

David Ireland

Since the beginning of his artistic career in the 1960s, David Ireland's work has never fit comfortably within any traditional category of art. Descriptions of Ireland have categorized him as sculptor, architect, archaeologist, designer, furniture maker, installation artist, conceptual artist, and performance artist, but never photographer—that is until 1994 when he created *Skellig*, a photographic installation at the Ansel Adams Center for Photography in San Francisco.



Capp Street House

Skellig Michael, a windswept island eight miles off the southern coast of Ireland, consists of two sandstone peaks rising hundreds of feet above a narrow valley. Between 500 and 700 A.D., a small group of Christian monks withdrew to the island to escape worldly temptation and get closer to God. The monks subsisted on gulls, gull eggs, rain water, and what little could be farmed on the small terraces that they fertilized with composted kelp until changes in climate and severe Atlantic storms forced them back to the mainland in the eleventh century.

David Ireland first traveled to Skellig in 1993 and immediately felt inspired. In part, Ireland used this bleak sandstone island as a starting point for his painted photography work "to address the hardships which both artists and monks endure," the inner isolation of the artist, and the individual in our society today. In his installation, Ireland presented the painted Skellig photographs next to a room containing a film loop of the island as Ireland approached it by boat, with actual objects from his own studio. The presence of the studio objects in the installation linked the island to Ireland's own art production. Ireland says he included the objects since "the materials I choose to work with and which fill my house do share the bleakness of what is characteristic of Ireland." The painted photographs in the other room served to heighten the viewer's impression of silence, isolation, and contemplation.



Capp Street House Interior

The desire to give the viewer an experiential impression of Skellig in lieu of a straight pictorial overview led Ireland to his style of painting over parts of the images. By painting the photographs, details are both obscured and framed, focusing attention on both what is revealed and what is missing. Ireland hopes that the viewer will contribute his or her own experiences onto these manipulated areas.² The red/brown color Ireland employed could have many associations: earth, farming, and some titles such as "Irish Blood" and "Blood, Dots, and Rain over Ireland" suggest the bloody history of Ireland itself. For 300 years the northern counties of Ireland have endured the longest colonial rule in history under the British crown, a situation often marred with violence.

Uncovering the psychological spirit of a place and its character is a recurring theme in Ireland's work. His best-known projects have been described as archaeological investigations of place; often architectural in nature, they are frequently composed with everyday, seemingly unremarkable, items. The raw, gritty, and earthy materials of his art—for example, concrete and salvaged objects—are familiar and tactile. Stacked in one corner of his home, itself an early project, are a pile of old brooms found in the basement; a three-legged chair occupies another corner; the cracks and peeling paint of the walls have been varnished, a row of jars contains the sawdust sweepings from work done. His site-specific piece, *Newgate* (1986 - 87), was created on the site of a former dump at Candlestick Park on San Francisco Bay which is now a recreation area. To retain the character of the site, Ireland reconfigured the scattered

broken concrete and rebar on the grounds into two megalithic walls, which he has described as "rising from the desolate chaos that surrounds it. Newgate possesses the primeval grandeur of its namesake, Newgrange, a stone age burial ground in Ireland made of over four thousand tons of rock."³

David Ireland was born in 1930 and lives and works in San Francisco. Today, at seventy-one, Ireland is often referred to as one of the West Coast's most admired artists. He shies away from this sort of praise, however, once explaining that "if a person can stand it, an artist who works without praise or feedback or outside points of reference should be a stronger sort of artist."⁴

¹ Stephen Jenkins, "A Conversation with David Ireland," *Artweek*, Volume 25, #7, April 7, 1994.

² *Ibid.*

³ Karen Tsujimoto, "David Ireland: A Decade Documented, 1978-1988," University Art Museum Berkeley, October 1988, p. 31.

⁴ Joan Smith, *San Francisco Examiner*, Sunday, April 12, 1992.