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Situated in the Cathedral Quarter, Belfast Exposed is one of Northern Ireland's most significant photographic archives, boasting over half a million images of everyday Belfast life from 1983 to the present day.

Two strikingly different, concurrently running exhibitions by internationally renowned artists currently highlight the importance of the organisation's work and raise thought-provoking questions about the meaning – or meanings – of images.

The curiously titled *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground* is a photographic exhibition by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin; *Short Films about Learning* is a video installation by Michael Hanna combining rapidly changing photos juxtaposed against a recording of a lecture by Paul Bloom, Professor of Psychology at Yale University.

The two exhibitions are intrinsically linked, revealing how different artists interpret the physical archive of Belfast Exposed in radically different ways. In a way, the archive itself is the star of the show.

For a long time, Belfast Exposed was essentially a massive memory store of everyday Belfast life during a dark period of the city's recent history. Since the beginning of the century, however, it has grown into an international photographic gallery.

'Every couple of years we have invited major artists to respond to or make work about the archive,' explains curator and gallery manager, Ciara Hickey, 'because we didn't want it to become something locked away, something that can't be touched.'

Previous exhibitions have seen Turner Prize winner Duncan Campbell and Redmond Entwistle throw new light on the archive's significance.

'The artists we work with bring a much more universal understanding,' says Hickey.

'The artwork created from the archive can be brought anywhere. It immediately refers to Belfast and the original photographers, but it also speaks about universal behaviours and tendencies, and I think that's why it's so important that we do it.'

Belfast Exposed has been a grass roots initiative from its beginning in the early 1980s – the original archival photographers were, and remain, amateur community photographers.

'At that time, there was obviously a culture of photo-journalists coming in and taking photographs of Belfast in the aftermath of bombs and funerals and then leaving again,' remarks Hickey. 'So this group of photographers started to bring the community in to document their own experiences and put the cameras back in the hands of people who actually lived in Belfast.'

Broomberg and Chanarin's exhibition takes the form of uniformly circular photographs that Belfast Exposed staff refer to as *The Dot Series*. The two artists, Hickey relates, were drawn to and guided by the markings and traces present on the physical archive.

Typically, a circle denoted the best pictures and a sticker indicated the part of the photograph the photographer wanted enlarged. 'It's quite a poetic way to look at the archive,' adds Hickey.

The black and white images in the Broomberg/Chanarin exhibition run from the mundane (an armchair) to grim reminders of the past (masked paramilitaries). A photograph of a show of hands, possibly at a concert, and another of a show of fists, possibly from a rally, speak volumes not only about body language but about the duality of life in times of conflict.

One picture shows bunting, but without color the flags' message is apolitical – they could just as easily represent Tibetan prayer flags.

Distraught, angry women are juxtaposed against laughing faces, burning tyres against a photograph of a bare tree, as delicate as an Asian rice-paper print. In another, a group of men in suits, their heads edited from the picture, stand motionless. It could be a snapshot of a train platform on a Monday morning. Or it could be a funeral.

The shadow of the Troubles looms large in this exhibition but it's not the only narrative at work.

'The majority of the photographs are from the Troubles,' Hickey concedes, 'and they are reminders of how recent that was and how horrific that was, but It wasn't all just bomb blasts. There are pigeons walking down the street, children laughing, and other things are going on. People do have normal lives. Of course, life goes on.'

Hanna's video installation on the ground floor is another experience entirely. It is more manipulative for starters: blacked-out windows create enveloping darkness; there is a specially carpeted floor; partition walls confuse entrance and exit.

Even in the process of entering the room the viewer is removed from the typical exhibition experience. Caught off guard, you might say.

The rapidly and randomly rotating photographs in the video share the common visual theme of the Troubles: victims of paramilitary punishments, riots, parades, the skeleton of a burning bus, threatening graffiti, a pool of blood and broken windows flash up on a continuous loop.

Yet, disturbing as these images may initially be, you will likely find yourself laughing as you listen to Professor Bloom's recorded lecture on adaptive mechanisms – survival mechanisms – of human psychology that Hanna cleverly feeds into the images.

We learn what Adolf Hitler and Barry Manilow have in common, for example, and why peek-a-boo is so endlessly entertaining for tots yet doesn't usually feature in adult party games. We gain insight into the psychological processes involved behind loyalty to individuals or causes, and how subliminal messages and shocking images work on our consciousness.

In subtly foregrounding our self-processes, Hanna's video installation partially illuminates why humans are able to function normally in conflictive environments. 'You get used to things,' Bloom's disembodied voice tells us. 'It's actually a very important form of learning, because imagine life where you never got used to anything?'

The archive as a theme is something that is increasingly present in contemporary art. 'A lot of artists are working with archives, what archives mean and the authority of images,' says Hickey. 'I think this is an interesting project in bringing fresh perspectives and new voices to what is a historical document of sorts. It asks more of the archive and asks you to approach the images in a different way, which is the key thing.'

Belfast Exposed continues to operate a massive community photography outreach program, so, thankfully, the archive is constantly growing. 'We're always adding to it. If you think about it, everybody has their own photographic archive in their own homes of their own histories,' says Hickey.

'I'm sure there are some absolute goldmines out there. It makes you think about your own archive and how it could be used in different ways, and how people might look at it in years to come.'

People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground *and* Short Films about Learning run at *Belfast Exposed* until April 18.