

Hugh Lane Gallery

Brian Maguire: La Grande Illusion

A Resource for Students and Teachers

3 October 2024 – 18 May 2025



Brian Maguire, *The Burning Amazon*, 2023.

**HUGH LANE
GALLERY**



Comhairle Cathrach
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City Council

Welcome

Brian Maguire: La Grande Illusion is an exhibition on view at the Hugh Lane Gallery from 3 October 2024-18 May 2025 encompassing a series of the artist's work from 2007-2024. This resource is intended to provide an introduction to the exhibition and some of its themes for students and teachers. It offers information, a focus on selected artwork featured in the exhibition, discussion prompts and activities for second level students and teachers to use. The discussion questions and activities can be used to prepare for a visit to the gallery, to complement the visit, or some may be more suitable to work on following a visit to the exhibition. They can be adapted to your individual needs, and are only intended to support the understanding of the main themes, and artworks, included in *La Grande Illusion*. Also included are a series of keywords which may be useful to define before using this resource; this is in order to ensure an understanding of its contents.

Contents

- Introduction
- Thematic overview of the exhibition with supporting artworks including: Background information, discussion questions and activities.
- Planning a visit to the Hugh Lane Gallery

Introduction

Brian Maguire was born in 1951 in Co. Wicklow, Ireland. One of Ireland's leading artists, his work stems from a profound engagement with the political and social complexities of both individuals and the places he has encountered. Maguire is driven by the struggle against inequality and violence, and in the pursuit of justice his expressionist paintings are adjacent to forms of war reporting, or photojournalism. Maguire's paintings are intended as testimonials that provide a visual source for the damaging effects of such violence. He uses his painterly skills,

surface and texture to draw us into an uncomfortable relationship where we are forced to unravel the ethical complexities situated within the aestheticism of his canvases. Maguire works with marginalised groups that experience social injustice. His affinity for social activism developed from his involvement in the civil rights movement of Northern Ireland in the 70s, and his direct experience of Ireland's colonial ties. Maguire's success has led him to representing Ireland in the Sao Paolo Biennale in 1998. Later, in 2000, he became Professor of the Fine Art faculty in the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in Dublin, where he had studied previously. He also studied at Dun Laoghaire School of Art prior to this.

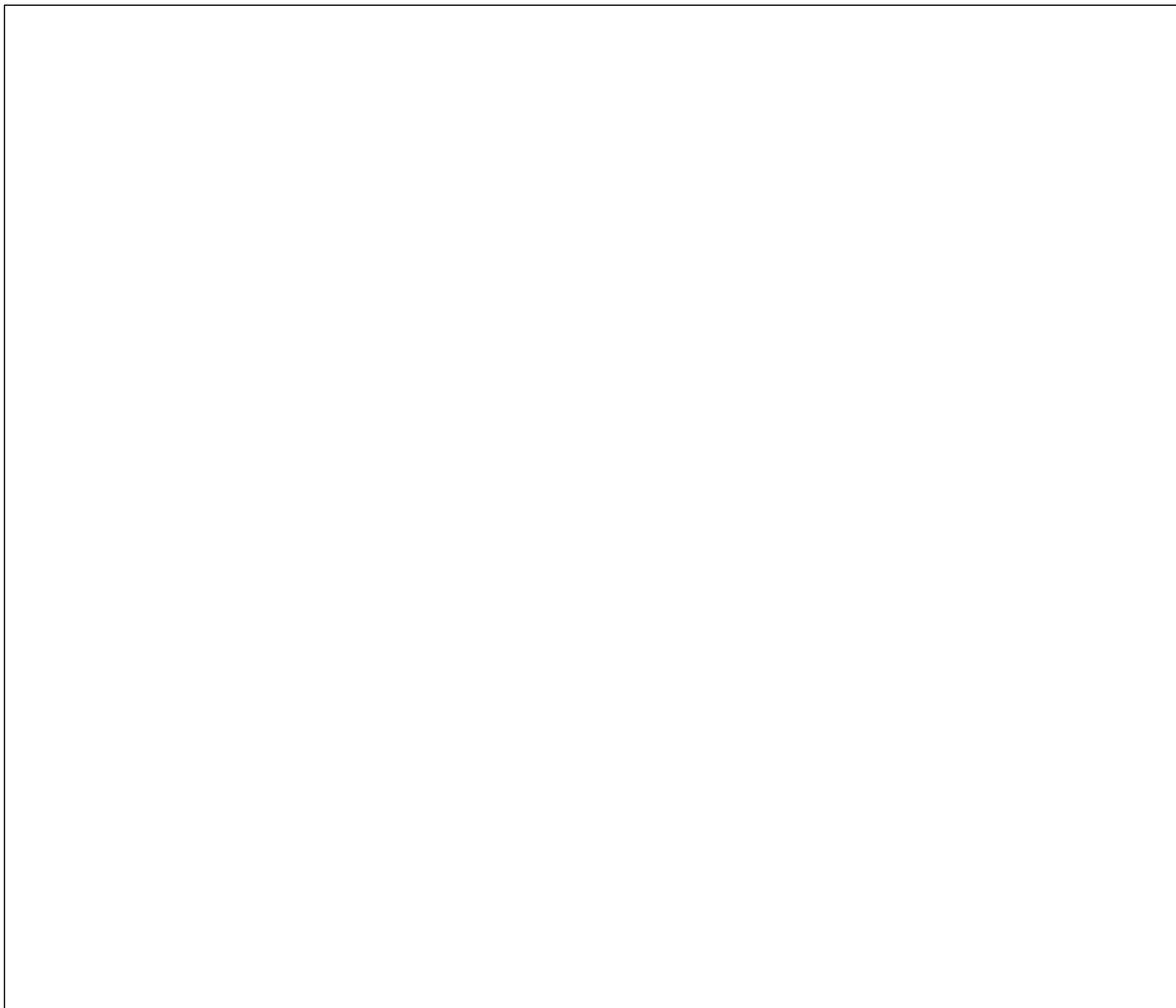
La Grande Illusion is structured in ways that reveal how the artist represents the fragility of human rights as well as how he responds to social injustice and its subsequent legacy going forward. Focusing on a period of change for the artist, 2007–2024, it highlights his activism in human rights and his efforts to document the damaging effects of war, in particular, its impact on lower socio-economic classes and its destruction of environment. This was a shift from his earlier works, which focused more on the artist himself. Maguire's attention was drawn from local to global, and he began to tell other people's stories. His work features a series of projects across a significant part of the globe: Juárez, Mexico (2012–15), the Mediterranean (2016), Aleppo (2017), South Sudan (2018), the Amazon (2022), Arizona (2022) and Brazil (2022–23).

For Maguire, testimony is vital to understanding the violence and human rights violations which encompass this cycle of corruption, social injustice, and death. Maguire understands the museum as an archive of history, and therefore believes that the art displayed should address current and social concerns. In particular, his work highlights injustices across the aspects of class, gender and post-colonial legacies.

Keywords

Expressionism; chiaroscuro; landscape; photojournalism; ethics; social injustice; violence; marginalisation; displacement; migration; war; Femicide (*feminicidio*); colonialism; testimony; prejudice; corruption; urban deprivation; human rights; local and global; museum as an archive of history.

Look up an atlas of the world and in the area below, make an outline sketch of the continents, marking the locations of the places which feature in Brian Maguire's art.



Gallery 1

THE INVISIBLE BECOMES VISIBLE



Brian Maguire, *Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up*, 2016
Acrylic on linen, 290 x 270 cm

Background

This image encapsulates Maguire's direct involvement with those marginalised and ignored in society. His experiences materialise into alluring, expressionist paintings that we cannot help but engage with. In *Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up*, Maguire tells the story of young man floating on top of the blue, and vast sea. He is alone and carries few belongings, tied around his waist. This man is a migrant, making his way across the Mediterranean in search of a better life. We don't know exactly where he is travelling from, but we understand that he will not make it to his destination as he is struggling to surface in the open water. The vastness of the sea

is suggested by the use of abstraction, which takes up the majority of the space on the canvas. We cannot see any hint of land in the distance. This image was taken from a photograph that Maguire saw. After this however, the artist decided that he couldn't make any more paintings this way, and began to travel to see the conditions experienced by migrants himself. From that point on, Maguire always travelled to the places that he painted. By capturing these images as paintings, the memory of those individuals can be honoured. Maguire thinks that the news cycle moves so quickly, from one disaster to the next, that all of these people are being forgotten.

The title "Over Our Heads the Hollow Seas Closed Up," is a quote taken from Primo Levi's book, *Survival in Auschwitz*. Maguire understands the idea that history is written by the victors, and therefore has the ability to repeat itself. He believes that "in painting, the invisible becomes visible" and if it's good enough, the medium could carry hope. For Maguire, it's important to remember the significant number of those lost and forgotten, even if they are unaccounted for. Maguire is not afraid of depicting these themes in the pursuit of highlighting social injustice. He relates to these people as a person who had to emigrate for work. He sees them in a similar light, since they were travelling to seek out a better life, just as he, and many other Irish people did.

Discussion

- Do you think that Maguire is within his right to portray this migrant like this?
- Do you consider this to be a sympathetic portrayal of a migrant?
- Do you think you would have understood the meaning behind the painting without context? Why or why not?
- Maguire challenges his viewers by depicting troubling subject matters in an aesthetic way. Do you agree with this statement when you look at this work? Why or why not?
- Stand in front of the painting and describe your overall impression of the artwork.

Activity

Challenging the news cycle: watch the news over a period of a week, or even just a few days. What do you notice about the headlines? Do you agree with Maguire that the news cycle moves too quickly? Discuss this with your class and see how the news is still so relevant to Maguire's artwork.

Keywords

Add keywords here that reflect your response to the artwork and that describe the main themes explored in this painting.

Gallery 2

REMAINS



Brian Maguire, *Arizona 2*, 2020.
Acrylic on linen, 150 x 200 cm

Background

Similar to the German Expressionists of the 1920s and 1930s, social and political commitments consistently inform Brian Maguire's work. In 2019, Maguire visited Dr Greg Hess who is the Chief Medical Examiner for Pima County, Arizona. Dr Hess gave the artist access to some of the visual records on file regarding the lives of immigrants that were lost travelling into the US from Mexico. Therefore, within the theme of "remains," Maguire is mostly working from photography again. *Remains* was also an exhibition in Cork's Crawford Art Gallery running from September 2021 until January 2022. Evidently, this theme makes up a significant part of his oeuvre.

Testimony is integral to understanding the prejudice that leads to migrant deaths and Maguire ensures that we bear witness to these crimes that are imposed on people and their environments by local and global injustices. Here, Maguire's artistic process is investigative as he works directly with those involved in these tragedies. While he bases this work on photographs that were obtained by authorities, he also hears the accounts by those affected, such as family members of those missing. He also gains his own first hand experiences by travelling to the border crossings and witnessing the conditions, as well as the remains of the people who didn't survive the journey. The journey through the desert route means dehydration is a very real possibility. Good Samaritans- people who actively assist those in need- prepare water stations to help those making the dangerous journey. However, many argue that US Border Guards destroy these safe havens by confiscating water supplies left for migrants. Maguire's paintings give voice to largely forgotten victims, whose memories are revisited through engagement with his work.

Discussion

- In 2022, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) documented 686 deaths among people attempting to cross the Mexico-US border, making it the most dangerous land route in the world. Do you believe that Maguire's work succeeds in giving voices to the forgotten victims? Discuss.
- Do you agree with Maguire's use of this kind of source material for his artwork? Is it helpful to show the world what is happening on the Mexico-US border; or does this image raise concerns of exploitation of the dead for artistic purposes?

Activity

Research German Expressionist art from the 1920s and 1930s. What similarities and differences do you see between this movement, and that of Brian Maguire's work? What do you think are the stylistic similarities? Are there stylistic differences? Break off into small groups in your class and discuss these ideas.

Gallery 3

WAR CHANGES ITS ADDRESS



Brian Maguire, Bentiu International Displacement Camp, South Sudan 1, 2018.
Acrylic on linen, 200 x 400 cm.

Background

Beyond using photography as a source, Maguire gains many first hand experiences of the places and subjects he paints. For example, he witnesses the destruction in Aleppo, Syria and Bentiu refugee camp, South Sudan by travelling there. Many of the paintings from his time there are charged with both outrage and sorrow. Maguire wants us to see what is happening to displaced people in the name of settler colonialism and war. This South Sudan refugee camp faced not only displacement concerns, but also environmental concerns as they experienced flooding. Again, in this painting, Maguire underlines the quick shift of the news cycle. The value of the artwork is that it will be preserved as an archive long after the news cycle moves on, especially in the case of South Sudan, where photography was banned. Maguire could use his artwork as a means of letting the world know about the atrocities communities like these are facing. There is an intertwining of themes of war, corruption and colonial legacy. Maguire can relate to this

considering Ireland's colonial legacy and ties to British colonialism. Brian Maguire's early projects were with paramilitary groups in Ireland from both sides of the conflict. The journalist and writer Ed Vulliamy labels Maguire as "a war artist whose war end up being against war itself."

Discussion

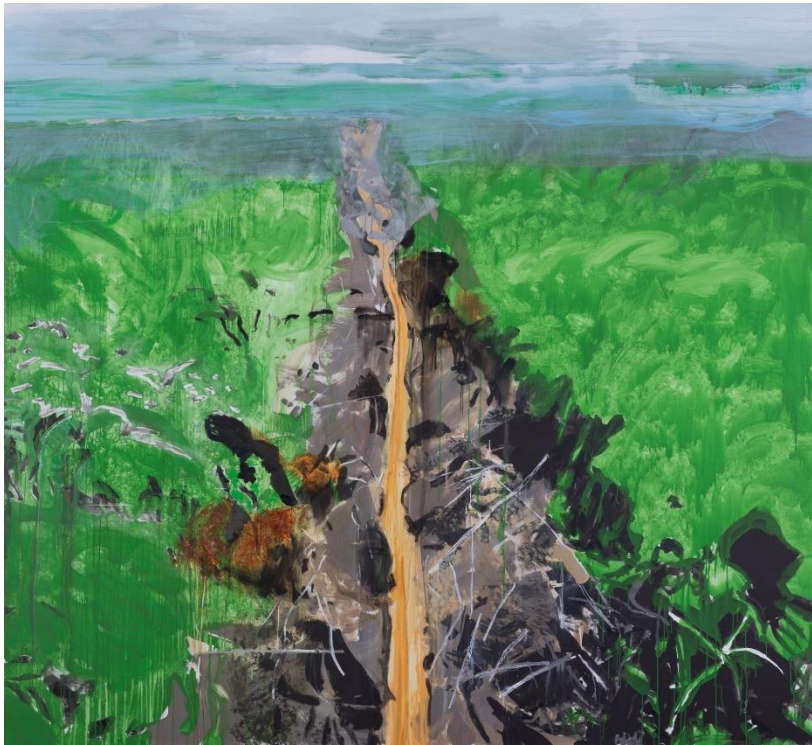
- Genocide and war in places throughout the world has led to mass destruction and displacement of people. How does Maguire's painting of South Sudan reflect this current issue? Is it fair to say that Maguire's work remains constantly relevant?
- Do you think this painting has an equally powerful effect before you understand the context of its creation? Do you think context is relevant to Maguire's work in general?

Activity

Explore the differences between abstract art vs a more representational kind of art. Take a current issue in the world and create two art pieces. The first should take inspiration from Brian Maguire, *the Burning Amazon*, 2023 (see page 1). The second should take inspiration from Brian Maguire, *Bentiu International Displacement Camp, South Sudan 1*, 2018 (see page 10). Do you think it's easier to convey meaning more in one than in the other?

Gallery 4

THE CLOCK WINDS DOWN



Brian Maguire, *The Clearcut Amazon*, 2023
Acrylic on canvas, 290 x 320 cm

Background

In April 2022, Maguire made a visit to the Amazon. Here, he witnessed the accelerating destruction of communities due to deforestation; he also experienced the dangers associated with reporting it. The Amazon cut, featured in *the Clearcut Amazon* is a well-known “highway” in the rainforest. This clearing was created in order for industries to move in to exploit the natural resources. As a consequence, many indigenous communities are forced to leave their homes and land and move to a city. They are pushed into urban deprivation while their homes are destroyed due to forced land clearance. Maguire visited five remote villages of the Mara people. These people are a fishing community and their fishing grounds were destroyed by a mining company. Maguire did many drawings of the Mara people during his stay. This is something he tends to do when he visits communities such as this one. Maguire has visited this region on more than one occasion. In 1998, he

represented Ireland at the Sao Paolo Biennale. He visited the favelas during this stay and invited those living there to come to the exhibition where he displayed their portraits. He sat down with members of both of these communities who shared concerns for their young people experiencing poverty and displacement. Their concerns were on the youth getting involved with cartels, who offer employment by way of drug trafficking. Much of the time involvement with cartels leads to death due to extreme violence within these organised crime groups. The artist's rebellion against this injustice leads to his empathy for not only victims, but also towards the perpetrators of crimes. His anger is towards the leaders of the cartels who recruit young people – not giving them an option to get out once they're in. This compassion towards violent criminals led to his work with the prison services – here, in Portlaoise prison in the 1980s, and in Brazil. There, Maguire worked with inmates in Carandiru – one of the world's most infamous jails. Maguire develops special relationships with all his subjects.

Discussion

- How do you think Maguire's interaction with communities impacts or shapes his work?
- Maguire "approaches painting as an act of solidarity." Discuss this statement with reference to *The Clearcut Amazon*.

Activity

Look up Brian Maguire's paintings of the Amazon. Compare these with photographic images of Amazon deforestation. Do you think Maguire's work does a good job at conveying the damaging local and global consequences of human interaction with the rainforest?

Gallery 5

BLOOD RISING



Brian Maguire, *Nature Morte (4)*, 2014
Acrylic on linen, 250 x 180 cm

Background

Brian Maguire made regular visits to Ciudad Juarez in Mexico following his journey there in 2008. Considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world, Maguire went there to learn about the violence surrounding *feminicidio* and the community problems increased by the activities of drug cartels. While there, Maguire formed relationships with bereaved families of the women murdered. He taught art to their children and worked on the creation of portraits of the missing women. He did this with the permission of their families. His intentions are to remind us of those forgotten or even those ignored by authorities who won't get involved due to concerns for their own safety. Maguire made a visit to *El Norte* newspaper offices. Here, the staff shared their photojournalistic files and archives displaying the

horrors of crimes committed against women and others in the community who cross paths with the cartels. This experience led to him working with director Mark McLoughlin on their documentary, *Blood Rising* (2013). In 2010, when they began filming, 438 young women were murdered and only 2 percent of the cases had been properly investigated. The government's attempts to control the situation by sending in extra police and army does not seem to have any effect. Many of them become part of the problem – consumed by greed, and offered money or drugs. The mothers of the missing women chose to work with Maguire, to try to communicate their stories to the world, hoping that international pressure may bring them justice. These cartels boast about their atrocities publicly to show their power. They intentionally leave behind the evidence of their crimes to show that they are 'untouchable'. Maguire's passion for social activism stems from his involvement in the fight for civil rights in 1970s Northern Ireland where by contrast the UVF and IRA would display their authority by drawing our attention to the crimes committed by the other. The ritualised and executions and normalized, open displays of criminality in Ciudad Juarez were shocking in comparison to what Maguire had previously witnessed. Just like his work in Brazil, Maguire feels a sympathy for the criminals who have no way out. Corruption, deep-rooted in society, is at the heart of these issues in Juarez. Ultimately, Maguire's goal after his journey there is to have us viewers identify with the dead.

Discussion

- Do you think the title of this painting is misleading? Why do you think Maguire may have chosen this title? What does *Nature Morte* typically refer to in art?
- How do you think this painting differs from a photographic document? Is there a difference between Maguire's artwork and the work of photojournalists in your opinion?
- Do you agree with Maguire's motivation for the use of the original source material for this kind of painting? Do you think *El Norte* should have given an artist access to these photographs? Is there a moral question when we enquire about an artist's use of source images?

Activity

Read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is reproduced on the wall of gallery 4 and also in the accompanying exhibition booklet.

As a group, discuss which rights Maguire's work highlights as being ignored in the communities he works with. Do you agree that a significant portion of the world's population does not have fair access to human rights? How can conditions be improved within our communities to provide and advocate for fair and equal rights?

Brian Maguire: La Grande Illusion, A Resource for Students and Teachers. Written by Tori Boccarossa (2024). Edited by Jessica O'Donnell, Head of Education and Community Outreach, Hugh Lane Gallery.

Select Bibliography and online resources

- *Brian Maguire La Grande Illusion* exhibition catalogue and exhibition booklet, Hugh Lane Gallery, 2024.
- Hugh Lane Gallery YouTube channel includes recorded talks and panel discussions with Brian Maguire and others. Explore more here <https://www.youtube.com/c/HughLaneGalleryDublin>
- https://hughlane.ie/whats_on/brian-maguire-la-grande-illusion/
- *Brian Maguire: INSIDE / OUT*. Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, 2000.
- *Brian Maguire*. New York and Dublin: Fergus McCaffrey, Kerlin Gallery, 2018.
- Brian Maguire. *Kerlin Gallery*. [Brian Maguire - Artists - Kerlin Gallery](#).

Planning your visit

Hugh Lane Gallery is free admission.

Opening Hours

Tues-Weds 09.45am-6pm; Thurs 09.45am-8.30pm; Fri 09.45am-5pm; Sat 10am-5pm; Sun 11am-5pm; Closed Mondays.



Installation view of Brian Maguire, La Grande Illusion

Guided tours are a very enjoyable way of exploring modern and contemporary art, the collection and temporary exhibitions. Guided tours can be booked for schools and visiting groups via the website with a minimum of two weeks' notice. Tours cost €30 per group, up to a max of 30 people per group. Depending on availability and advance notice, larger groups can be divided into two groups, with two guides at a cost of €30 per group.

A sketching tour (max 15 people) can be booked with advance notice and subject to availability. A sketching tour consists of guided discussion and drawing in the gallery spaces and costs €45. Drawing materials are provided and students are also welcome to use their own sketch books.

To submit your tour query please go to <https://hughlane.ie/book-a-tour/> A member of the Education team will be back in touch to discuss your proposed dates, times and areas of interest.

Students are also welcome to visit on a self-guided visit and this can also be notified through <https://hughlane.ie/book-a-tour/> Students on self guided school visits should please break into smaller groups and remain under the supervision of their teachers.

Additional resources, as well as details of a wide ranging programme of events including art talks, art courses, projects, exhibitions and more can be found on the Hugh Lane Gallery's website <https://hughlane.ie/whats-on/>

We hope you enjoy your visit.

Hugh Lane Gallery, Parnell Square North, Dublin 1, Ireland

www.hughlane.ie

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