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Article posted on March 6, 2012

IRISHTIMES.com

24 hours of London gallery hopping

By Jim Carroll

Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's photos make the city of Detroit look like a post-industrial Pompeii. Abandoned hotels, derelict theatres, ruined workplaces, empty schools: it's as if the people left everything they had created behind when they fled the city. Shot between 2005 and 2009, Marchand and Meffre's *The Ruins Of Detroit*, a selection of which are currently on show at London's Wilmotte Gallery until April 5, track the dramatic, extraordinary decline of a great city. It's all the starker when you consider the snapshots and statistics displayed at the outset of the exhibition about what the Motor City once was in its pomp, a city of extraordinary factories which employed thousands, a city of power, money and industrial prestige.

There are many in Detroit who will vehemently argue that such ruin porn doesn't tell the whole picture. Marchand may believe that "It seems like Detroit has just been left to die", but many community activists in the city will point to their efforts to make the city work again. Regardless of which side you're on in that particular argument, there's no doubt that these photos on this scale tell all kinds of poignant, heartbreaking, horror stories. You look at the American Hotel ballroom or the Eastown Theatre, rooms which were once full of life and gaiety, and you realise that, even in the 21st century, an urban powerhouse like Detroit can come apart at the seams.



London is having an arts moment right now as it pulls out all the stops to mark the Olympics and the David Hockney exhibition at the Royal Academy (running until April 9) is certainly leading the way in this regard. It's a blockbuster exhibition in every sense of the word, with the gallery opening until midnight most weekend nights as it tries to cater for the crowds who want to view Hockney's latest works. Hockney is box-office gold anyway but this, like Hockney's works, are on another scale entirely.

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A *Bigger Picture* is largely dominated by Hockney's rekindled fascination with his native Yorkshire's landscapes. While there are other works included in the exhibition (such as his Californian odes Mulholland Drive and Pearlblossom Highway), it's how Hockney paints the Yorkshire Wolds as the seasons change which causes the most wows here. Throughout, the colours are a riot, turning what are everyday natural scenes, such as the road to Thwing, into exotic, wild, buzzy protrayals and

giving you an endorphin rush in the process. Hockney's eye also catches how nature quietly and calmly transforms those scenes you see every day of your life (see the paintings from Woldgate Wood or his iPad drawings capturing the arrival of spring in Woldgate).

The fact that Hockney is so keen to show how the iPad has changed his working methods is also telling. Technology doesn't always have to be a disruptive element, especially if someone has the enthusiasm to see how it can help rather than hinder their work. For Hockney, it was the immediacy of the iPad which allowed him to rapidly capture the changing light and conditions of some of the scenes in front of him and allow us see such fascinating pieces of art.

It's the colours which also stick in your mind after a visit to David LaChapelle's *Earth Laughs in Flowers* (Robilant & Voena, until March 24). Best known for his surreal and fantastical fashion and celebrity photography, LaChapelle's new works are studies in super-saturated, garish kitsch, matching traditional bouquets of flowers with the trash, ephemera and plastic culture of modern consumer life.

You have flowers surrounded and overshadowed by plastic dolls, pills, decaying fruit, sagging balloons and half-eaten foodstuffs. Take it as the other side of the American Dream (pace the Ruins of Detroit) or another statement by LaChapelle on the stupefying, brain-dead nature of modern celebrity culture. Remember too that the exhibition title comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Hamatreya", which mocks human mortality against the permanency of nature.



Every year, some three million Muslims travel to Saudi Arabia for the hajj pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca. As we know from photos and news reports of the mass movement to the city, it's a spectacular, extraordinary sight to see so many people on the move, especially for a religious ceremony. What Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam (British Museum, until April 15) seeks to do – and does so extraordinarily well – is try to explain to a non-Muslim audience what the hajj is about

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and why it means so much to the believers. After all, as Abdunasser Gharem's *Road to Makkah* photo of one road-sign on display in the exhibition demonstrates, the hajj and Mecca are off-limits to non-Muslims.



who went on hajj in 1932.

What comes across again and again in the exhibition is the monumental undertaking which the hajj was and still is. Before planes transported pilgrims to Jedda, the voyage to Mecca across deserts and seas was as strenuous and sapping as any of the rituals which happen at hajj. The exhibition tracks the routes those pilgrims took as they came from all points of the Muslim world. As it has become easier for people to get to Mecca, the numbers have grown: the exhibition notes that the three million today is a huge increase on the 20,000

Beyond the rites and the rituals, though, beyond the bodies shuffling seven times around the Ka'bah or gathering the pebbles at Muzdalifa, even beyond the gathering of souvenirs and mementos to bring home (Knock is not the only place with hawkers flogging holy tat), it's the devotion of the faithful which has the most impact on you. The hajj really does change lives.