



HAUNTING SKULLS, P. SIBUT-BOURDE

Haunting skulls

Pierre Sibut-Bourde

“Trozos de granito sin origen ni continuidad. [...] Después salieron al desierto y a las montañas. Allí estaban los padres de las rocas huérfanas que acababan de dejar atrás. Formaciones graníticas, volcánicas, cuyos picos se silueteaban en el cielo con forma y maneras de pájaros, pero pájaros de dolor, pensó Amalfitano.¹”

— 2666, Roberto Bolaño, p. 262

At the southwesternmost point of the United States, buried deep in heavy sands punctuated by towering miradors, its iron bars and barbed wire plunging hundreds of metres into the Pacific, announced by the red bilingual RESTRICTED AREA NO TRESPASSING U.S. GOVERNMENT PROPERTY AREA RESTRINGIDA PROHIBIDA LA ENTRADA PROPIEDAD DEL GOBIERNO DE EE. UU. signs, lies the border wall. Walls, rather, meandering downhill between bushes and wildflowers growing out of the dead land. Holes pierce the austere slats, revealing, from the Mexican side, a wasteland with Navy helicopters flying in the distance. From the U.S. side, a lively beach with white residential houses overlooking the waves breaking on the metal structure can be seen. Although Friendship Park is closed, Border State Field Park remains accessible to those willing to follow Monument Road in the Tijuana River Valley—an unmarked concrete path slowly thinning into a gravel trail, then dissolving into dunes. Stretched arms wave from afar across the closed border. Indiscernible faces peer through the fences as the palms are seen swinging between neighbouring slats opening on Jardines Playas de Tijuana.

Along its 3,144-kilometre length, the border deploys a continuum of surveillance, ranging from cameras to foot patrols, complemented by infrastructure, walls, and fences adapting to the numerous environments it runs through: metropolitan areas, from Tijuana and San Diego, CA to Matamoros and Brownsville, TX, as well as rivers and deserts, deadly crossings from the north of Sonora to Arizona. In some areas of the latter, the gaps in the “Smart Wall,” as described by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) website, conflate both the violence of dry, impractical terrain and the political rhetoric of projected sovereignty, using funds from the “One Big Beautiful Bill”, to plan, award, and build a second fence, closing the continuum with continuous infrastructure.

The Arizona desert has indeed never been fuller. An accumulation of monitoring devices and infrastructure completes a landscape that was never marginal. Yet, the Arizona desert

¹ “Chunks of granite with no origin or context. [...] Then they were in the desert and the mountains. There were the parents of the orphan rocks they’d just passed. Granitic formations, volcanic formations, peaks silhouetted against the sky in the shape and fashion of birds, but birds of sorrow, thought Amalfitano.” (2666, Roberto Bolaño, translated by Natasha Wimmer, English edition by Picador)

persists as a space of erasure: crossings from the Sonora region to Arizona tell the history of migration, one of haunting skulls bluntly emerging from sands and rocks, one of corpses found near the border. Much like the “orphan rocks” described in Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, the Arizona desert absorbs the stories of the crossing attempts. A space of veiled disappearance, if not for the visual records of Dr. Greg Hess, a medical examiner in Pima County, AZ, and Brian Maguire’s painterly expression of them.

In 2019, the Dublin-born artist gained access to Hess’s thousands of administrative records accumulated over the years as bodies were found in the desert. Maguire used these photographs, the date and time of discovery, and the GPS coordinates to create his *Arizona* series. “Remains,” an exhibition of the works, was presented in the Crawford Art Gallery in Cork (17 September 2021-9 January 2022), featuring striking expressionist transfigurations of the medical record—violence expressed in empty eye sockets and dislocated skeletons against long yellow-and-ocher strokes. On the right, immediately



Brian Maguire, *Arizona 1*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 146x210cm

visible when entering the room, hung *Arizona 1*. Dominated by a shock of blue sky and sandy ochre, only a few figurative subjects stand out from the fluid horizontal gestures of the background. A skeleton, central in the painting, captures the viewer’s attention first: dark, almost shadowy, with touches of light on its white skull and decaying ribcage. To see more of the brown tones under the ribs, to slowly find touches of red between the

bones, the spectator has to approach the canvas. At proximity, the painting entirely absorbs the field of view as the desert spills out from both sides. The regard of the gallery visitor becomes that of a witness: getting closer to the discovery in all its violence, only to be absorbed by the desert, with the dark green tones of plants hovering on the corners of their eyes, and the weight of the brown mountains, seen from below, acting as reminders of the violence of the desert.

Of the five paintings shown in that room, *Arizona 1* acts as an introductory work for Maguire’s expressionism. The other four show discovered bodies from up close, with a blunter, more aggressive expression. Unlike *Arizona 1*, where the corpse is seen from a distance, *Arizona 7* brutally jolts the viewer into the rotten ribcages and a dislocated skeleton on the bright orange-red of the desert. Defined brush strokes give a less

expansive background, and the dark plants are replaced with mineral elements: scattered rocks around the body arch the limbs in a restless position, leaving the skull hanging. Haunted by the striking yellow around the shoulders and by the unidentified dark-green element, the spectators can only project their eye around the painting, wishing to find relief and peace that will not be awarded to them. Just like Bolaño's repetitive and



Brian Maguire, *Arizona 7*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 125x181cm

abrupt descriptions of murders happening in Santa Teresa in the fourth part of *2666*, *Arizona 7* showcases a barer depiction of the crossings in the desert.

Yet, from the *Arizona* series arises a broader voice that can almost be heard through the paintings. Not Brian Maguire's, even though the artist acts as a mediator between the public and the files of the record, between what has been seen and compiled, and what is displayed with acrylic on a canvas; a voice that bridges the gap between continents, crossing deserts, walls or water alike, a voice that speaks languages of sorrow and despair.

Four years after the Cork exhibition, Brian Maguire presented "Nature Morte²" in the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris (30 April-6 July 2025), in which the *Arizona* series is seen anew. While some paintings were present in both exhibits, and the same voice was whispering out of them, the acute ear would feel a slight nuance, as if the passing years altered the tones. Despite having the same material, the change of title for the exhibition transmuted what was seen and presented in Cork as remains into a cry beyond stillness and death. The second time, this cry seemed to pour out of the canvases, clothed in all its violence. *Arizona 4* is particularly striking in this aspect. The position of the skeleton, seen from afar, lying flat at the centre of the piece, is similar to *Arizona 1*, as is the technique used for the background. Much like *Arizona 1*, plants are present, but this time they seem to sprout from around, or perhaps inside the corpse, nature taking over the remains. This idea seems to be reinforced by the light green tones standing out against the dark colours used for the rest of the painting. The skull, facing the viewer, is painted black, as is the upper body. There, the contrast between nature and death is pushed to its

² Untranslated by the Irish Cultural Centre. The expression "Nature Morte" is usually translated by "Still Life", but a more literal translation could be "Dead Nature".



Brian Maguire, *Arizona 4*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 200x300cm

extreme: a lively plant grows out of the desert's stillness, while a corpse decays after a crossing never achieved.

Just before entering the main room, and after *Arizona 13*, in which a very white skull on a grey and black background can be seen, a map was presented. It showed the main roads from Nogales to Tucson, its distance labeled with days of walking. On the map, red dots, scattered

innumerable everywhere, show where bodies of migrants were found. "Muchas personas han muerto cruzando. No hay suficiente agua. Muchas personas se pierden en el vasto desierto³," says the legend, geographically materialising the violence that the series voices. At the very bottom of the map, a solid straight line represents the border between Mexico and the United States. On the US Customs and Border Protection website, images of the same border are displayed. They show the cranes of the Tucson Sonoita Project carrying the 24.7-mile primary wall into the desert. In between the metal slats, voices may soon be heard, carrying the records of the haunting skulls scattered across the Sonoran desert.

Brian Maguire (b. 1951 in Dublin) is a politically and socially engaged Irish painter. His works, often described as expressionist, focus on violence, social injustice, and inequality. He works in Dublin and Paris. His Arizona series confronts migration between the United States of America and Mexico, especially in the desert north of the border in AZ. This article drew most of the information presented from the "Remains" exhibit, as seen in the Crawford Art Gallery of Cork in 2021 and from the "Nature Morte" exhibit, as seen in the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris in 2025. In Dublin, some of Brian Maguire's work can be seen in the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA).