



Remains – Brian Maguire

Artist as social commentator

A Senior Cycle Resource

**Crawford Learn
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A Senior Cycle Resource

Brian Maguire's paintings confront migration at the US/Mexican border. This resource provides information and discussion points to support students in forming their own opinions. It is especially relevant to the leaving cert art appreciation question - *Art as Social Commentary*.

Words matter

Who are refugees?

People who are living in fear and are unsafe in their own country. Refugees are people who are fleeing armed conflict, war or persecution across an international border. Returning to their own country would make them unsafe.

Who are migrants?

Migrants may be escaping real poverty or difficult conditions but their lives are not in immediate danger. Migrants are people who move, not because their lives are in danger, but most often to improve their chances of having a better life. A better life might mean finding decent work, meaningful educational opportunities, or being reunited with family members.

What does the word migration mean?

The word migration was first used in English in the seventeenth century to describe people moving, it comes from a latin word meaning 'to move about'. People have always moved through out history. The meaning of migration today is tied to the borders of countries and political or cultural ideas about nation states and protection, which determines who is allowed to cross and who is not.

Who are asylum seekers?

A person who has applied for official refugee status in a country that is not their home. They are seeking international protection, which is a human right under international law.

People are not labels

The terms used in this resource describe a person's legal status in relation to migration, which is only one part of a person's story. These labels do not describe a person's identity and no-one can be known solely through their legal status.

Asylum seekers in Ireland?

In Ireland, asylum seekers are housed in a system of basic accommodation called Direct Provision, while they wait to hear if they have been granted refugee status by the Irish state.

The United Nations and international human rights groups have heavily criticised the system. The processing of asylum claims is extremely slow. Asylum seekers generally wait for a year to gain an initial interview to assess their status and it can take years to exit the system, asylum seekers describe feeling helpless and in 'limbo'.

Direct Provision accommodation is often isolated, away from towns or city centres and accommodation can be cramped. The centres are run by for-profit hospitality and catering companies under contract with the Irish government.

Refugee Crisis

Amnesty International estimate that there are 26 million refugees globally. Some see people moving across borders as a threat. Others argue that we have a responsibility to help others in an unequal world: to address the conflict, inequality, climate change that drives people from their homes.

More to think about

- **Is moving part of your family story?**
- **What do you think would make you want to leave your home?**
- **What does it mean to belong in your country?**
- **Should every person have an automatic right to a safe home? Should certain restrictions be applied?**
- **Do you think that every person should have the right to move freely?**
- **If you lived in a country where they were few jobs, no health care, no access to education, what would you do?**
- **If you lived in a place where your ethnicity, gender, sexuality meant that you felt unsafe, what would you do?**
- **Is it right to look after Irish people first and make sure that they have everything they need before offering protection to refugees?**



Who is the artist?

Irish artist Brian Maguire is a politically and socially engaged artist. He makes paintings and drawings to bear witness to inequality and violence. In making art with and for people who are marginalised, he has worked as an artist with prison inmates in Ireland, Poland, and America, with homeless people and people in psychiatric hospital. Brian has travelled to favelas in Brazil, slums in Nairobi, war-torn Aleppo in Syria and Juárez in Mexico to work with victims of gender violence.

Brian Maguire suggests that artists cannot solve society's problems, but what they can do is meaningfully communicate problems through art, especially the stories of people who don't have a public voice.

Brian was born in Dublin and studied art at NCAD. As a young man, in the 1970s, life was difficult, he began drinking at 15, this spiralled into a drink problem, he became unemployed and homeless. Brian managed to get treatment and turned to painting to look back at his experience. He focused on his feelings of alienation and his own experience of violence and inequality. Gradually he moved from making artwork about internal conflict, to stories of conflict in the wider world.

'I decided that I could not make a painting without something of the real world being in, or part of, some aspect of the subject. You have to be part of the story. This is the method of the projects that I do — and if you work this way, it can take 10 years to complete a project. It takes a long time to belong somewhere enough to paint it.'

Brian Maguire in conversation with journalist Ed Vulliamy, p44 Brian Maguire monograph published by Fergus McGaffrey & Kerlin Gallery Dublin.

Brian has spent the last 40 years travelling to places where there is violent inequality, he is drawn to telling the stories of people who are unseen. To construct his paintings he will often refer to photographs and news clippings, He is sometimes compared to a war artist or a photo journalist.

'There's one thing that I share with photo-journalists, I actually go there. It doesn't work unless you do that. There's something about sharing a space with the people who are there that enables you to have ownership of the images.'

There is always an element of exchange in Brian's projects. When he travelled to Aleppo in Syria he offered art classes to local children. *'You have to bring some item of value to the place and people which gives you the right to work there. And that value needs to be negotiated'*

Brian Maguire in conversation with journalist Ed Vulliamy, p51, Brian Maguire monograph published by Fergus McGaffrey & Kerlin Gallery Dublin.

Brian is adamant that it is his job to give back to the communities that he works within, not to exploit their grief or create a spectacle of their lives. On developing meaningful relationships of trust he has said *'to paint someone is to steal from them in some way, even to the point of abuse, perhaps. And that is something that requires the artist to pay back a debt to the subject.'*

Human Rights lawyer Lucia Castro described the impact of Brian's art work by stating the Mexican government did not care what she or her colleagues said, before Brian brought the story of the



Pamela and Tabeta with their portraits, favela Vila Prudente 1998, courtesy of the artist.

extreme gender violence taking place in Juárez to the US and Europe.

Brian has described his paintings as a *'gesture of solidarity'* and as *'an act of revenge'* for injustice.

'Well, for a long time, the feelings that returned to me were feelings of anger, so this became the source of the work. I get very f.....g angry when I see something like this. How did those people manage to get here? Why did they kill this girl? It's a separate question as to who the anger is for, but that's what I meant when I said that most art comes from a spirit of revenge; sometimes love, but mostly revenge.'

Interview – with Brian Maguire; *'Painting as Solidarity'*, Visual Artist's News Sheet, March/April 2018, Joanne Laws.

Brian describes his artwork as being driven by both love and anger. His commitment to telling the stories of people who a disempowered means that he gathers as much detailed visual information as possible.

'There is an archival and forensic nature to this work. Justice failed the Jews in Europe

and every text I've read emphasises that their story be told in the future. And who does the telling? Artists. When asked why Ireland had so many writers, Becket said: "when you are in the last ditch, there's nothing left to do but sing." The only thing left is to ensure that the story is told. I see myself as a storyteller, as a contemporary history painter. The logic of the work rests in the telling of these stories.'

Interview – with Brian Maguire; 'Painting as Solidarity', Visual Artist's News Sheet, March/April 2018, Joanne Laws.

Words are powerful

Consider the following words and phrases that have been used in the context of migration by political leaders around the world....

swarm

flood

swamped

checks and balances

illegal alien

America First

Build a wall

China Virus

Prevention Through Deterrence

Operation Gatekeeper

Operation Hold the Line

Zero Tolerance

parasite

Hostile Environment

epidemic

Fortress Britain

Take Back Control

Breaking Point

invasion

snow flakes

free housing

Go Home

Paintings that confront migration

Art can be a tool to communicate what is difficult to put into words, with directness and urgency. Brian's paintings call for urgent action and human dignity.

'I feel fairly powerless as an individual... We all have a responsibility, I think, to work in the space we can — I can choose to paint.'

Brian Maguire in conversation with journalist Ed Vulliamy, p54, Brian Maguire monograph published by Fergus McGaffrey & Kerlin Gallery Dublin.

Brian made a series of paintings about migration in 2016, the news was filled with images of thousands of refugees and migrants from Syria, Africa and Asia desperately trying to escape poverty, climate change and war. So desperate that they were trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea from Libya and the Aegean Sea from Turkey. Often paying smugglers and relying on pathetic dinghies to travel vast distances. Brian's paintings acknowledged the many people lost at sea.

Brian said *'What an artist has to do is reflect their time . . . That's really what I'm trying to do, to reflect what is for me the biggest story in Europe – those deaths in the Mediterranean.'*

Refusing to look away – An Irishwoman's Diary on Brian Maguire's paintings on the migrant crisis, Brian Maguire in conversation with Lara Marlowe, Irish Times 2016.



In this painting, water closes over a fully dressed young man. His life is ahead of him but he is suspended in the deep blue sea unable to surface.

Detail: Brian Maguire, Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up, 2016 © The Artist.

The source for this painting was an image that Brian found on the internet, but he found that he could only make one painting in this way. So Brian later drove from Paris to Greece and back through Macedonia, to see the conditions experienced by the refugees for himself.



Brian Maguire, Arizona 1, 2020 acrylic on linen 146.5 × 210.5 cm. © The Artist.

The paintings in this exhibition

In 2019, Brian Maguire met Dr Greg Hess, Chief Medical Examiner for Pima County, Tucson, Arizona. Dr Hess gave the artist access to thousands of visual records of unidentified people who died while struggling to cross the desert into the United States.

Determined to tell their story, Brian combed through the records, and selected 8 photographs. He projected the photographs onto large canvases as a guide, and gradually built up the paintings.

The art works are large canvases, with washes of thinned down acrylic paint, in this work we see greys, blues and earth colours. We can see the motion of the brush. In the centre of this canvas are the unidentified skeletal remains of a migrant who has perished, a bundle of clothes at their feet.

Brian says *'There's an enormous contradiction here—the landscape is desert but it's extraordinarily beautiful. There's beauty all around, and these guys are dying, but then there's airplanes going over. Some people travel on planes, others have to make this crossing on foot. That's why I make these paintings, to draw the line under that difference.'*

Brian Maguire in conversation with Christian Viveros-Fauné, p43, Remains - Brain Maguire, exhibition catalogue.



Brian Maguire, Arizona 2, 2020 acrylic on linen 150 × 200 cm
© The Artist.

The paintings are raw and uncomfortable. Brian does not make pretty paintings, yet he is a very accomplished artist and much of the handling of paint is beautiful. The purpose of this art is to communicate a difficult story with both love and anger.

The desert

Arizona's Sonoran Desert is a vast and unrelenting wilderness on the US-Mexican border. Donald Trump could not have built a wall more effective than the Sonoran Desert. Summer temperatures can reach 50C degrees. People travel into the desert because they are completely desperate to reach the US, and because they have given up on the asylum process.

The Migrants

Displaced by violence, poverty, climate change and the impact of COVID-19, they are part of the movement of people, from Latin America, Asia, Africa through Mexico into the USA. Ever since the border was drawn in 1848, the USA has recruited workers from beyond the borderline, but resisted any more immigration.

'It's terribly important that those people are recorded and given places of honour in our system. The only way I know is to make art that will recognise their existence . . . When the system fails to protect human rights, we're left with the story. And the last thing is to tell the story.'

Refusing to look away – An Irishwoman's Diary on Brian Maguire's paintings on the migrant crisis, Brian Maguire in conversation with Lara Marlowe, Irish Times 2016.



Further discussion

Artists and social commentary at the US/Mexican border

Teeter-Totter Wall

Architects Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello have worked creatively to reimagine the US/Mexico border wall. In 2019 they installed pink seesaws (teeter-totter) into the border wall for families to play on. The architects describe *'actions that take place on one side of a teeter-totter having direct consequence on the other side'*. A small section of the wall between the two countries became a site of playful connection.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/30/pink-seesaws-reach-across-divide-us-mexico-border>



Make America Grate Again

Artist Cosimo Cavallaro has built a wall made of old cotija cheese in front of the border wall in Tecate, California. Cosimo fundraises through his website and sells his own merchandise with the ultimate goal of making the wall 1000 feet long.

<https://www.cheesewall.com>



GIANTS

In 2017 street artist JR created a gigantic installation at the border fence.

The installation shows Kikito, a toddler whose house overlooks the border, playfully peeking over the fence from his side. JR organised a picnic that took place on both sides of the fence. Kikito, his family



and hundreds of guests came together to share a meal. People gathered around a long table stamped with a pair of eyes that stretched across both sides of the fence. They listened to music with half the band playing on either side of the fence.

<http://www.jr-art.net/projects/giants-border-mexico>



Brotherhood Mural

Artist Enrique Chiu worked with 3700 volunteers to create a mile long mural on the border wall to spread messages of solidarity with people crossing the border.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YM4DP8N-POUk&t=43s>

<https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2019/06/mural-of-brotherhood/>



More to think about

- Can art inspire social change?
- Can art inspire us to question and imagine better ways to live together?
- Can art help us to connect with people who are different or distant?
- Migrants are not all the same and their experiences of moving can be difficult, funny, surreal or transformative, is there a migrant artist, maker or performer that inspires you?

Further resources:

<https://www.kerlingallery.com/artists/brian-maguire>

Brian Maguire monograph published by Fergus McGaffrey & Kerlin Gallery Dublin available to read online at https://issuu.com/darragh-kerlin/docs/brian-maguire_issuu_preset

<https://humaneborders.org>

<https://www.afar.com/magazine/10-border-walls-that-artists-have-turned-into-powerful-protests>

<https://cvonhassett.medium.com/art-at-the-crossroads-artists-addressing-the-u-s-mexico-border-8c708e1659cc>

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/migration-and-movement/#

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo>

<https://counterpointsarts.org.uk/artists/>

Sources for this resource

Remains: Brian Maguire, exhibition catalogue published by Crawford Art Gallery.

Brian Maguire monograph published by Fergus McGaffrey & Kerlin Gallery Dublin available to read online at https://issuu.com/darragh-kerlin/docs/brian_maguire_issuu_preset

<https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/refusing-to-look-away-an-irish-woman-s-diary-on-brian-maguire-s-paintings-on-the-migrant-crisis-1.2715455>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/art-from-atrocity-brian-maguire-records-a-humanitarian-crisis-1.3619449>

<https://joannelaws.com/2018/03/21/interview-with-brian-maguire-painting-as-solidarity-visual-artists-news-sheet-march-april-2018/>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/visual-art/art-from-atrocity-brian-maguire-records-a-humanitarian-crisis-1.3619449>

Voice Our Concern, Amnesty International Ireland Secondary School Education Pack
https://www.amnesty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Chapter_07.pdf

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>

Who are Refugees and Migrants?

What Makes People Leave Their Homes? And Other Big Questions.
Michael Rosen & Annemarie Young

Cork politician criticised over refugee post
Independent Cork City councillor Ken O'Flynn says he won't apologise for calling for 'checks and balances' on refugees fleeing the Taliban, and has hit out at those criticising him, calling them 'snowflakes' <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/munster/arid-40361282.html>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/151206-immigration-border-migrant-mexico-desert-ngbooktalk>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jul/12/us-immigration-bodies-heat-arizona>

<https://www.politico.eu/article/toxic-news-refugees-migrants-eu/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>

https://www.humanityinaction.org/knowledge_detail/an-alternative-vocabulary-for-reporting-on-migration-issues-on-politics-ethics-and-the-news-medias-contested-migration-terminology/

<https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/border-crisis-arizona-sonoran-desert-882613/>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/direct-provision>

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/irelands-strange-cruel-system-for-asylum-seekers>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo>

