

Remains by Brian Maguire review - stark images of a world on the move

The painter Brian Maguire's latest show, Remains, tells a story that none of us can turn our back on.



Brian Maguire by Bryan Meade

« It will take a minimum of 18 days to walk to Phoenix. You will need a minimum of three gallons of water per day per person." That's 54 gallons of water. It's too much to carry, but without it anyone who tries to cross the Mexico-US border by walking through the Arizona-Sonoran Desert will die. These figures come from an enlarged poster pasted to the wall and stretching to near ceiling height at the Crawford art gallery in Cork as part of the Irish painter Brian Maguire's latest show, Remains.

Maguire is 70 this year. He has spoken often about the impulse to find one image to tell the

whole story and about how he sees his job as an artist: to paint the stories that don't get told. He is interested in the images that don't get shown on television. The images in this exhibition are among those.

The seven paintings in this show depict the bodies of migrants who have died in the Sonoran Desert. The wall poster shouts in capital letters: DO NOT GO! NOT ENOUGH WATER! NOT WORTH IT! It features a map of the terrain, littered with too many red dots to count; each one represents a body.

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Last year was one of the worst for migrant deaths in this stretch of desert. The Pima county medical examiner's office in Tucson, Arizona, recorded the remains of 220 individuals. That office contains 21 years of records of more than 3,300 deaths. Some 700 have died in the past five years alone.

Maguire is aware of the questions this practice of painting unidentified bodies can raise. The catalogue for the exhibition includes a quote: "It isn't the artist's part to offer a solution to the problem but, rather, to provide a proper presentation of the problem." These were words spoken by the American novelist Philip Roth quoting the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov at the National Jewish Book awards in 1988. And so Maguire does that.



Brian Maguire, *Arizona 3*, 2021. (detail).
Acrylic on linen. 200 x 140 cm.

"Is it OK to make these paintings?" Maguire asks the writer and curator Christian Viveros-Fauné in his catalogue essay. The answer seems to be that the artist feels compelled to make this

work, to draw attention to human crisis, and so the answer is yes.

Painted in acrylic on canvas, and measuring up to three metres wide, Maguire has made seven beautiful, horrifying works of art, simply named and numbered Arizona 1-7. Arizona 1 shows skeletal remains stretched out: bare bones and remnants of clothing in a yellow-brown sandy scrubland under a turquoise sky. The surface of the painting is textured with lumps that mimic the surface of the ground.

In a short video documentary that plays in the next room, a charity worker from Humane Borders, a humanitarian group based in Tucson, tells Maguire: "People die even with water." The group places water drops or stations at intervals across the expanse. The barrels are sometimes shot at, rendering them useless.

Arizona 2 shows a skull on a patch of pale, dry land, a fireball of sun on a dark green horizon echoing the round of the bleached bony cranium below. In Arizona 5 the soles of the trainers that desert crossers are advised to wear point towards us, the rest of the body stretching away to reveal a twisted torso. These are people, real people, who have died.

In 2019 Maguire met Gregory L Hess MD, who is the chief medical examiner of Pima county and a forensic pathologist. Hess has also contributed to the exhibition catalogue. He writes that UBCs (undocumented border crossers) come from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. He has recorded 1,633 inquiries about his work in the past 11 years from journalists, politicians, celebrities and humanitarians, and yet, as he writes, "nothing has changed". In fact it is getting worse. In the first five months of 2021, 96 remains have been recovered. Hess's office is responsible for identifying and repatriating the bodies to their families.

Hess emphasises that each painting represents an individual – "each with a unique story, hopes and goals. They also fill me with that sameness, that numbness, that fatigue of history repeating itself." And he explains why he gave Maguire access to the file of 4,000 photographs of desert-trapped human remains held in his office: "Here is an accomplished artist, requesting access to view scene images of deceased, unidentified migrants, in order to



Brian Maguire, *Arizona 2*, 2021. (detail). Acrylic on linen. 150 x 200 cm.
Remains continues the artist's creative enquiry into the Mexican/American border. Lee Welch

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Mary McCarthy, Crawford's director, and Anne Boddaert, the show's curator, describe

Maguire's process as "a sort of collusion with the subject matter." Throughout his career he has painted people whose lives have been marked by poverty, violence, addiction and war. He has painted prisoners in Ireland, children in shantytowns in Brazil, victims of femicide in Ciudad Juarez in Mexico, buildings destroyed by war in Aleppo, Syria. He is clear that this work is about the victims of US immigration policy. Maguire talks about collateral damage, refers to "the workers of capitalism", and points out that "so-called preventative policy" is not preventative. People are still crossing the desert, and people are still dying.

If feeling doesn't come into it when Maguire is painting, feeling still lies in the paint spatters and brushstrokes. It also lies in the choice of image, although perspective and composition has already been selected, unbeknown, by the photographer. It seems inappropriate even to speak of the image's composition. This is gruesome work. Arizona 6 is crisscrossed with straggly lime-green branches. Arizona 7 shows a half-dressed, half-skeletal torso, a bare skull, on a bed of red rock. These bodies feel close to human size as you stand before them. Maguire

paints the consequences of borders as a form of violence.

The journalist Ed Vulliamy's catalogue essay tracks the history of this particular border, drawn in 1848, through US presidencies and immigration policies, with a focus on Bill Clinton, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. He writes that journalists reporting on violence in Mexico, from which many of these victims are fleeing, often end up dead – "Some 90 of my colleagues have been murdered."

It is not painting's job to save the world, but Maguire paints to point to our collective obligation not to look away. Human migration isn't a new phenomenon, but we have already entered an era in which climate change will accelerate population movement globally. Maguire sees painting as an act of solidarity. Every one of us is one step from crisis circumstances beyond our control. We've only got one planet to share. This is a story none of us can afford to turn our backs on.

Remains – Brian Maguire, Crawford Gallery, Cork, until Jan 9



Brian Maguire's work at the Crawford Art Gallery, photo: Jed Niezgoda

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