

THE GLOSS

Artistic License: Brian Maguire

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

How do you define your role as an artist?

My role as an artist is to represent what I see.

How and where do you work?

More often than not I am invited to go to a place and listen. Inevitably, the research is done on site. The paintings are made depending on size, in Dublin or Paris; the larger ones being painted in Paris. The shows are always by invitation. I generally fund my research and production with sales and grants. Before traveling, I read myself into the subject. Usually, there is a long wait until it is possible to do a work; depending on time, visa or funding, etc. When it is possible to travel and do the research, then this is a sign to make the work.



*Brian Maguire, Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up, 2016,
Image Courtesy of © Kerlin Gallery, Dublin*

Can you tell us about the background to Brian's practice?

Michael Dempsey: Brian Maguire's painting practice is driven by the struggle against inequality and violence, and the pursuit of justice. Compelled towards the raw realities of human conflict, Maguire approaches painting foremost as an act of solidarity, rehumanising his subjects and recentring the narratives of the disenfranchised. Social engagement plays a central role, leading him to work closely and interactively with refugees, survivors of warzones, incarcerated peoples and local newsrooms in locations including Sudan, Syria, São Paulo and Ciudad Juárez.

This subject-led approach requires negotiating an exchange; establishing a method of working that attempts to "repay the debt" to its subjects. Maguire's direct observation of conflict zones puts his practice adjacent to forms of war reporting or photojournalism but, while his artworks might begin as acts of bearing witness, his task in the studio is to transform his testimony into blisteringly powerful works of art. There is a resulting tension between the raw and visceral nature of Maguire's subject matter and the seductive, illusory nature of painting itself. Rather than abandoning aestheticism, Maguire uses painterly skill, surface and texture to draw us into an uncomfortable relationship; in which ethical vision functions as part of the poetic imagination, resituating art in the concrete social structures from which it is so often removed.

From the artist's early years of 1980s Ireland to geo-political issues, subjects that have become triggers for the artist, and in turn our own reflections, have been selected. Maguire carries an expanded view of war – seen as a class and gender struggle, as well as post-colonial legacy. However, to call Maguire's work reportage is to simplify; instead there is this: to say what he wants to say, Maguire has to be there, to bear witness, in the manner of James Nachtwey or his inspiration, Goya (*The Disasters of War*), in the manner of George Orwell: *Homage to Barcelona*, Brian Maguire needs to see for himself.



Brian Maguire, Mr. William Earle, Sudan 1880, 2018. Image courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin. © Brian Maguire

class held a private party in one of their homes in Juarez, when gunmen arrived and shot at the kids, killing many of the 20 youngsters. The government in faraway Mexico city, through the President of Mexico, stated that this happens when trading drugs. The distraught and angry mothers travelled to Mexico city and waved their children's exam results at the president. They were all good students. Likewise, the government tended, through its police, to blame the women and girls for their own deaths, falsifying evidence. In Juarez, there were not enough detectives to open a file on each of the murdered; much less conduct an investigation.

At the end of the project, the Museum de Arte de Juarez exhibited the paintings of the women and girls in 2019, and this acknowledgement was supported by the families. One woman explained, "We were born on the edge of this city, our daughters were born on the edge of this city, our daughters were killed on the edge of this city. We have never before been in the centre

Your exhibition, 'La Grande Illusion', focuses on a certain period of your work from 2007 to 2024. Can you outline the importance of this period?

This period begins when I went to Ciudad Juarez in 2008 following a contact given to me in Houston. I met with Marisela Ortiz in El Paso, Texas, and we reached an agreement that I could meet with families of a murdered woman, and I could put on art classes for the orphans.

This led me to start a project of making two paintings; one for the family and one for a museum show. For just over ten years, I spent the time returning to Juarez meeting people and researching stories of the murders.

In later years, I took a close interest in the killing of men. There was a horrible event, for example; a senior school

of this city. Today, in the centre, our daughters are acknowledged". A film of the art process and the mother's stories was made by Mark McLoughlin, with music by Gavin Friday and Terry Allen.

In Dublin, I made a short work looking at the murdered young men of the city's feuds. It seemed strange to me that the conflict resolution skills of the Irish government, honed by the Good Friday Agreement, are used with gangs in Haiti and in Kabul, but not in Crumlin.

In 2015, I presented in the Fergus McCaffrey Gallery, New York, a new body of work that arose from a residency in the newsroom of El Norte Newspaper, which showed the violence people of Juarez lived with. It was also shown in Derry and Eamon McCann, Susan McCabe, Ed Vulliamy and Jonathan Cummins spoke at a resulting seminar titled 'Absence of Justice.' 2018 was spent working on a monograph, published by the Kerlin Galley and Fergus McCaffrey Gallery.

In 2017, I travelled to Syria via Beirut and photographed the remains of Homs and Aleppo. These paintings became the Irish Museum of Modern Art show 'War Changes its Address.'

In 2019, I returned to El Paso and Juarez to present a show in both cities, simultaneously. Covid set in shortly after, so I retreated to my studio in Sandyford and began work on the archive of police photos I had collected from the Chief Medical Examiner at the Pima County. The pictures showed the migrants who died from dehydration while trying to reach Tucson. This resonated with a body of work made in 2011 from images of African migrants who drown in the Mediterranean. The exhibition was launched in the Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, late in 2021 with a publication, 'Remains'. Finally, this show covers work I made following a research trip to the Amazon River near the city of Manaus to engage and record the comments of the indigenous people who lived on the river.



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

The exhibition also feels particularly poignant given current conflicts around the world...

My paintings all contribute to an argument that this world is fixed against the poor. Taken individually, they tell a local story but, as a whole, they speak of capitalism.

How is the exhibition structured?

Michael Dempsey: 'La Grande Illusion' develops Brian Maguire's multi-layered oeuvre by transforming the galleries of Hugh Lane into a space for action and dialogue. Six themes are laid out in a visual narrative, reminding us that art history always reflects structures of domination. It puts the power inherited by the museum to good use by displacing motifs usually linked to history's victors in favour of other genealogies. Brian Maguire's paintings play a critical role in critiquing, complementing and providing an alternative to state narratives, and the exhibition offers a space for ideas and emotions that may be overlooked or underrepresented in the fast-paced digital world.



Irish artist Brian Maguire and co-curators Barbara Dawson, Director and Michael Dempsey, Head of Exhibitions ahead of the exhibition 'La Grande Illusion' opening 3rd October at Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, Image © 2024 Laurence J

Need to know: 'Brian Maguire: La Grande Illusion' opens at [Hugh Lane Gallery](#) on October 3 to March 23 2025.