Brush and Guns and Guns and Brush

The culture of Ireland inspires thoughts of trooping fairies, rolling hills, and humble folk dancing and singing the night away in pubs. What no one imagines is Brian Rock’s reality: explosions, gunfire, death and destruction amidst dirt, poverty, and political unrest. Growing up in Belfast during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, war is engraved in his psyche. He continues to see it, smell it, taste it, until he puts it on canvas so everyone else can feel it. His emotions control his paintings, conveying a sense of chaos and frustration with just a hint of coherency.

“Playground,” for example, is drawn from childhood memories of cowering in bed while explosions filled the night. Then, a few days later, he and his friends would run outside, excited for the things they would find in the wake of battle. The children collected nails, various shapes of glass, and bullet casings the way most would pinecones and worms. Dwelling on this memory, adult Rock used these objects to capture movement. “Playground” is a hybrid of paint and object mosaic, with a girl’s dress soaked in red to represent the destruction of innocence. The painting moves like fire, with nails and bullet shells spiking the red and maroon border. A Peace sign made from rust-colored barbed wire is barely visible amongst the gray, red, and orange glass hovering over the scene. Altogether, the piece is six and a half feet long and weighs over 100 pounds; a heavy painting for a heavy memory.

A core element in Rock’s past and portraits is color. His piece “Ardoyne,” named for his home town, illustrates the atmosphere of the IRA neighborhood: dark, black as gunpowder with grit and smoke hanging in the air. “In the gray, dark…nasty nasty world, the bright colors are what you’re drawn to.” For Rock, those are the green, white, and orange of the Irish flag. Red of blood is also prevalent, repulsive yet intriguing. In the painting these bright colors are splashed against a backdrop of black and maroon, shining against the dark but still a mess in and of themselves. The paint is lumpy, thick, like plaster dried on pavement. To demonstrate the nastiness of war, Rock literally scoops dirt and mud from the ground and mixes it with the paint on canvas. “It also illustrates that we’re all dirt…that we’ll all be back in the ground, pushin’ up clovers…”

His intense involvement with his pieces is all part of his personal therapy; while most people talk through their past traumas, Rock paints through his. He literally lets his emotions and memories possess him until the rush is spent, the tension is released, and he can ride the euphoric high of completing his piece. “A lot of physical work goes into all my paintings,” he admits. The best example of this is “Burn,” which stems from a direct memory of his fourteenth year, when he helped clean corpses from a gas station explosion. The mannequin is stuck to the canvas, purple, black, and gray as charcoal with splashes of red. It’s wrapped in barbed wire painted to look like the Irish flag. While Rock loves his country, he admits that even in times of peace, the political closeness is binding and suffocating for the people. “Peace is never, ever free. [We] may achieve peace, but there’s always constraints.”

Rock’s work is all about his Irish heritage, but he now resides in the countryside of New Mexico, where he’s happy to say that he can hear the birds sing and has a new studio from which to work. Allowing the frantic nature of his memories to take control in his art has helped him immensely, though there’s always more to let out. While he still harbors chaotic memories, he hopes his paintings will give a voice to others from Belfast, to show the world what war was like and what it is like and what it will continue to be like. He has captured pictures of emotions behind his most painful memories so all can look at them and see the psychological scars of battle. One glance brings to mind anguish, frustration, and danger. On the other hand, they also carry a sense of hope; that the world will come to realize the atrocities of violence and stop before the next generation suffers its consequences.