El Confidencial

Disappearances, murders, and wars: Dublin's Hugh Gallery exhibits Brian Maguire.

By Mario Canal

MR. WILLIAM EARLE, SUDAN 1880, 2018. BRIAN MAGUIRE. IMAGE COURTESY KERLIN GALLERY, DUBLIN.

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GALERIE CHRISTOPHE GAILLARD
www.galeriegaillard.com

In his spacious Paris studio, Brian Maguire (Dublin, 1951) is painting the portrait of Rosie, a Native American woman from the Salish and Kootenai tribes. She was murdered after accepting a ride home from a stranger. Her body was found three years later. Her brother Laurence also died violently, killed by someone known to the family. "They were the second or third family I worked with. Rosie was brilliant. She was a good girl," Maguire says as he navigates through digital archives on his computer to show her photograph.

Five years ago, Maguire was invited to work on cases of missing and murdered Indigenous people in Montana, USA. The project took time to take shape – not just due to logistics. "Part of that was my fault. I went crazy in the middle of it all," he admits, referring to the emotional toll. He began by searching the streets, guided by numerous posters and even large billboards with the faces of the missing, placed in public spaces by their families. From there, he initiated a delicate and persistent contact with victims' relatives, introducing himself through the work he had done over a decade earlier in Ciudad Juárez. There, over multiple visits, he collaborated with families of missing women, painting portraits of their murdered sisters, mothers, or daughters. That project became the exhibition An Oasis of Horror (in a Desert of Indifference).

"When people are abandoned by the justice system, memory must occur in a public space," explains the Irish painter. For Maguire, this is where art belongs – not as decoration, but as a form of symbolic justice that, while not legally reparative, creates emotional restitution and a space for dignity.

Brian Maguire is not defined by a specific pictorial style – beyond the expressive, free-handed figuration that fills his canvases – but rather by a way of being in the world. His work emerges from specific contexts, from real encounters with people and territories marked by violence, neglect, and impunity. In every case, the starting point is a relationship – whether with a family, a community, a journalist, or a circulating image without an owner. "I'm always looking for images. And the images tell the whole story," he says. But behind each image is a life – and often, a tragedy.

Maguire has worked in Syria, the Philippines, South Sudan, Brazil, Mexico, and other contexts marked by injustice. He sees himself as a witness who makes the viewer complicit in what has happened. "News photographs disappear," he argues. "After seven years, it's almost impossible to find an image online. But if a painting enters the art system, its memory can last for hundreds of years." In this bid for permanence, Maguire finds the meaning of his work: to build a lasting form of memory, beyond the cycles of disinformation.

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Police Graduation (Juarez), 2014, Brian Maguire.
Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

The Clearcut Amazon, 2023, Brian Maguire.
Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

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THE JAIL

Maguire's journey didn't begin in artistic circles. Born in Dublin, he worked as a construction laborer, getting by as he could. From childhood, he was drawn to drawing as a form of escape. "Drawing and painting were my way of meditating," he recalls simply. That impulse endured, even when family difficulties made an artistic career seem unlikely. But a small miracle occurred.

Maguire gained admission to a technical school – a sort of vocational training center– following the principles of the Bauhaus. There, he studied using the methods and original manuals of Paul Klee and other Bauhaus teachers. "They taught us how images work, but they didn't tell us why to make art. I figured that out later," he says. That pragmatic, experimental training left a mark on how he approaches painting – not as a closed discipline but as a porous language.

In 1968, Maguire enrolled at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, amid a revolutionary atmosphere where students from around the world were trying to transform cultural, political, and social institutions still anchored in the 19th century. The school was located next to the Irish Parliament, making the clash between revolution and power starkly visible. In this politically active context, art education was not a retreat but a front line.

At that time, the young student joined a group linked to the IRA. Two years later, the official branch of the IRA dissolved, and Maguire voted to abandon the armed struggle against the British occupiers in favor of political action. He was never arrested, which later allowed him to teach in Irish prisons. "Many of the people I met genuinely believed they were fighting the British. They didn't see themselves as murderers, but as revolutionaries."

In prison, Maguire found a different way to teach. There were no manuals or structured classes. It was about creating a space for dialogue, where artistic expression could be a channel for transformation– or at least self-awareness– for inmates. "Prison taught me not to judge anyone and not to ask too many questions," he says with a laugh. "You just share your story and hope the other person does the same." That ethic of mutual respect has shaped all his later work. It also prepared him to confront difficult stories without falling into sensationalism or condescension. Maguire is not a thrill-seeking artist or a profiteer of gory tales. He believes that where the state fails and violence erases names, art must intervene.

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Brian Maguire. Courtesy of the Artist/Galerie Christophe Gaillard.

Bentiu International Displacement Camp, South Sudan 1, 2018, Brian Maguire. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

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Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up, 2016, Brian Maguire. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

Railway Junction Turin, 2011, Brian Maguire. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

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Vista de la exposición. Image courtesy Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin. Photography Denis Mortell, © Brian Maguire.

Cocaine Laundry: HSBC, 2015, Brian Maguire. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

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Strange Fruit (Europe), 2016, Brian Maguire. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

THE WARS

Maguire's work has taken him to territories marked by conflict. His first trip was to the Philippines, where he documented the extrajudicial executions of the drug campaign promoted by President Duterte. The painter is not an adventurer or an adrenaline-seeker, nor someone looking to profit artistically from gruesome stories. Maguire believes that where the state fails and violence erases names, art must intervene.

In Manila, he focused on the case of a man executed by the police. Journalist Vincent Goh, who followed the police radio signals to document these deaths, gave him a photograph. The context was horrifying: "People would give the names of their own brothers or fathers, who were often drug addicts. That same night, the police would arrive and kill them," says the artist.

He arrived in Syria during one of the worst moments of the war. The large-scale paintings depicting destroyed houses and the panoramas of refugee camps being erected are terrible, yet beautiful. The sense of threat is frozen in the viewer's gaze, but the painter does not allow himself that emotion when he is on the ground. "I am not afraid of that kind of danger. I went to Juárez when it was the most dangerous city in the world. When I went for a walk as soon as I arrived, I saw soldiers in their vehicles and then the federals. The most amazing thing was that they were using the same military equipment I had seen in Belfast in 1971," he recalls. "So I told myself, 'It's okay. I've been here before.'"

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Aleppo 4, 2017, Brian Maguire. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.

When asked about his artistic influences, Maguire mentions Francis Bacon, his youthful idol – especially for the way he represented physical and psychological anguish. A reproduction of Bacon's studio sits at the back of the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, where several of Maguire's series are currently on view. Each gallery room is dedicated to a specific conflict, including the destruction of the Amazon. And while the canvases depict harsh realities, they do so lyrically.

His work moves in the tension between what is seen and what is omitted. In fact, it's about making the invisible visible. That's why he doesn't shy away from difficult details: a man floating in a blue sea, having died crossing a strait; another, decapitated in the desert, a victim of the drug cartels. There's no artifice or excess in his paintings – only a sober rawness in the brushstroke that avoids embellishment. He acknowledges he has learned from poetry how to say what's essential and leave out the rest. "Overworking is pointless," he states. "You have to know when to stop."

That restraint only applies to the canvas. Despite undergoing several recent heart surgeries, the painter doesn't stop. His storytelling ability reminds us that we are in the presence of a determined Irishman. His conviction runs through his entire personality and body of work, because for Maguire, painting is a way to tell stories, to seek justice, and to practice empathy – with others and with everything that has vanished without a trace. "Art resides in empathy. And what makes violence impossible is empathy. You can't shoot someone in the head if you empathize with them. It's not possible."

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