because his 'family' (including the son here) are posed shop-window dummies. And he himself, the family man, is lost in the midst of them. Of the millions of photographs taken every day the family is surely, in some form or other, the most popular and universal subject. The images in Joe Duggan's *Family Man* take this common occurrence and turn it into pure artifice. A father figure, by turns bemused, pathetic, happy, thoughtful and tender, tries to make a real family out of a family of mannequins, as if they were a projection of the clichés by which he imagines and knows what a family is. Both the photograph and the very idea of family are turned into something awkward, unreal, and even, frankly, bizarre. Duggan's photographs are decentred by pure, self-induced dislocation in the midst of the signs of a meaningful and fulfilled life.