

BRIAN MAGUIRE AND THE CASA DA CULTURA PROJECT AT VILA PRUDENTE, SÃO PAULO.

James Concagh

I must say I enjoyed the opportunity of having had the chance to work with Brian Maguire. His work reminded me of my teacher Robert Mason when I studied with him in 1979 at Chelsea School of Art. Mason went on to produce his great series of paintings based on the workers that built The Broadgate Complex in the heart of London. I was fortunate enough to witness some of the work in process. Mason spent many hours at night portraying the men at work laying the foundations beneath the earth. These men, for the artist, were very special. They seemed to have a life of their own and his descriptions of the whole project made me realise that Robert was in fact going back to his childhood memories of the factory workers and miners from his home town of Leeds. In much the same way as Mason felt strongly towards the workers that dug deep below the surface, Maguire relates to men locked away in prisons. Although I did not know Brian from my National College of Art and Design days, I would have been aware of his work from the art scene in Dublin. Brian would have just started his work with prisoners when I left Ireland in 1986.

First of all, I was more than honoured to have been chosen by the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland to assist Brian with his research here for the XXIV Bienal International Art Show of São Paulo. I enjoyed meeting the Commissioner Fiach MacConghail on his two visits out here as well as Jenny Haughton whom co-ordinated the whole project from Dublin. I was also very flattered when Munira H. Mutran from the Associação Brasileira de Estudos Irlandeses invited me to write an article about the work that Brian developed during his three-month stay here. Looking back now I can see how much went on and how little I know of the complexities that lie behind Brian's work. What threw me most was the Foreword that Thomas MacEvilley writes in the official catalogue for the Bienal. Just when I thought I could get away with a few crisp and clever sentences, MacEvilley draws extensive parallels to Maguire's concepts of art that I would never have guessed in a thousand years. Left somewhat bewildered by the article, I realised that the only way to deal with things was to try to develop some consistent descriptions about what I personally found interesting about the project. This also makes sense when one considers just how many people were involved in the project. I am sure that I wouldn't be wrong if I counted near to one hundred people. So, in order to keep my sanity and try to analyse in some way the artist's work, I have decided to concentrate more on his way of painting rather than the intricate symbolic and social elements that are also important in his work.

In an article by Simon Morely in *Art News*, edition 196, a great concern is given to the fact that Ireland has very few visual artists and that the run of the mill lies in the hands of a very few. Morely quite rightly sums this up with the exceedingly high level of talents in the field of literature:

With a combined population-North and South-equalling about half that of London, Ireland can boast a disproportionately large number of 20th Century writers, from Yeats and Joyce to Seamus Heaney. Today the literary scene is as strong as ever but one would have been hard pressed until recently to name an Irish artist of international stature, certainly not based in Ireland.

While many artists are in search of an international sense of what Irish art could be, in a wider sense of the word, Maguire chose to dig deep into his own territory and face the music. For twelve years the artist worked in prisons around the country dedicating himself to those that had no means of expressing themselves. He also chose to face the problems of a changing society still plagued with moral and political contradictions. In many respects the artist portrays his prisoners as people that were unable to adapt to these new changes. The series of portraits of these prisoners was eventually made into a video based on the rules and regulations laid down by Irish Law in 1958.

Although I only saw these works on slides, I was able to see them on a number of occasions together with Brian. After a while I began to make relationships with the way the artist portrayed some of the prisoners with a different painterly style to that of others. I noticed, for example, that his portrait of Christy was a lot lighter. Brian applied his paint with more refined strokes and was a lot more generous with the open spaces around the figure. With the other prisoners he was a lot more vigorous with the paint. There was hardly any description of space at all on the picture plain. In a sort of naive way I made comparisons between this and the idea of being in a small cell. I imagined that the prison was in fact the pictorial space on the canvas itself. Now the interesting thing about all this was that Christy was one of the few prisoners that claimed he was innocent. He spent nine years proving it and eventually won the case. In order to do this he had to read the law and know it well in order to defend his cause. The other interesting element was that Brian had a collection of portraits of Christy throughout the

process, which were highly interesting from the point of view of contradictory brush-strokes and spatial concepts. From a purely pictorial point of view there is no doubt that there is some psychological element attached to those prisoners that are literally moulded onto the picture plain and those that are not. Although Christy was an exception to the rule I was only able to see this more clearly by looking through Maguire's whole selection of paintings over the last ten years and some of the drastic changes that took place in his work at the Bienal.

The official theme for this year's XXIV International Bienal of São Paulo was chosen by the director, Paulo Herkenhoff, in relation to the question of anthropophagy. Herkenhoff mentions in one of the cities leading newspapers: "...I am more than pleased for having brought these curators and artists for discussions that we proposed. This reflects the amplitude of the Bienal..."

The notion of anthropophagy is strongly related to the idea of cannibalism. Many artists interpreted the theme literally using elements of war and carnage to get the message across while others touched on more everyday forms of Western consumer society devouring their products. Maguire's proposal was interpreted by the critic Celso Fioravente as follows: "National representations have included a segment of countries where one country "fights" with its neighbouring country and everyone loses". Since most of Brian's work deals with prisoners there are obvious traits of the so-called "Troubles" relevant in his work.

Maguire's final proposal, however, was to question the process of criminality and why it happens in the first place. Choosing São Paulo, the artist was interested in not just the Irish process but a much wider notion of injustice. In many respects Maguire was able to touch upon the whole question of how people are, in fact, consumed by social injustice in a far more direct way here in Brazil than, let us say, in Ireland. This does not mean, however, that criminality is not as complex here as it is in other countries but, in a city like São Paulo, there are certain harsh urban realities and codes that perhaps make it easier to differentiate. With only 20% of the population representing middle class standards there is an enormous gap between extreme wealth and poverty.

Since crime usually starts early here, Maguire was very conscious of including children in his final show or installation piece. For two months the artist worked in one of the cities oldest shanty towns, Vila Prudente, depicting more or less forty portraits using charcoal technique. The Irish Commissioner, Fiach MacConghail describes his first visit to the area in the catalogue:

After my one and only visit to Vila Prudente in São Paulo, a certain melancholy set in. A sense of fatalism that exists amongst the marginalised sector of any society began to disturb me while at the same time offering no understanding of it.

Maguire spent a great deal of his time working in this environment and collecting as much information as he could about the children and their backgrounds. There were a number of problems involved and the language barrier didn't help. Maguire finally visited some of the children's homes and using photographs, projected on to large aluminium panels, included the portraits he had done of the child in his or her environment. The third section of the exhibition concentrates on portraits of prisoners from *Diário Popular* (a more popular newspaper in the city that has a section that announces acts of crime committed by certain citizens) showing photographs of prisoners that had been selected for that day. The large painting entitled "Memorial", based on the 111 prisoners massacred in the Carindiru penitentiary here in the city of São Paulo, completes the exhibition and adds a new scale to the whole space.

In the introduction of the catalogue Thomas McEvelley comments:

So in a sense the various elements might be viewed as pictures of different stages of life. First the subjects are seen as children, then as convicts whose pictures are in the news, then as corpses after being massacred by the police.

Within the criteria of the Herkenhoff proposal for the Bienal there is no doubt that there is an awful truth to McEvelley's description of Maguire's work. The notion that the poorer classes are much more likely to become the criminals of tomorrow and that the system will consume and annihilate them like a large munching machine is certainly one way of looking at it.

If one, however, reads all the work on this level then the artist has certainly produced an excellent installation piece. What interested me most, though, were the paintings of the prisoners and how Brian painted them here compared with those back home. Maguire had given the figures more space on the canvas both in the *Diario Popular* compositions and in the large painting *Memorial*.

The most disturbing thing about the prisoners here is that they seem to have been given a place to breathe and reflect. They appear to conjure up this whole psychological question of what is in fact a prisoner after all. The moulding now seems to be the very physical sense of the portraits rather than the environment around. The men are somewhat distorted as though they are struggling with their own physiology. While the portraits of Christy still suggest elements of physical and symbolic repression

around the figure these portraits reveal the struggle from within. The artist is touching on the very essence of human liberty through the act of painting. This is essentially Maguire at his best both as a painter who cares about his techniques and the artist who cares about those who he feels have been hard done by. Oddly enough, it was Yeats himself that drew our attention to the notion of portraiture when he wrote:

*If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror after mirror,
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.**

Maguire's tremendous humility before his subject matter and his continuous searching for form upon form allow him to reach tremendous depths in his portraits. His concern for prisoners and the underprivileged are essential and his social consciousness in putting the message across naturally makes him prone to deliver it in some documented format. But the real issue of Maguire's strength comes about when he is face to face with his canvas and paper, usually in a very isolated state. It is here that the artist depends on the minimum of resources and the maximum act of faith.

When I asked Fiach MacConghail over a cup of coffee why he had pushed so hard for Brian to be selected for this year's Bienal he responded, "Because he is a painter". This was more than a straightforward answer and one that was to put into perspective the more essential elements of Maguire's work.

The large painting "*Memorial*" and the "*Portraits of Prisoners from Diario Popular*" are without a doubt the strongest elements in the final exhibition. In many respects Maguire's portraits of prisoners are a lot more about the essence of his own child-like qualities than the children from Centro Cultural. Here Maguire lets loose with the paint and creates his own personal metaphor that is so characteristic of his approach to his painting. The artist is free to deal with the subject...a subject that he knows so well. As I watched Brian working on this series I was astounded at the way he applied the paint and distorted the images to his own advantage. Thomas McEvilley emphasises the importance of Maguire's techniques on a number of occasions: "...The whole metaphor that the painter is spurring his life fluids onto the canvas, which would never be held true of Mondrian but was invited by Pollock".

In much the same way as the artist gave Christy ample space on the canvas Maguire now gives his *Diario Popular* prisoners the same treatment. The one painting of this series that always comes to mind is the portrait of a prisoner painted on March 18th. Oddly enough the prisoner is not only freed from the mundane reality where Maguire found him, but on the very picture plane where he stares out into this poetic white space over to the right. The contrast of his slightly distorted body...the only thing he owns... in relation to the white non-physical space around creates a contrast that allows the spectator to understand the true level of human dignity at its bear minimum. Maguire no longer needs to protect his prisoners with so much thick lashing paint nor does he have to arm them with symbolic weapons or destructive elements on the picture plain. The Negro prisoner has an air about him that permits him to function as a human being regardless of his destiny. Maguire surrenders to the act of painting and determines his credibility in human nature by the dark tones that make the figure stand out like a rock. "*Memorial*", by its sheer size deals with similar issues. The prisoners are laid out in their makeshift coffins after having been mercilessly gunned down the night before. Paint runs down the canvas like blood and symbolic forms can be seen along the sides. Maguire, however, leaves an enormous white area in the top centre of the composition. The overall scene is too much to deal with and I sensed that when the artist explained, "I wanted to give the idea that they had somewhere to go after having been slaughtered like sheep...a place in heaven", there were obvious connotations about just how difficult it was to paint. Brian had acquired actual photographs after his first visit here, from the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo*, in order to complete the painting in his studio in Bray.

Apart from the video, slides were also shown to pupils when Brian first came over in February when he gave some lectures and talks at St. Paul's School. As an educational tool the Maguire slide shows were to have a great impact. Practical courses were also set up for the International Baccalaureate Art and Design programme as well as a CAS activity (Creative, Action, Social) for pupils who are now fervently working on one of the Maguire projects along with the Casa da Cultura children in Vila Prudente. Brian also worked in the Art Centre at the School as an artist-in-residence for the first two months of his stay. David Sweetman from the English Department was kind enough to give this interview when Brian returned to the School in September.

DS: Where were you born?

BM: I was born in Bray, County Wicklow, Ireland, and grew up there.

DS: Where were you educated?

BM: In terms of schooling I went to St. Bray's. Following this I went to the National College of Art where I did an Arts Foundation Course. Subsequently, I went to the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1968.

DS: Have you acted as an artist-in-residence in other institutions?

BM: I have acted in this capacity before at St. Paul's, in February/March of this year. I have also lectured abroad at the Universities of Boston and Texas, in the States, and at the University of Helsinki. I have to say though, I've found my time here at St. Paul's amongst the most enjoyable. The children are very receptive and share a rich mix of cultures and interests.

DS: Who is your mentor?

BM: Edward Kienholz. He is an American sculptor who works out of a violent compassion, a rage against injustice. His work is exhibited in France, Italy, Germany, in Europe, but not in England. His work generates its power from its truth-content, its true value. For example, if I were to draw the interior of a *favela* (shanty town) here in Brazil I do not need to change it in my representation, condition it with a personal response. I just need to be truthful. Being true implies a critique. It's not necessary for the artist to be critical; it's necessary for the artist to be true. The truth is critical.

DS: What is art?

BM: Art is doing away with a sense of being alone. In portraiture, for example, which is what I'm doing at the moment, art gives a sense of existence to what is outside oneself, a sense that the other person lived. It is the entrance into a sense of relationship. The picture that is left is the outcome of this process, or performance. Art is best defined as an activity rather than a static object. It also, of course, involves a sense of truth, identifying the truth of what is drawn. In this way, art aspires to the condition of religion. The activity of art is like the activity of prayer-giving back an identity to things, and done in silence.

DS: What makes a good artist?

BM: This is a very subjective question! Empathy with the subject, passion, originality. Not cleverness. Good art is both intellectual and emotional.

DS: What motivates you in your work?

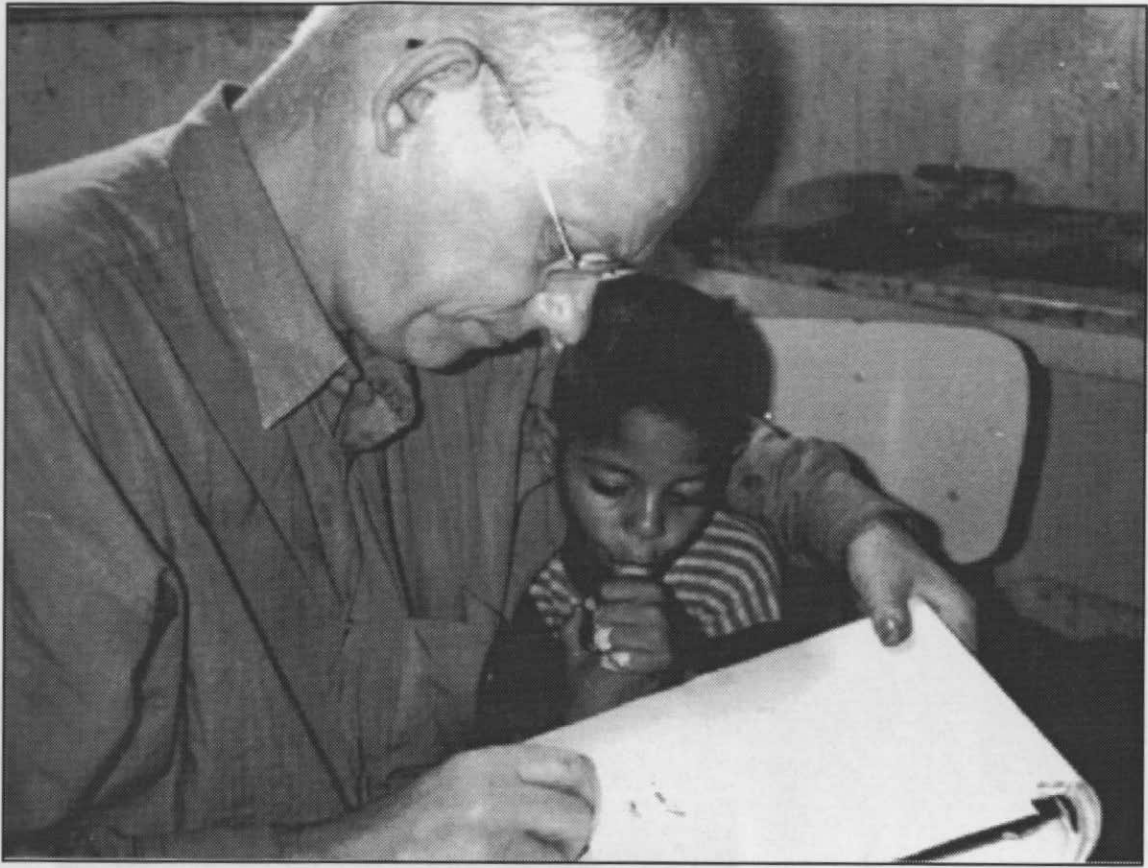
BM: I work in two ways. Firstly, I work out of the spirit of revenge. I worked for twelve years in prisons where I taught the inmates art. I became interested in the nature of society, the way it divides, and creates institutions - a class ridden society. My art became part of a protest for the oppressed. Secondly, I work out of a spirit of love, or innocence. For example, the portraits I'm doing here are of some children. They have an innocence about them. Children are not self-conscious like adults, who are more difficult to draw. The art reflects this innocence because there is no commercial condition in the production of these pictures I'm doing.

Whatever further outcomes might be in store for Mr. Maguire in São Paulo there is no doubt that his work at the Bial stands out and is recognised by the people of São Paulo for the immense research that went into it. The very fact that Brian came here and spent so much care and attention to every detail of his work clearly shows. Press interviews and general newspaper coverage, as well as television appearances, still continue to appear long after Maguire left. This determines just how important it was for an artist like Maguire to come to Brazil and draw our attention to the social injustices that, one way or another, tend to be swept away under the carpet. Maguire has given back some of the human dignity that is so necessary here for those who struggle every minute of the day to hold on to what they have.

*** This article is dedicated to my mother, Anne.**

A Special thanks to Headmaster Mr. MTM. Casey McCann, for believing in the project, to The Board of Governors and all the teaching staff and pupils, St. Paul's School, and to Mr. Sapsezian and his auxiliary staff.

* W.B. Yeats. "Before the World Was Made" cit. In John Smith. *Arts Betrayed*. London: Herbert Press, 1978. P. 72.



Brian Maguire at Vila Prudente (photographer: James Concagh)

