

(Arts Review)

Kevin McLaughlin – *Temple: from Build to Burn*

14 July – 1 August, The Social Studios and Gallery, 35 Shipquay Street, Derry

By Dominic Kearney

In March this year, a 72ft high wooden temple was constructed on a hill overlooking the city of Derry, after its component parts were crafted and cut in a nearby warehouse. The project was a collaboration between Burning Man artist, David Best, and the creative company, Artichoke, as well as a host of artists, crafts people, students, schoolchildren, and community groups.

The structure was opened to the public for a week before it was set alight on the evening of the Spring equinox, in a meeting of the bonfire tradition of Northern Ireland and the temple tradition of the Burning Man Festival of Nevada. In the week prior to its burning, thousands of people visited the site, and accepted the invitation to leave messages of peace and remembrance and personal significance. The names of departed loved ones, hopes, regrets, passions, and prayers all burned along with the temple itself on the night of 21 March.

In this exhibition, Kevin McLaughlin, photographer and sculptor, charts the progress of the temple, from the component cutting and sorting, to its construction and immolation, in a series of 12 images and a 20 minute video, played on a loop. He has produced a permanent record of a structure that was never meant to last.

It's a fascinating exhibition that mixes the strange and the ordinary. We see the warehouse scenes, where the thousands of parts were cut and catalogued as if for a giant Airfix kit. We see the temple built on site in Gobnascale, a weird, ornate, elaborate, oriental structure, overlooking a city on the western edge of Europe, set to burn like a Viking funeral or ancient, pagan offering. We see families and couples and solitary dog walkers wandering around this alien structure that has landed in their city, creating a new normality. It's a record of transmutation between different types of beauty.

The photographs grasp the transforminess of the Temple project. A number were shot with a 30-second exposure, leaving the lines of the structure crisp and clear, but the images of the visitors blurred and vanishing. The project was a celebration of possibilities and a joyous acceptance of a short-lived presence, and McLaughlin's pictures capture this. There is real richness in the images. They show the power and majesty and vibrancy of the project, not just in the structure itself, but in the people who visited and the messages they left and the effect of the temple on them.

The best of the images, to my mind, are those in colour, of the temple at night, glowing from within, red and orange, with a city glowing beneath it, white and blue, beneath a dark and shaded sky.

"It was a sacred space," says McLaughlin. "A place of devotion, reflection, mourning, and celebration." Those elements are all there in his photographs, spiritual, profound, and deeply human.