

A few months ago Desiree Akhavan, the American director of *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018), wrote to Megan Doherty to praise her photographs. Akhavan explained that she was using the Derry photographer's work as a visual inspiration for *The Bisexual*, a new Channel 4 comedy drama, and wanted to decorate the characters' walls with her prints. When Doherty watched the series, she barely paid attention to the plot. "I was like, 'Oh my God, there's one of my photos. And there's another,'" she says.

The 25-year-old is finding it difficult to process the success of *Stoned in Melanchol*, her first photographic project. One of the images graces the cover of a novel – Oisín Fagan's *Hostages* – and she has had exhibitions in London, Paris and across Ireland. Last year a Tokyo gallery published some of her work in a zine. Now the complete series is being published as a limited-edition book, marking the end of a chapter in her life, she says.

On the terrace of a café at the Guildhall in Derry, Doherty lays her prints on a table. The book was conceived as a giant Rizla packet, with her work – 50 A3 images across 25 double-sided pages – making up the rolling papers. A director of *Magnum Photos* penned the foreword, while Doherty has written fictional vignettes to slot between the prints.

"It's all very scrappy, but that's what I like about it," she says. "When I was starting out, I'd rip up magazines of photography and plaster the images over my wall. I want people to be able to chop and change the way they want."

The unconventional design, and lack of linear format, is a way to present stills from a film never made. These photographs are like moments from a wider narrative: a woman makes a furtive call from a phone box at night; someone is lost in thought at a supermarket drinks aisle. There are semi-naked embraces; drunken trysts in wastelands; and last-chance saloons. This exploration of small-town boredom is more fictional than social commentary, as Doherty wanted to create a window to a fantasy world.

"It was a form of escape for me. I felt trapped in Derry and wanted to move away somewhere. So I designed my own world that wouldn't have any connection to Derry. I created these scenes from ideas in my head, casting my friends as the characters, and I lit them in cinematic ways. *Melanchol* is an invented place, a dreamscape."

In Doherty's final year of school, a teacher introduced her to the work of Nan Goldin, a US photographer who captured marginal lives and lost souls in the depths of night. "I'd never seen photography like that before. My mum was a hairdresser, so I spent a lot of

AMERICANA IN HER STILLS OF THE NIGHT

Megan Doherty's cinematic images of loneliness in Derry wouldn't look out of place in films such as *Paris, Texas*. To add a spot of authenticity, the photographer is releasing them in a Rizla-style box, she tells *Pavel Barter*

time in the salon looking through her beauty magazines. I was used to the standard, classic fashion photography. Nan's stuff blew my mind."

Stoned in Melanchol's neon-bathed landscapes and night portraits owe more to American cinema than photography, however. *Buffalo '66*, *Lost in Translation* and *Paris, Texas* were influences. *Christiane F*, a 1981 film about heroin addicts in Berlin, is also present. Doherty wanted to conjure up a different era and so she shot on film to achieve this effect.

"A lot of social-media photographers focus on technology, but I wanted to escape from that and go back to the 1980s and 1990s. The style really interests me. Shooting on film – the texture, the grain, the way light translates – is so cinematic. Digital is flat. I like things to be gritty, I like scratch marks and dust. I try to keep it real."

Last year Doherty exhibited her work in Paris alongside two fellow emerging Irish photographers, Ciarán Óg Arnold and Martin Seeds. Arnold's pictures of alienation, anger and troubled masculinity in small towns contrast with Doherty's exploration of loneliness and longing experienced by many young women.

Her series began in 2014 with the title shot, which features Charlotte Gordon, a friend and muse. The photographer staged a party scene with Gordon in the middle of the hubbub, alone and

Light touch
Doherty's images of Charlotte, right, and night scenes, below



MEGAN DOHERTY



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“I've had emails from people saying they have found solace in my photos



BARRY CROKIN

In the frame Doherty was nominated for a Magnum prize two years ago

staring down the lens. "Just before the shutter went off, a tear rolled down her cheek. It was like magic. You can't see it because the red and green blows it out, but I know it's there."

The project became more freewheeling after that. Doherty had grown up without any youth subculture, and so she created her own. "I lived with my parents at the time. I didn't know a lot of my subjects when I started. We were hanging out from morning to night, inventing adventures that we lived as well. We all became close friends."

As a teenager with artistic leanings, she felt alienated in Derry, but *Stoned in Melanchol* united her with other creative people from the city. "I bashed Derry when I started this project, but I didn't realise how much was going on. There's a scene taking off here and so many young people are doing their own exhibitions. There's a community building and more happening now than ever before."

Doherty began uploading her photos to Facebook and Instagram, which caught the attention of bloggers and magazines. "I wondered why it was getting so much attention. Then I tried to take things into my own hands. I contacted bigger publications."

In 2016, *Magnum* shortlisted her for its graduate award. *New York* magazine commissioned her to do a fashion shoot in Derry, and she went to the Big Apple to take portraits of the poet Cleo Wade in the apartment Wade shared with New Jersey senator Cory Booker.

Ultimately, she wants to make films of her own. Last summer she worked as a stills photographer on *Calm with Horses*, a film based on a novella by the Irish writer Colin Barrett and made in Galway. But Doherty says she will never give up photography. She is taking photographs based on her short stories and "seeing what patterns emerge". In January, she plans to leave Derry for good and head to New York or London.

Doherty pulls out another image and puts it on the table: damp streets and receding car lights. There's a finality to this photograph; it captures her emotions about *Stoned in Melanchol*. "This is done, I've put this to bed. This is why the book is coming out now – it's complete. I've nothing more to give towards it. It's a time in my life that's over."

For all the attention the series has brought her, personal notes resonate most. "I've got emails from people saying, 'I'm in a city, I've just moved. I'm desperately lonely and I find solace in your photos.' That blows my mind. I don't know why it resonates with people so much, but so I'm glad it does. It's important to me." 📌

Stoned in Melanchol is available from Nov 12 at setantabooks.com/megandoherty