

Fanning the Flames of Destruction

By Belinda McKeon

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A new film and installation, *Burn*, expose the searing truth underlying 'normal' life. The creators, Paddy Jolley and Reynold Reynolds talk to Belinda McKeon about pyromania, arson and the burning intent of their work

A living room burns. Its inhabitants continue to sit on, unperturbed, staring blankly through the stuff of their everyday lives. A woman, surrounded by tiny fires, glares at a man, and he swats absent-mindedly at the small blaze on his sleeve, as though it were a hovering insect. The contents of the fridge melt and drip. A young man douses with petrol the white sheets of a sleeping woman's bed, and his own clothes, and strikes a match to raise a high wall of flame. An older couple do not register his flailing body as it stumbles, fiery, into the room where they sit side by side; they stretch out their arms and move their hands closer, but fail to connect. He burns; they burn. The camera pans up to the snow falling now, snow suffused with petals, sweeping through the room which is now a seething cauldron.

The gentle snow extinguishes all, its strewn white blanket is the last thing we see. And then the reel starts over again, and the first tiny flames fan themselves to life.

Irishman Paddy Jolley and Alaskan-born Reynold Reynolds have collaborated before to capture a world like this: eerie and spectacular, in which no human onlooker could survive. Their 1999 short film and installation piece *The Drowning Room* presented the spectacle of a family living in a small underwater space, thrashing about their daily mundanities in the most bizarre of circumstances. That was a test of endurance for the actors, who had to shoot brief scenes between gasps from hidden pipes of oxygen. Its unsettling blend of the awful and the absurd stayed with its audience long after it had run its 10 minute course.

This month, their latest collaboration *Burn* comes to Dublin, and it, too, promises to echo in the deeper parts of its audience's imagination, those places where the mythical and the mystical sound their resonances.

The work, commissioned by Aileen Corkery of Temple Bar Properties, is conceived in two parts. Viewers who watch, aghast or amused as the figures in the short film at

Meeting House Square, Temple Bar, are consumed by the blaze at night can, by day, themselves become the occupants of the burning room, as a four-channel installation transforms the four walls of the Arthouse basement.

Burn is a stunning evocation of those unspoken, unfronted somethings, those secrets, worries and lies, forming a force which is always a part of the fabric of everyday interactions; at first niggling at the edges, then - provoked by a word or a gesture - suddenly searing through everything and everyone in its path.

Jolley worked for several months researching the piece, avid as a pyromaniac, setting objects alight and photographing their destruction, working his way towards a philosophy of fire, considering it as a trace of divinity, as the sun, provider of light and life, and as a purifier and destroyer, the force behind spontaneous combustion. For him fire is a symbolic archetype, an amalgam of contradictions, and to create a film around its power was more to give space to a universal force than to piece together a story.

"The challenge was to bring the compulsive quality of dream, that energy, into a general space," he says. Yet this is not a piece which lends itself easily to interpretation. As though wreathed in smoke, the meaning of *Burn* is not easy to decipher. The figures that people the burning room are human, but they are barely people; without names, without histories, they render impossible the smooth identifications by which we make sense of the characters of a film. In the minutes we have to look at them, there is not time to work out their individual roles, their relations to one another. Their creators are upfront about the importance of the people in the piece.

"They're not really characters, they're moving props," says Jolley, who has cast people like this in his work before. His first filmic collaboration with Reynolds, *Seven Days 'til Sunday* (1998), tracked the fall of what looked like human bodies from the heights of tall buildings. They were actually headless dummies. But as far as the work is concerned, says Jolley, they're the same thing. People are not invested with emotion. It's also the source of the dark humour which is the mark of the Jolley-Reynolds collaboration, that particular brand of comedy at the heart of their pieces which works because it delivers the contemplation of terrible possibilities with deadpan bluntness. While Jolley cites 1920s slapstick comedy as an influence, the film works much more subtly. There are no flying pies or bananas to slip on; it will produce not peals of helpless laughter, but astonished, vaguely guilty chuckles and nervous grins. Through the cheapest and most unpretentious of special effects, *Burn* renders horribly hilarious the spectacle of humans deep in denial, trying to carry on as normal in the most abnormal circumstances.

Both artists believe in the importance of giving to the audience the freedom to bring their own associations and connotations to the work. Whatever about an audience's capacity to invent stories and secrets for the figures who flicker across the screen in Meeting House Square, the artists' installation at Arthouse will certainly force them to draw on their own resources. The burning room is there to step into, but the people are gone. Or rather, they are not there, as Jolley and Reynolds prefer to say. The absence of people opens an undefined space, which is precisely what they are trying to do with the installation.

"It's about a presentation of the atmosphere or the environment of the room on fire," explains Jolley. Such an atmosphere, Reynolds feels, would be clouded by the narrative complications of having characters already in its midst. "If there was a person on the screen, it would really break down the space," he argues. "Once you put a person in there, that becomes a primary subject."

Having both a film and an installation run as part of a single piece has been the mark of the Jolley-Reynolds collaboration in the four years since they met at the New York School of Visual Arts. Both *Seven Days 'til Sunday* and *The Drowning Room* were screened both in a gallery and in a cinema space. While compromise may be an essential part of any successful collaboration, Jolley and Reynolds found it easy to negotiate in their earliest pieces.

Jolley, the photographer, created an installation with the striking visual image as central; Reynolds, the film-maker, had his work of determinate length with credits to mark the beginning and end. Both artists could feed their individual habits.

"Every piece that we've done," admits Reynolds, "in my mind has existed as a film. But from Patrick's point of view they all probably exist as art works."

Yet, he continues, what fuels the work is the tension between their styles, a tension which means that their films defy easy definition, even as experimental.

After we have watched the film together, Jolley and Reynolds are both eager for me to tell what I have seen on the screen, what I have been made to feel by this melting space, these fingers of flame, like angels or demons, perched at intervals around an ordinary room. They worry that it's difficult to articulate what this means, to put words on this strangest of worlds, which evolves in slow-motion, unreal and deeply uncanny, like the residue of something dreamt just before waking.

"There's the building of ignored tensions," says Reynolds, "an atmosphere that they

must have been living with for so long that they no longer pay attention to it. It's very domestic. Something's wrong, but nobody's responding."

And that is the unnerving effect of their work; the way it reveals that the intense and the spectacular are disturbingly prosaic, that the most familiar situations are always licked by the flames of something deeper, darker, and potentially destructive. And that there's something comical about it all.

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