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“Common Humanity” is a curated exhibition exploring the cultural use of art as propaganda in Northern Ireland. It further considers the shifting of focus from the glory and triumph portrayed in paramilitary propaganda to instead focus on the people who make up Northern Ireland and their humanity. The show is designed to be specifically located in the Musee de l’Orangerie. The central feature, around which the show is designed, is “The Castle” by Jorge Mendez Blake. This curated version will have two murals (one Loyalist and one Republican) depicted on each side.

The Silent Testimony portraits, depicting victims and family members of those killed in “the Troubles”, will hang on the surrounding walls. Thus, the central wall, “The Castle”, and the portraits on the outer walls create a dynamic tension in the mind of the viewer. This forces the audience to remember the true impact of ‘The Troubles.’ Instead of the idealised version of events, often shown in both Republican and Loyalist murals.

“Common Humanity” is located in the Musee de l’Orangerie, which traditionally holds ‘les Nymphaes’ by Monet. The exhibition is being held in this space as these paintings follow Monet’s journey through idealism and disillusionment. “Common Humanity” considers these themes in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This is important when considering the context of Northern Ireland, where the murals similarly present an idealised version of events. Monet also wished to create an immersive experience and take the viewer into his world. Standing in the round room, surrounded by unfocused images and colour it transports the viewer out of the room. As one viewer described it, “The only proper reaction would be to dive into it and drown”. Similarly, by placing the exhibition in a round room with no view of the outside

world, there is no distraction from the harsh reality that is highlighted in the exhibition.

This exhibition deals with themes of cultural identity and deconstructs the meta-narratives of Northern Irish society. Meta-narratives are the ideas that a society is built upon. In the case of Northern Ireland, these ideas are articulated as being, a country that works better when it is divided into Protestant and Catholic. It is human nature to seek out community, however, as Stuart Hall, says “they emerge within the specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity”. Religion in Northern Ireland has moved away from the traditional sense of an ideal that unites (religion coming from the Latin Religion to bind together) and instead is often used as a way of separating the community by defining which side you belong to; Protestant or Catholic. There was a point in history when these meta-narratives were accepted as reality, however over time People began to question whether this version of society was accurate and was what they wished their communities to look like. “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation.” Baudrillard talks about how much of our society is manufactured using these meta-narratives, which ultimately have been designed to oppress. By presenting an environment that is hyper-real and imaginary it presents the “outside” as the real version. Northern Ireland has created a microcosm where violent acts are glorified in the name of “political freedom”. However postmodern theory ‘[views] truth as something that is created/constructed by human beings, rather than something discovered that is (in some sense)

already out there'. The propaganda presents it as a world of martyrs when the reality is that many innocent people were targeted by the paramilitaries or caught in the crossfire. 'Common humanity' brings to light the real impact of violence and invites us to explore the true nature of Northern Irish society in the dynamic tension of the exhibition.

'The Wall' by Jorge Mendez Blake will be the canvas for the murals. It is an imposing structure, 75 foot long. In this exhibition, it represents the division in Ireland and the book that disrupts the foundations is a visual representation of "how a small idea can have a monumental presence". In this exhibition, the book is purposely left unnamed leaving it up to the audience to decide what the most important factor in the change has been. Some potential suggestions could be a bible, representing religion, or a copy of the Good Friday agreement which was a major catalyst for political change in 1998 in Northern Ireland. Mendez Blake constructed 'the wall' using no mortar, which results in a structure that is unstable and potentially could crumble. This further indicates the fragile nature of the propaganda. The rejection of centralised beliefs has taken power away from the propaganda. From a distance the disruption in the wall is barely noticeable, it is only after closer inspection that the imperfection can be seen. The change in Northern Ireland has happened subtly, as is represented by the subtle disruption (the book) in the wall. The murals painted on 'The Wall' represents how the propaganda and the ideas they spread are still around to this day. However, when the structure is viewed up close the audience can see the lack of cohesion, as it is not built with mortar, in 'The Wall'; this, combined with the book disrupting the foundation, further emphasises the move away from these ways of thinking.

Placing the artwork on the disrupted wall rather than a smooth, well-built wall exaggerates the disruptive defect of paramilitary propaganda. As well as this there have been attempts to ignore the changing beliefs of the wider community and as a result, education has created a fractured image. The message the paramilitaries wish to present and advertise has therefore become less impactful. The Loyalist mural chosen for this exhibition is a tribute to Jackie Coulter who was a leading loyalist in the UDA. The Republican mural is a tribute to Bobby Sands who was a hunger striker and prominent member of the IRA who was elected as an MP whilst in prison. Both of these murals highlight the most polarised aspects of the division, however forgetting the politics of their deaths these individuals are also a reminder of the people who died as a result of the conflict. The purpose of placing the murals on 'The Wall', as the centrepiece is to make the audience feel as though they are viewing it through the eyes of someone who has a personal connection to it, even if they do not. Affect theory is explained as "something we experience passively rather than actively". The sensation of standing in a room staring at a central focal point, surrounded by portraits adds to the sense of seeing the true nature of the propaganda. The audience has a unique point of view, coming in as a complete outsider. They get to choose which side of the divide they stand on and how they respond to what they are seeing. The audience will be able to traverse the round room, and in doing so view the portraits and murals from a 360-degree perspective. The murals are placed back to back on the wall to give the audience the unique experience of seeing the conflict from both sides. This composition also references how the people behind these murals will never see eye to eye. Placing the murals in direct line of "sight" of the portraits gives the sensation of judgement.

“Silent Testimony” by Colin Davison is an incredibly emotional series of paintings, depicting 18 people who are all connected by their loss experienced during the troubles. There is no ulterior motive with these portraits, solely to share in the moment of grieving with them. It is about bringing it back to humanity and away from politics, not manipulating their grief to make themselves look better but just sitting with the raw emotion captured in the artwork. The portraits feel miles away from the political tributes featured in the murals. Although both the portraits and the murals are tributes, one has been politicised and thus loses value as a tribute, because it allows only one side to join in the grieving

Although everyone can grieve those lost in the political murals, the death is overshadowed by the political nature of their deaths. Often when these people are remembered it is for who they were associated with ie Bobby Sands, IRA, Jackie Coulter, UDA, rather than the fact that they lost their lives. The other artworks, instead, focus on the common aspect of grief and the power that comes from sharing that. This creates an interesting dynamic in the room, as in the centre are two men who played a key role in paramilitary activity. Across from that are 18 faces of people whose lives have been impacted massively due to losing relatives as a result of paramilitary activity.

Humanity is defined as “the condition of being human”. The title “Common Humanity” alludes to the sense of humanity coming together to overcome difficulties; when the exhibition is viewed on the surface level it speaks loudly of division and the dynamic between unity and division. The murals are more than an artwork on a wall; they represent a mindset, although originating many years ago, is one that has lingered and continues to influence much of Northern Irish society.

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Pg 4

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