

The Rock and Roll Painter

by Paul McGuinness of The Popes. October 2009

These days it seems everyone is looking to find a bit of Irish in them, "Have you got any Irish in you? Would you like some?" I think Phil Lynott of Thin Lizzy said that. It wasn't always like that.

I was born in London in the 50's to two Irish immigrants. By the time I was 4 years of age, they had packed us all up and returned home to Waterford. I arrived home on the Monster express, not in first or second class, but cattle. Artist Brian Whelan's parents did the same when he was nine.

Both our families lived in the shadow of emigration in a time when it was THE story of Ireland. But later, in the days of the Celtic Tiger, the Irish living in Britain seemed part of an almost forgotten age. Ireland acquired an historical and cultural amnesia, turning its face against anything that belonged to the old country, even shunning their didiley ah.

As immigrants in Britain we were all made to feel inferior and it was only through some cultural giants like Shane McGowan and The Pogues and The Dubliners, that the beauty of our heritage was expressed,

Things have changed again. In the age of the "post" Celtic Tiger, Whelan's art is ahead of the game. It looks revolutionary but it is also familiar, poignant and relevant. The story of the immigrant, so central to his work, is now THE story of the world into the 21st century.

Now a new era of British Irish relations has banished the gun and taken up the tongue. It is right to remember your past as a counter weight to the future and in this future, art is the new rock and roll. If nothing else, contemporary art has challenged our pre-conceptions with sharks in formaldehyde and unmade beds. Whelan on the other hand does not look for novelty or shock drama. His methods are traditional. When he rolls up his sleeves and gets his hands dirty, he is one of the old school.

I was aware of Whelan's work before we met. I had seen his work in reproductions, but nothing prepared me for the "live" experience, seeing the paintings in the flesh so to speak. It's a bit like the difference between hearing a record and going to a live gig.

The best way I could describe Brian Whelan would be to call him the rock & roll painter.

