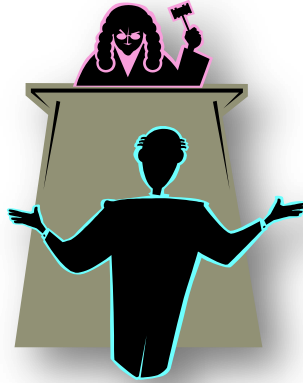


The questions below are not, by any means, all of the questions we are most frequently asked. They are, from our point of view, the *best* of the questions we have been asked and their answers are comprehensive enough to take care of most of the rest. If you cannot find an answer here do let us know.



FAQ

1. Who *are* The Bogside Artists?

A: **Tom Kelly**, his brother **William** and their mutual friend **Kevin Hasson** are the group known as “**The Bogside Artists**”. We were all born and bred in The Bogside, Derry.

2. The murals in Derry attract a lot of attention.

When planning the pieces what features did you

give them to help them do so? How did you make it so dramatic and effective?

A: We do not set out to make images that command attention. In contemporary art there are of course ways to do that. By insulting, humiliating, shocking the public etc you are sure to get attention. What we try to do is to describe an event as best we can. If it is a dramatic event we use tonal and/or contrast to convey the drama. Underneath all our images is a solid design because we want our images to last because the story they tell is an enduring one.

3. The murals you have created have specific meanings behind them concerning the history of Derry. I think this is good in terms of attracting attention of locals who experienced the troubles and also from tourists who have read of such times. Do you think it is necessary for pieces to

have a history and purpose for them to be popular attractions?

A: No. Good art can be about anything. There are many famous portraits for instance of people about whom we have little information. The Mona Lisa is a classic example. Little is known of the people Van Gogh painted. And so on. In public art, particularly murals, history predominates because it is usually some social or historical event that prompted their creation in the first place. The murals in Mexico City painted by Rivera are examples of this but so too are the sculptures of the four presidents of the USA at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota designed by Gutzon Borglum. You have to also note an important distinction between these two works which also applies to many other similar works. Rivera's murals offer an interpretation of history along Marxist lines whereas Borglum is just showing what people looked like. Commemorative art is always historically based. Its purpose is to commend an event to the consciousness of the observer. Such art you will find at

Auschwitz for example and in Berlin to remind people of what happened to the Jews during World War 11 and to urge people not to repeat it. Such art works you will find all over the world. Our work falls into that category. We seek to show and commemorate, not to interpret.

4. I personally feel that street murals bring life to cities and create a certain atmosphere for the town. I think it is an area which should be developed more. If you could redesign the city what would you add, take away or change about it in order to make it more eye-catching for the public?

A: Bad architecture should not be allowed *by law*. Bad architecture is as injurious to the soul as bad movies or bad anything else. Buildings should be screened for aesthetics and appeal by a council body set up for the purpose **before** they are allowed to be built. That way, unsightly buildings would be prevented. The city should be **FOR** the people who live there and they should have

a say in what is built. More parks, more playgrounds for kids, that sort of thing. Physically, we humans are soft, sensitive, vulnerable creatures, all curves in fact. The Bauhaus, as far as The Bogside Artists are concerned, did more damage to civilization than two world wars. All that chrome, glass and geometry! The establishment was quick to embrace the style because it was cheap to make the stuff, whether it was a skyscraper or a chair.

Man's city environments, for the most part, stand opposed to him. Already alienated, he cannot find his own reflection in the products of his own mind. He is a stranger in his own house. Also, there is not enough colour in the city. Too many grey or sandstone buildings! And everybody wonders why kids run amok with cans of paint to do their graffiti. We can expect more of the same because THE PEOPLE ARE NOT INVOLVED IN DECISION MAKING CONCERNING CULTURAL MATTERS. Who gets to design what and for where, is left to a select few in positions of power and influence who may have no genuine concern for the

environment *whatever* and are concerned, almost entirely, with seeing that lucrative public commissions go to their friends. These few, by the way, copy ideas shamelessly from other cities because they are on a safe wicket. It has been tried and proven and so there is no risk involved. Public restructuring for Derry comes from that source. That is because; being innovative may land them and their buddies in hot water if it doesn't come off. That's why so many cities share the same boring features. Our view, with regards to Derry at any rate, is that the people who live here should have the city they way **THEY** want it and no way else. Moreover, they are clever enough by far to come up with their own ideas. All this may have nothing to do with murals but murals, especially The People's Gallery are unique elements in any cityscape. Their uniqueness riles the old stalwarts and confounds the unimaginative.

5. Are there any murals around the world you specifically admire and why?

A: Many. Michelangelo's frescoes are murals. The work of Siqueiros, Jose Orozco and Diego Rivera are complex and wonderful in their historical sweep. By murals I take it you mean, murals in the main. There are murals in Los Angeles and San Francisco that are magnificent. Most of them, (unlike ours!), have taken many months to make. If we ever dally over making one of ours it has usually nothing whatever to do with the actual painting of it but because of obstacles put in our way by others. As for interior murals, all dem Renaissance dudes are a hard act to follow. King of the muralists would have to be the 18th century Baroque master Giambattista Tiepolo whose frescoes in Germany, Spain and Italy are to painting what Shakespeare is to writing. There are many more, if we had space to discuss them.

6. Do you think the murals are appreciated as they should be?

A: That's an individual question. Matisse was booed out of the gallery on his first exhibition night. Van Gogh was

laughed at. Gauguin had to clear off to Tahiti. Kids were told to throw stones at Cezanne in the street. Now these painters are recognized the world over.

Appreciation comes slow to a lot of people. Others don't care much for art or culture and never will. There are people in this world who would be still miserable and housebound even they won the lottery! Amen. That said, most people like art that doesn't set out to offend them, art they can understand and hopefully touch them. That is all you can expect of it, if you work honestly. Outraging the 'public' and all that nonsense we leave to the Wanabes. Good art certainly may end up doing that but, in our day, all the old moral canons have been removed and people are shockproof for the most part. Art has all the freedom it needs and has no fetters I can think of, unless you are unfortunate enough to be living in a country where freedom of expression is still prohibited.

7. How does your approach differ from other muralists'?

A: We are simply recording history, the key events that impacted the consciousness of the people in the Bogside, but not exclusively, since many others were directly and indirectly affected by the same events, such as the beginnings of the civil rights campaign and Bloody Sunday.

8. When did you paint your first mural and where was it?

A: The Petrol Bomber was our first, painted in the summer of 1994 in commemoration (25 years) of The Battle of The Bogside of August 1969.

9. How many have you produced since then?

A: Fourteen more, eleven for The Bogside and one for a community centre in Donegal, one for the Pica gallery in Perth Australia and one for the 2007 Irish Festival in Washington.

10. What are the challenges faced by a muralist in Northern Ireland?

A: The weather springs immediately mind. It rains an awful lot where we live. In fact, only last week, our studio in The Bogside was flooded under a foot and a half of water. And when we were painting our Peace Mural it rained quite suddenly and dramatically and for hours. The paint that hadn't dried ran down the walls in rivulets. Some things you do not forget. You realize even before you pick up a brush that you are not going to please *everybody*. Our harshest critics are the so-called contemporary artists in the city who are firmly of the opinion that we are not 'real artists' at all; presumably because we refuse to concoct something whose express intent is to bamboozle, humiliate or con the public at large in the name of that shibboleth they call "contemporary art". What they proudly consider to be contemporary today will be old hat in a hundred years time but they do not seem to be aware of this. Our view is that art should in some dimension of its being

transcend its times and it can only do that, in our view, in the realm of universality, its humanity if you will.

11. What's the motivation for you as artists to create The People's Gallery?

A: Reading the British tabloids and their tribalistic bias against the local community. That certainly played a big part in our thinking. We decided to tell *our own* story and, as Tom so neatly put it, to “make of the gable ends of The Bogside our front pages”.

Nobody knows the vastness of the suffering of those people in the North or what they went through on a daily basis. We knew only too well, as we were all deeply affected with what went on. You have to remember The Bogside was a littered wasteland when we began to paint our first mural. It was no better than any other dilapidated rubbish-strewn working class warren that you might find in Dublin or Glasgow. There was an eerie emptiness along the length of Rossville Street where the walls wailed with grief. To us it was a

black canvas crying out to be infused with some sort of humanity, some expression of life lived and events witnessed. It would have been very remiss of us not to have taken on the challenge. Those gable ends would eventually have been festooned with inane graffiti or ephemeral political slogans making the place an even bigger eyesore than it already was. Now the people have their own gallery – The People’s Gallery – reflecting back to them *their own* past and the price they had to pay for civil rights. They are proud of those murals and we are immensely proud that we gave them something to be proud of.

12. If you hadn't been doing this, what would you be doing instead?

A: We three would probably be, like ninety percent of the population, holding down jobs we endure for wages that are not commensurate with the cost of living. Northern Ireland is one of the most expensive places to live in on earth. Doing what we do because we enjoy it

means there are three less miserable people in the world. That's got to count for something!

13. In your opinion, would you say that your work has become an integral part of the urban environment?

A: Yes. Before we painted the murals the Bogside was one of the bleakest, emptiest places on earth. The residue of terrible events hung over the place like a shroud. Now at least, we have managed to exorcize the place to some extent.

14. Do you feel that murals in Northern Ireland act as territorial indicators or boundary markers?

A: We are neither in the knee-jerk arena of response to political events nor in the propaganda business. We distance ourselves as far as possible from both. We have our differing political viewpoints that we strive to keep out of our murals. Why? Because that is not our

remit as we have explained and besides, we believe that art is sacred. Our work has a strong, classical element in its design which is meant to reassure the community that its life will continue whatever traumas it may endure. Because of where the murals are situated, they are viewed by some as territorial in essence. "Prods over here, Catholics over there" is part of the madness, is, in fact, the disease without a cure. But, as the events we depicted, took place where the murals are situated, what else could we do? All we could do was to try to transcend the locale by universalising the **essential** human content. In other words, a person from Sarajevo or Palestine should be able to relate to our work without any difficulty. That's why you see no emblems, badges, tribal insignia or invocations to act in our work. Alas, there are some who can see this too well and do their best to discredit it. The word for that is evil. It exists.

15. How do you feel murals effect the community they are in in terms of community relations etc?

A: Your response to anything depends on your beliefs and conditioning and on yourself as to whether you CHOOSE to act on your response or not. We do not try to threaten anyone with our work. But, that doesn't mean you are sure to like it. It depends where you are coming from as a human being. Bogsiders can relate to the work as it is a mirror of their experience but it is less proximate for the youth who were born after the events depicted. One tourist operator complained on radio that the murals did not follow a proper chronology as if we had set out to paint a tourist attraction! Art that is well done and for the right reasons and is not fuelled by hatred or madness must always be beneficial to all. Our work strives to be in that category and according to the general response from tourists and locals, we have succeeded in that aim. Above all, our work strives to be

human, first and foremost. It is not painted *exclusively* for BogSIDERS but for **everyone**.

16. Do you think that murals in Northern Ireland encourage segregation?

A: From what I have seen there seems to be a shift away from the "Death To All Taigs" school of mural painting to a more broad appreciation of Protestant history. With Republican murals there is a shift towards the bigger picture in terms of world socialism. The last I saw, depicted Malcolm X. A group of American artists had been invited over to do it. That is always shameful, in our view, as it declares that local artists are not up to scratch.

Segregation alas, is the brutal fact behind all the conflict and that was the modus operandi of the Unionist government since its foundation. From a socialist viewpoint, in order to exploit the working class from

both sides you had to divide them in every possible way. This was a strategy implemented by British imperialists all through their empire building history, although you might also find it deployed by tyrants as far back as Julius Caesar. So, from the beginning, the people living in the North of Ireland were divided along religious lines, political lines, identity lines, educational lines, cultural lines, moral lines, and last but not least, demographically, so that big towns like Belfast and Derry had demarcated housing enclaves for both camps; and so, our political history is basically the history of segregation and exploitation. South Africa learnt a lot from Northern Ireland in that respect, and even had unionist advisors brought over to help them. They shared measures such as The Special Powers Act. These are simple facts incidentally, that are easily checked out.

On the other hand the socialist view is ideologically flawed because people in general, even those who are privileged, are well aware of the fact that we do not live

by bread alone. This was what kept Martin Luther King from becoming a fully fledged revolutionary.

It was important to many unionists, especially those in the Orange Order, to keep Northern Ireland intact as a British province as they considered Britain to be their spiritual home; therefore their vitriolic view of Southern Ireland as a threat to their political existence, apart from engendering rampant paranoia among their own people, evinced an idealism that went beyond mere monetary gain and wedded itself, quite naturally, to Protestantism as a belief system that put individual autonomy, destiny and integrity to the fore as spiritual values to be defended. Of course, their mistake was that they believed Catholics to be as radical as themselves whereas in truth they are moderate in their beliefs and indeed critical of the same and very slow to fanaticism in their defense. In fact, many Catholics espouse the very values Protestants believe to be exclusively theirs. Many of them believe in sex before marriage and

approve of contraception and even abortion, but would still consider themselves Catholic.

17. Do you believe your work has had a positive effect on any individual or community?

A: Art that is well done and for the right reasons and is not fuelled by hatred or madness must always be beneficial to all. Our work strives to be in that category and according to the general response from tourists and locals, we have succeeded in that aim. Above all, our work strives to be human, first and foremost. It is not painted exclusively for Bogside Catholics or nationalists but for everyone. Propaganda as such is invariably centred on tribalism (political or ethnic) or parochialism per se. The phrase "bringing the community together" opens a whole can of worms that could be summed up in the word "tribalism". People imagine they are together when they are fighting a common foe, but are they really? You see people "together" in this sense in

soccer stadiums and cricket grounds. And when young Americans were packed off to fight the peasants of Vietnam, just as they are soon to be packed off to fight the peasants of Iraq, the American press was full of jingoistic gibberish about "our boys overseas". When "our boys" returned home, many of them could not find a job and took to drink and drugs to forget the horror of what they had been through. So much for "bringing people together". Beliefs divide, pure and simple and FEAR is the true enemy of mankind for which belief systems, be they Muslim or Christian, inadequately provide a palliative. Nothing will bring people together in any real sense, except people themselves and since we are brought up to hate ourselves and each other we have a very long road to travel.....ALL of us.