

WILLIE DOHERTY

Northern Irish, born Derry, Northern Ireland, 1959

Border Crossing, 1994

Inkjet print, 13 x 17 5/8 inches

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My training is that of an English landscape archaeologist. I look at ordinary features in the landscape—roads, trackways, fields, hedges, trees, houses, farm buildings. I use these features as traces or clues, and think about how old they are, in what sequence they were created or laid down, how they have changed through time. I then take these traces and assemble them into a story.

Stories about landscape tell us about who we are. Stories have power, whether they are objectively based or freighted with elements of myth. In English cultural life, the oak tree is an emblem of national identity. Ancient churches speak to a perceived continuity of religious belief. Old trackways address pilgrimage, contact, and movement. Prehistoric burial mounds and stone circles invoke elements of the uncanny, the pagan, the ancient.

Willie Doherty's photograph speaks to me as an archaeologist on a series of levels. It has a prosaic, everyday quality about it: a trackway, an old tree, a fence, some concrete bollards, a fern-covered hillside in the background. But at a deeper level, I see Doherty gesturing towards ideas of history, continuity and discontinuity, and referencing Irish and Northern Irish identity. He's called it *Border Crossing*: these are not any old lumps of concrete, but "dragon's teeth," barriers placed by British authorities to mark and enforce the 1921 partition into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Partition was a political act that cut across the grain of the landscape. The artificial border thus created was the focus of violence during the Northern Ireland conflict known as The Troubles (1968–98).

There's a tension, then, between the old and enduring landscape and the artificial border thrown across it. One central achievement of the 1998 Good Friday peace agreement was to resolve this tension, and effectively remove any physical presence of the border. As I write during Britain's exit from the European Union, this agreement, the invisibility of the border, and the decades of peace it materializes are under threat, in part from a backward-looking English nationalism. Landscape archaeology, then, is not just about the past; we are always on a roundtrip ticket back to the present.

—Matthew Johnson
Professor of Anthropology