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McDermott & McGough; Irish museum of modern art

[ArtForum](#), [Summer, 2008](#) by [David Carrier](#)

Using obsolete printing techniques and an 8 x10" camera, David McDermott and Peter McGough in the 1980s and '90s, made photographs that look like they were produced a century ago. This display of 120 small pictures in four rooms, newly decorated for the exhibition with faux-antique handpainted wallpaper and an eighteenth-century floor pattern copied from an old Dublin design, surveys nearly twenty years of the artists' career. No cars, computers, or modern machinery appear in these photographs. The pair's cyanotype *An Assortment of Studio Props*, 1913, 1997 -- fake composition dates are part of their titles--presents the odds and ends associated with a beaux-arts studio school. The palladium print *Frightened of Machinery but Devoted to Machines*, 1895, 1989, depicts hands joined in prayer before an old fashioned typewriter. McDermott & McGough do ironical religious scenes: *In Shocked to Read that Jesus Christ Associated with the Poor and Humble*, 1927, 1989, a dandy soaks his foot; in *The Last Supper*, 1898, 1998, two women sit in front of a table occupied by gesticulating figures; *The Tomb of Lazarus*, 1902, 1989, shows rough-hewn stones in the woods; their gently homoerotic *Christ Bound*, 1904, 1989, depicts Christ, arms tied above his head, wearing a white loincloth.

McDermott & McGough present themselves as turn-of-the-last-century aesthetes, Oscar Wilde's grandsons. Like Edward Gorey, they are fascinated by the happily idle Edwardian culture that was swept away in the Great War and the Depression. There are no signs of strife in their pictures, which show discreet female nudes; gardens (as in *A Garden in Bridgehampton (Summer)* (Jacqueline Schnabel), 1910, 1992; and playful photographic versions of engravings from a nineteenth century text, *Les Recreations scientifiques ou l'enseignement par les jeux*. The old-fashioned science experiment shown in *Experience of Equilibrium with Three Knives*, 1884, 1990, is as out-of-date as the palladium print technology used to make the image. *Portrait of the Artists (With Top Hat)*, 1885, 1991, typical of the pair's self-portraits, shows two young dandies who look very much at home in their culture. Now and then, a late-modernist sensibility breaks through, as in *Cabane*, 1910, 1992, which composes an elegantly blank image of a shed, or in *A Corner in the Studio (Chair Frame and Wall Grate)*, 1917, 1992, another strikingly austere composition. The ominous skull in *And the Head*, 1912, 1993, is curiously like those Warhol painted, complete with cast shadows. But for the most part, McDermott & McGough re-create the vanished world they love.