Sean Scully

WILLIAM ORPEN'S WAR PAINTINGS
MICHAEL CRAIG-MARTIN AT CHATSWORTH
HUGHIE O’DONOCHUE'S STAINED GLASS
DAGUERREOTYPES OF DANIEL O'CONNELL

DAVID LILBURN INTERVIEWED
HENEGHAN PENG IN MOSCOW
ADIEU TO GUARDIS’ MASTERPIECES
JOHN COLL’S NATURAL WORLD
O’DONNELL + TUOMEY ARCHITECTS’ SAW SWEE HOCK STUDENT CENTRE IN LONDON
BY KESTER RATTENBURY

I ought to seem peculiar that some of London’s most new buildings are by O’Donnell + Tuomey. One of many peculiar things in fact, that you could almost walk past something as dramatic as their Saw Swee Hock building without noticing it, or that it can feel both strange, familiar and old – even before the works are fully finished. But if you know O’Donnell + Tuomey, it’s not so strange, because whenever they build, their projects are almost revelations of the places they’re in. So their London projects take you into, gritty, old, brick-built London with its tangible life, rough-tough shabbiness and its unexpected, occasional generation of freedom. That’s not a given. Almost everything else that’s going up in London seems obliged to surf the commercial alipstream – very shiny, very generic, very standard. It’s often hard in the UK to tell if you’re in a school or a rather grim business park. But O’Donnell + Tuomey’s buildings are really public, human and particular. They make you take real pleasure in the place you’re in, in the people you’re sharing it with, and the way that those places are made. The new Saw Swee Hock Student Centre for the London School of Economics (LSE) is their second, and a really great building. It’s in a tiny mesh of lanes squashed between the irregular grandeur of Lincoln’s Inn Fields and the traffic torrent of Holborn, amongst a jumble of buildings of all ages, including the old building, which a canny Victorian owner rebranded as The Old Curiosity Shop. LSE uses these streets as its campus (exam results are posted on the street) and O’Donnell + Tuomey wound this street life upwards through London’s ragged, dramatic skyline. So that strange, obscurely dramatic future brick building presents a Christmas stocking of life: a fantastic adjacency of should-be-incompatible activities – music venue, pub, prayer room, church, gym, cafes, careers service – inside an apparently coherent one-piece brick dress. Those brick planes shift to accommodate against the tragedy. O’Donnell + Tuomey had a ready-to-go new building designed when the crash hit in 2008 – leaving them with a refurbishment and a skinny budget. And yet they turned that place into a character and vision of its own. It’s a kind of big camera – roughly speaking, the new black ‘case’ building wraps the brick original. And it has its own real Camera Obscura and its great big aperture windows into London’s built history. Oh, and you get a nice set of galleries into the bargain. Why do O’Donnell + Tuomey succeed in London’s competitive market? Well, basically, because they’re really, really good, and lots of people know it. They win devoted fans, clients, contractors, critics and regular people. So that the LSE is in constant, thrilled use. So that even when the Photographers’ Gallery is closed you’ll find people like me hanging round in the cafe. Because some critics are wise enough to recognize that if they commission an O’Donnell + Tuomey they will get and give something really special. Their buildings extend little bits of London into better versions of itself. And that’s really worth having.