

EDITOR'S PICK

TOP STORY

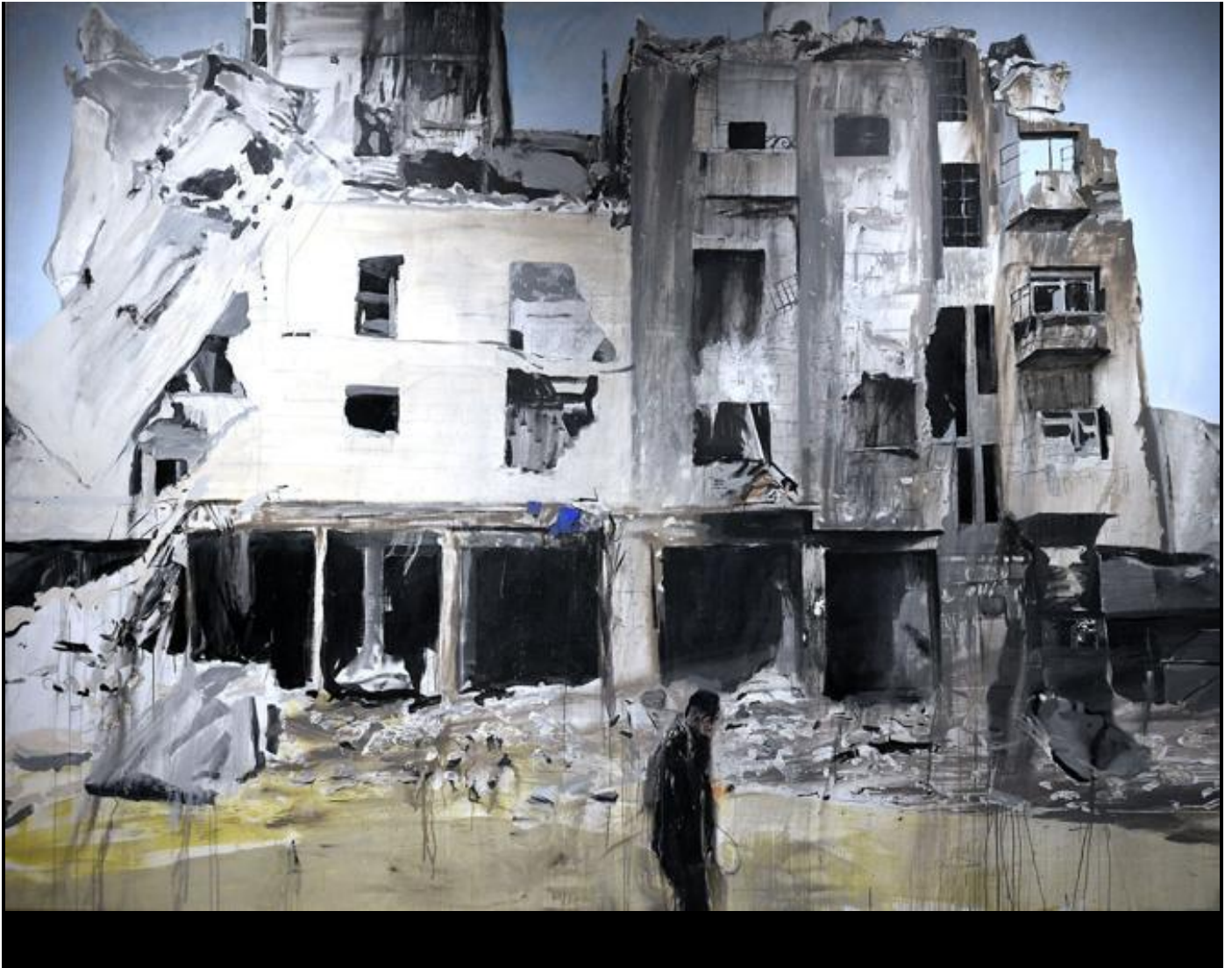
Irish painter calls attention to modern atrocities and tragedy

Cory Walsh

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Brian Maguire, "Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up," 2016, acrylic on linen.
TOM BAUER/Missoulian



Brian Maguire, "War Changes Its Address: Aleppo 5," 2017, acrylic on linen. TOM BAUER/Missoulian

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Brian Maguire, "Mexican Necklace," 2016, acrylic on canvas. TOM BAUER/Missoulian

Two paintings that each span at least 12 feet in width at the Missoula Art Museum depict the carnage of bombings in Aleppo, Syria, during its civil war.

They're from a series Irish artist Brian Maguire has titled, "War Changes Its Address."

"I think it's probably the simplest, most poignant way to talk about how these scenes are replayed over and over again," said Carey Powers, the MAM's communications and marketing director.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine changed the context of the exhibition, but senior curator Brandon Reintjes noted that Maguire has been “doing this work for decades.”

Born in 1951, he has long explored a path that merges humanitarian concerns with contemporary painting.

The exhibition, “In the Light of Conscience,” gathers work from across Maguire’s career and his travels to see areas of conflict and tragedy himself: Urban ruins in Syrian civil war; the deaths of undocumented migrants crossing the border into the U.S. or into Europe; and hate crimes in the United States.

“He talks about what an imprint war has had on his life,” Reintjes said, “both from the Irish Struggles, but then also the Holocaust [and] growing up in the shadow of the Holocaust and responding to that and what our moral obligation is.”

In some ways, the exhibition feels more akin to conflict-zone photography or documentary filmmaking than contemporary painting, with wall text that gives deeper context for particular pieces. The scope and the scale “kind of breaks every assumption or box that you put him in,” Reintjes said.

The paintings are “a magnitude larger” than what MAM often shows, he said. An acrylic-on-linen, “Aleppo 5,” measures 9.5 by 12 feet, so tall the wreckage of a building in Syria looms over the viewer.

Associate curator John Calsbeek said Maguire works with the technical “efficiency” of a master, citing how he renders cityscapes with expressive brushstrokes, white space, skeletal drawing and unexpected splashes of color.

Working in the West

Maguire is well-established around the world, and the Syria paintings were exhibited at the United Nations delegates' entrance, yet this is his first museum showing in the United States.

He lives in Ireland and France, but is close to the artistic community in Hope, Idaho, and visits there during the summer. Through those connections, the MAM staff began talking with him years ago. His series on the femicides in Ciudad Juarez sparked conversations about missing and murdered Indigenous people, or MMIP. Through a grant from the Tremaine Foundation, and later a Fulbright Scholarship, Maguire came to Montana for four months last year to begin a project.

“That gave him enough time to invest himself in the communities and form relationships,” Reintjes said.

Maguire met with families of missing or murdered people and painted portraits of their loved ones, as he did for those who disappeared in the deserts or the murders in Juarez. He made one portrait for their kin and another that will go on display in the MAM next year.

Bearing witness

In the open space of the Carnegie Galleries, the sizes of these paintings “impact you on a physical level,” Reintjes said. Then, the viewers confront themselves with the content.

“You're in this role where you're witnessing atrocity on a very intimate level, and it makes you uncomfortable,” Reintjes said.

Maguire works with a medical examiner in Arizona, and two paintings depict the corpses of migrants who died crossing the border. While

detailed in their renderings of a scene, they do not render faces or include names, pushing them toward the universal.

“He’s very conscious about what the line is, what permissions are, and also how to do this with a good conscience,” Reintjes said.

“Calvary” (2019) was painted in memory of two victims of hate crimes in 1998: Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was beaten and left for dead in Laramie, Wyoming, and James Byrd Jr., a Black man in Texas who was killed by white supremacists. The canvas depicts the horrific crime, although the rendering is abstract. The title refers to the crucifixion of Christ, according to the text.

In “Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up” (2016), a migrant seeking to cross the Mediterranean has drowned, surrounded by textured blue water. “It’s not about a single person, it’s about all of us,” Calsbeek said.

According to MAM, Maguire drew the title from Holocaust survivor Primo Levi memoir, “If This Is a Man.” He said that the “moral dilemma Europe faces with migration connects it to Levi’s statement that what Auschwitz taught him is that if you value things more than people, you risk spiritual collapse.”

IF YOU GO

Brian Maguire, “In the Light of Conscience,” opens on Friday, March 18, at the Missoula Art Museum. It will stay on view through Aug. 13.

Maguire will be in Missoula for First Friday, April 1, from 5-7 p.m. He’ll give a talk at 1 p.m. on Saturday, April 2.

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