



Brian Maguire, *Aleppo 4*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 78 1/2 x 157 1/2 in, copyright the artist. ▲

Irish Artist-in-Residence Brings Care, Prestige to Create Portraits of Missing Indigenous People

by Brandon Reintjes, Senior Curator and Carey Powers, Marketing and Communications Coordinator

In 2020, Irish artist Brian Maguire was invited by MAM to participate in the Emily Hall Tremaine Curatorial Research project investigating how the museum might present an exhibition around the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP).* MAM is planning a juried exhibition of contemporary Native artists who are engaged with this issue in addition to an exhibition of Maguire's work featuring portraits of those who have gone missing. Maguire was in Missoula from May to September 2021, a rare artist-in-residency for the museum. Maguire came as a 2021 Fulbright Scholar, a prestige that allowed him to travel from Ireland specifically for this project.

The epidemic of MMIP is taking place across the United States and Canada. Thousands of men, women, and children go missing or are murdered each year and the web of federal, state, local, and Tribal jurisdictions often complicate these cases. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland recently created a Missing and Murdered Unit taskforce within the Bureau of Indian Affairs to take on and solve these cases. Missoula, adjacent to the Flathead Reservation, within a short distance of the Blackfeet Reservation, and host to a significant Native urban population residing within the city, is an ideal place for Maguire to conduct research on this topic. He has applied his subtle, sensitive, humanitarian approach to the plight of MMIP.

Maguire (b. 1951, Dublin) is an Irish artist whose work stems from his involvement in the civil rights movement

of Northern Ireland in the 1970s. In his work, Maguire draws attention to marginalized voices by occupying a role as facilitator, which he is uniquely careful not to exploit. Starting in 2010, the artist has created work in Juárez, Mexico, in response to the proliferation of women murdered by the cartels in the wake of the Mexican drug war (a practice known as *Feminicidio*). Maguire's efforts have been profiled in *Blood Rising*, a 2014 documentary co-produced with Mark McLoughlin. In 2017, Maguire spent time in Aleppo, Syria, and created an entire body of work cataloging the devastation of the city after years of war. Maguire is enthusiastic about developing a series devoted to the stories of MMIP, similar to his approach in his *Feminicidio* series. Maguire has visited reservations in Montana and met with family members of MMIP, in a similarly respectful manner he has developed in all his work.

Maguire's artistic response to the political and racial content inherent in the topic has informed the development of an exhibition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists with the goal of bringing greater awareness to the topic and leading to better institutional response. After Maguire's visit, MAM found it necessary to plan two exhibitions of the artist's work: The first in 2022, called *Brian Maguire: In the Light of Conscience*, will feature a broader selection of his work, followed by an exhibit in 2023 featuring his MMIP portraits from across Montana.

MAM's senior curator, Brandon Reintjes, sat down with Brian this summer in his studio in Missoula to discuss the trajectory of the project so far:

Brandon Reintjes (BR): Brian, you are here as a prestigious Fulbright Scholar, working with MAM. What are the goals of this time in Missoula?

Brian Maguire (BM): To meet with families of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People, and, if there is agreement, to paint the portrait of the missing or murdered relative. I do two paintings—a domestic size work for the family and a larger work to show publicly. The public work is part of a series of works I have made over the past 20 years, which aim to present the stories of those without power so that we can imagine social transformation. The world needs to know about this crisis happening in Native American Country. I work with the families very privately and listen to the story, then create the two works. The larger of which is for exhibition. Portraiture has long been the arena of the rich, powerful, and glamorous, but many artists have reclaimed it for a less powerful public. In his 2018 essay on my work, Gavin Delahunty references Allen Sekula's 1976 manifesto *Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary* in which he called for a "political economy, a sociology, and a non-formalist semiotics of media that could provide the framework for a critical representational art or art that points openly to the Social world and to the possibility of concrete social transformation." That is what I try to do. My goal is public outrage.

public works are instruments of a social and psychological truth families retain; the girl (or boy) is at her very best, smiling for the camera, safe in the atmosphere of family. It is from this work, chosen by the family, that I rephotograph and paint the image. I aim to memorialize the human being that is obliterated. Valerie Werder writing on my work in an essay *The Man Who Makes Photographs by Hand* identifies the thing which painting contains and which photography loses as presence. What Valerie calls the presence is a sense of the person taken. These works are intended to show the public what is gone from this world.



▲ Brian in his studio, 2021, photo courtesy of MAM.

BR: You've spoken about how bright and talented some of the people who've been murdered were, how impressed you are at their capacities and capabilities.

BM: Yes, and the world loses out on their talent and potential. A person is unique, all those little events from childhood upwards form the young adult, and their death robs us all of that person's future.

BR: What is the plan for the works created during your residency?

BM: My hope is that an exhibition will be made and will travel to tell these stories in middle America, and simultaneously across Indigenous communities; that this exhibition will contribute to the discussion in Montana and throughout the US about the MMIP. There are today National and State task forces examining the issue. The previous president and the Department of Justice and the current president all have focused their attention on this issue. While in some cases I have been told by family members, and certainly in the past, people have not been well served by law enforcement, it is also true that in more recent cases law enforcement could not have done more to investigate the disappearance and murder of the family member and to recover the body.



▲ *Arizona 8*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 58 inches, copyright the artist.

BR: Is the goal of all your art outrage?

BM: Yes, exactly.

BR: You also move between the private and public spheres a lot with this work.

BM: I do in all of my work. It demands from the artist sensitivity and discretion. I carry the families' trust. These

*A note on terminology: The disappearance and killings of Indigenous women and girls is often referred to as MMIW, or MMIWG. For the sake of this project, MAM is using MMIP (Missing and Murdered Indigenous People) to include the plight of men and boys as well.