

REVIEW - 08 JUN 2016

Simon Fujiwara

BY DECLAN LONG

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland



Simon Fujiwara, installation view Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2016

Bravery, betrayal, secrecy, conspiracy: the biography of Irish revolutionary leader Roger Casement – the subject of an audacious new installation by Berlin-based British artist Simon Fujiwara – could be tagged with a long list of stirring dramatic keywords. Casement's relatively short life (1864–1916) was packed with enough action and intrepid globetrotting to offer potent material for a whole series of high-stakes adventure stories. A movie franchise based on his exploits – and such a speculative scheme comes close to the core concept of Fujiwara's typically yarn-spinning exhibition – could credibly kick off, for instance, by concentrating on Casement's travels in Africa and South America where, as a young consular official, he exposed brutal exploitation of native populations. Episode two might be pitched as 'Casement and Ireland', in which our hero commits to the cause of Irish freedom, turning against the British state that had previously knighted him for humanitarian endeavours. 'The Trial of Roger Casement' would wrap the series up: a gripping courtroom drama

centring on his execution for treason. This story's crucial plot twist comes via the revelations of the so-called 'Black Diaries': private journals, containing references to illicit gay relationships, which were leaked – some would say fabricated – in order to discredit a figure held in high regard around the world. There is thus, as Fujiwara has found in planning his own idiosyncratic account, an abundance of powerful narrative substance here: so much of significance in one man's dignified life and cruel death.



Simon Fujiwara, poster for *The Humanizer*, 2016

But if my cursory run-through of Casement's biographical highlights seems reductive – giving little sense of his importance to Irish history, especially in this centenary year of the 'Rising' that led to independence – consider the implications of Fujiwara's still-more radical distillation of the narrative. His conceit is to create, in collaboration with Hollywood screenwriter Michael Lesslie (and others, including Oscar-winning set designer Annie Atkins), an extravagantly mocked-up trailer for a Casement biopic – an idea first mooted by Universal Pictures as far back as 1934. And so, he presents a teaser version of the multi-layered story, structured according to the restrictive conventions of Hollywood production and promotion. Entitled, with parodic silliness, *The Humanizer* (and accompanied by the inane tagline: 'Every human matters'), Fujiwara's promised film dares to slice and skew history, reorganizing facts and events to fit the prescribed codes of mainstream cinema (in its grandiose, Oscar-chasing mode). Key periods are cut out. Minor characters become major. The miscellaneous accidents and serendipities of life become packaged within the neatly ordered stages of a coherent, linear narrative. Fujiwara plays a provocative fictionalizing game: simultaneously recalling Hayden White's 'metahistorical' insights ('Invention [...] plays a part in the historian's operations,') and veteran screenwriter William Goldman's twisted truths ('Storytellers tell lies too. We must.')



Simon Fujiwara, installation view Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2016

The pared-back nature of Fujiwara's purposefully inaccurate narrative is intensified by a further strategic subtraction. *The Humanizer* is a film without images: an audio-only trailer, played in sound-bite sections throughout a series of interlocking galleries. In each of these rooms – luxuriantly cinematized with carpet-and-curtain velvet plush and adorned with a selection of fake Casement 'relics' – we hear snippets of plot-signposting dialogue, underscored by great, blustery

swirls of movie-trailer sound: thundering synth-drums, African rhythms and Irish reels, emotive swells of orchestral strings. Divorced from any distinguishing visuals, this compendium of sonic clichés has peculiar, indeterminate effects. In part, the bombastic soundtrack heightens the preposterousness of a project that offers welcome, impudent absurdity during a year of earnest national commemoration. In this context, a little healthy impiety goes a long way. But however many cheap, ironic tricks Fujiwara's *The Humanizer* pulls, it also holds a strange, pathetic power: leaving us in the dark with simulacral traces of a truly tragic life and reminding us, maybe, of all that gets lost as complex histories congeal.