

Wicklow artist finds unbroken spirits and forbidden love amid ruins of Syria

Catherine Sanz, Ireland Reporter

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Six paintings by Brian Maguire will go on display next month at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin

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Depicting the stark, secular and beautiful world within what remains of Syria has inspired a new series of paintings by an Irish artist.

Brian Maguire, 66, from Bray in Co Wicklow, spent ten days in March in the war-torn country, where he photographed destroyed buildings and spoke to soldiers, students and families living in Damascus, Aleppo and the surrounding areas.

A series of six paintings based on this trip will go on display at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Imma) in Dublin next month as the debut show for the museum's 2018 programme.

Brian Maguire, War Changes Its Address: The Aleppo Paintings documents Syria's ruined buildings and uses flecks of colour to highlight how normality is returning.

"You walk down these long streets and everything is wrecked, but then you turn a corner and there's a lively coffee shop or a small flower garden growing amidst the rubble," Maguire

said. “It was nuanced hope.” He travelled to Syria because he wanted to know what life was like on the ground for those who remained.

Maguire said that despite the destruction, he found life was thriving and appeared to have moved away from being strictly religious. “When you go to restaurants at night, families were singing and dancing, many women weren’t wearing headscarves and the styles felt very 1950s glamour,” he said. “I have been reluctant to state this publicly because I don’t want to detract from the suffering and loss but it felt like people have relaxed, and it was extraordinary to see.”

He said that this “laid-back” attitude was felt inside mosques and at checkpoints, where he said he did not see a finger on a trigger. “There was a sadness to the emptiness, but there was also relief that guns were pointed firmly at the ground.” One of the more moving encounters he had was learning of a “Romeo and Juliet tragedy” involving a young man from a strict Sunni background who had fallen in love with a Kurdish girl. “He felt that he couldn’t elope or leave, so he was quite stuck in a way and eventually they were forbidden from seeing each other,” Maguire said.

“We had a bizarre conversation about this near a mosque where he noticed a can of Guinness, believe it or not, huddled among some trash. He said this angered him more than the destruction of the city because it was disrespectful to the mosque.”

Maguire has previously travelled to parts of Mexico worst affected by the country’s drug war. He said that at the moment he wanted to focus his paintings on the international arms trade, which he believes involves “massive amounts of money spent purely to destroy poor people”.

He said his affinity for social activism stemmed from his involvement in the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. He also represented Ireland at the Bienal de Sao Paulo in 1998, for which he created a series based on people from the city’s favelas. “War is the only constant in the world. It just moves around,” he said.

Brian Maguire, War Changes Its Address: The Aleppo Paintings is at Imma’s courtyard galleries from January 26 to May 6.