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HOMOSEXUALITY AND AIDS
IN IRISH ART

By

Olivia Reid

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INTRODUCTION

CONDICIONE



A fear of sexuality has been prominent in Irish society and to some extent still is, especially in regard to homosexuality which has always been seen as a taboo subject in Ireland.

While elsewhere in the western world, especially in parts of North America, new interests in issues of sexuality, prominently homosexuality, became apparent; a majority in Irish society chose to reject any discussion on homosexuality. This resulted in the rejection of any new Gay activists; struggles, preventing the Gay community from re-forming its status and shedding the social stigma that has thus far in our recent history been associated with homosexuality. Simultaneously Irish Artists showed little response to issues of homosexuality, whilst in America and Britain artists held an important role in Gay activist movements. They created the introduction of images that make reference to homosexuality, and later AIDS, into the public view. They often attempted to rectify the misconstrued idea of homosexuality as amorphous and as a perversion of an otherwise clean cut and immutable system, heterosexual society.

In questioning why Irish Artists rarely address these issues, I realised that the social stigma of the past is still associated with homosexuality in Ireland. This nationwide prejudice towards homosexuals which still exists, has often resulted in a torrent of hatred, malice and violence being released against the Gay community and those associated with them, in the form of vandalism, 'Gay bashing' and even murder. It is unquestionable that this environment would, and perhaps has been one of intense instability and danger for Irish Artists to openly deal with issues of homosexuality.

Although this prejudice may seem to be common to many societies outside Ireland, the problem has intensified here due to the lack of support from Ireland's two most dominant powers, the Catholic Church and the Government, both of which have come extremely close to

CONCERN



justifying discrimination against homosexuals to the extent of appearing to condone any acts of cruelty directed towards them by the general public.

Chapter One, discusses the artist's role in society, citing elements of discrimination and prejudice against homosexuals apparent in Irish society. It is a prejudice that has been condoned by both the Government and the Catholic Church. Chapter Two, discusses the Government's procrastination in the past, in regard to David Norris' fight for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in Ireland. The chapter highlights the dominance of the Catholic Church in everyday social life in reference to the hierarchy's decriminalisation against homosexuality, describing it as a 'disorder' and a 'disease'. Chapter Three introduces Billy Quinn, an Irish artist who produces art about homosexuality and AIDS, raising issues of sexuality, Catholicism and AIDS, issues that leave him vulnerable to abuse from members of the public.

CHAPTER ONE

The Artist's Role in Society - Confronting the Public

COUCHINGLOE



We can no longer afford to see art in a decontextualized frame, literally walled in by the ideology implicit in the passive museum or gallery space. For many people, art may still seem detached from daily-life and our prevailing social concerns. However, in recent times art, similar to everything else around us, can be essentially tied to the social environment, reflecting common social issues.

Art can be seen as an area where boundaries can be transgressed where insight can be revealed within the context of the everyday and the familiar. Art holds possibilities of being an uninhibited unrestrained cultural terrain where artists can challenge those institutionalized systems of domination (imperialism, racism, sexism, class elitism etc.) creating public awareness and a forum for public discussion.

In the case of artists who address issues of homosexuality, they have established their role as one which attempts to rectify the misconstrued idea of homosexuality as something of a disorder, along with addressing a problem endemic to the institutions that exhibit art, that is the presupposition of a universal heterosexual viewing subject. Artists outside Ireland have constantly attempted to illustrate the violence done by the systematic presumption of heterosexual viewers in the established art world, demanding and entire re-evaluation of the ways in which viewers are invited to look at art, by challenging the established positions of sexual identity in the contemporary art world. This automatically forces the public to question identities of sexuality and hence their own sexual identity.

For Irish artists to raise similar issues amongst the public would result in creating an environment of intense discontent and perhaps anger. Due to the Irish background and beliefs, art containing homoerotic images or even the least explicit Gay art, which merely refer to homosexuality cause unease in society. Homosexuality is still anathema to

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most people in Ireland and any attempt made by Irish artists to question the fixity of male and female attributes causes confusion in the minds of many people, and in some situations they react with violence.

Even the most tolerant and moderate may feel offended and angered by the prospect of relationships being recognised or authorised other than that of the family, especially in a nation devoted to the preservation of the 'family'. According to Simon Watney this results in -

THE MALE HOMOSEXUAL OFTEN BECOMING
AN IMPOSSIBLE OBJECT , A MONSTER THAT
CAN ONLY BE ENGENDERED THROUGH
SEDUCTION WHICH IS ITSELF INEXPLICABLE
SINCE FAMILIALISM LACKS ANY THEORY OF
DESIRE BEYOND THE SUPPOSED NEEDS OF
REPRODUCTION.

(WATNEY, P. 206)

The family as an instrument of social policy creates an unconscious compulsion to censor and expel the signs of sexual diversity from the domestic field of vision. Groups in Irish society, in defence of the 'family' may feel obliged to reject the social and sexual diversity of a culture which can never be adequately pictured in the traditional guise of the family by seeking to limit or shut down possibilities for individual creative self-actualization used by artists who address the issues of homosexuality.

The problem has become apparent that AIDS¹, often seen as a medical pathology, has influenced the public to place male homosexuality to an even greater extent in a negative ambience and the homosexual even more so in the role of cultural pariah, molester of children and vile recruiter of adolescents.

However the origin of many of these beliefs are purely that of misinformation, similar to the ignorance in regard to AIDS itself. It has been shown that in Ireland there is still ignorance about the transmission

SOUNDTRACK

1971

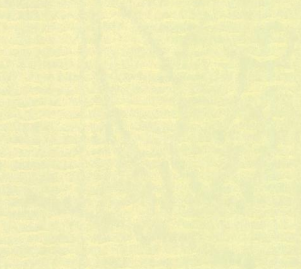
of the disease creating a fear of AIDS as a new plague which has hardened Irish societies level of social tolerance and gentleness creating increased hostility towards homosexuals.

The language of disease is loaded, making words like innocent and victim imply guilt and helplessness for people with HIV² and AIDS causing them to be widely associated with being a threat to the 'family' and the 'nation'. Subsequently homosexuality understood by some AIDS commentary as the cause of AIDS is always available as a coercive and menacing category to entrench the institution of family life, and to prop up the profoundly unstable identities those institutions generate.

Much of this ignorance is due to there being very little published work on AIDS in Ireland, and even less on the social aspect of AIDS. AIDS healthcare policies in Ireland are left up to the Health Boards and hospitals involved. This unacceptable situation currently allows the Mater Hospital in Dublin, which cares for AIDS patients, the right to refuse distribution of Eastern Health Board safe sex information to its patients. This lack of guidance gives grounds for fear and prejudice in regard to AIDS and especially in relation to homosexuality.

Due to discrimination against homosexuality and perhaps fear of AIDS Ireland has become an unstable environment for artists to publicly address issues of homosexuality and AIDS.

COLLEGE



END NOTES

1. AIDS : Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

A collective name given to a range of opportunistic infections which target the body's weakened self-defences.

2. HIV : Human Immunodeficiency Virus.

A viral infection of the blood which may nullify the body's immune system.

CONTROL



CHAPTER TWO
Creating a Forum

The Government

- Providing a Forum for Prejudice by Discriminating Against Homosexuality.

The background of Irish Law on homosexual acts is an important foundation for an understanding of an almost nationwide prejudice towards homosexuals and those who relate, directly and indirectly to issues of homosexuality and AIDS.

This includes the government's obvious procrastination in regard to the legal issues of homosexuality, and its mis-guidance of the public on the same issue.

On the 7th July 1993, Mary Robinson signed into law the decriminalisation of homosexual acts. This was symbolic ending to a twenty year long campaign for Gay law reform in the Republic of Ireland. This decision was initiated by Maire Geoghegan Quinn, Minister for Justice and Mary O'Rourke, Minister for State at the Department of Labour and Enterprise, who also introduced the Unfair Dismissals Amendment Act in the same year. This made discrimination in the workplace on the grounds of sexual orientation illegal.

In reality the Government wasn't responsible for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts, the true initiator was The European Commission on Human Rights¹ who placed the Irish Government under extreme pressure to change the Legislation. In addition, looking back at the long history of repressive legislation and the many years of dispute that occurred before its reform, clearly points to procrastination on the side of the Government in supporting the minority issue of homosexuality. This provides the perfect conditions for an environment of prejudice and discrimination against the Gay community to grow.

In 1977 David Norris, a Trinity College Dublin English Professor and a founding member of the Irish Gay Rights Movement, approached the High Court of Ireland claiming that Section 61 and 62 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861², as well as Section II of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885³ which criminalises homosexual acts was cruel and inhuman. He fought for a law reform but unfortunately failed in the Supreme Court in 1983. In response the Chief of Justice, Mr. Justice O'Higgins, stated that homosexuality had been condemned in Christian teaching and that the Irish Constitution should be constant with Christianity (Forde, p. 2).

David Norris proceeded to fight for justice. In 1986 the laws in Ireland, making homosexual acts a criminal offence were challenged before the European Commission on Human Rights in Strassbourg by David Norris, represented by Mary Robinson. Norris claimed that Sections 61 and 62 of the Persons Act of 1861 were a continuing interference with his rights to respect for private life under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights⁴. By this he claimed that a homosexual man in Ireland had a choice of either respecting the law and refraining from prohibited sexual acts - even in private with a consenting male partner - or he committed the acts thereby becoming liable to criminal prosecution, punishable by life imprisonment. Norris also questioned Section 31 of the Broad-casting Act which hinders the basic rights to free access to information and free expression of ideas. He called it, "a strange and ineffective form of political censorship" (Molony 7/1986, p. 12).

The European Commission on Human Rights decided in a preliminary judgement on the Norris case in 1987, convinced that the Irish Legislation against homosexuality constituted interference with a person's private life. Acting alongside normal procedures in such cases, the Commission then communicated its decision to Mr. Norris and the



Irish Government, who expected a 'friendly settlement' to be agreed between them. After no response from the Irish Government, the case was referred to the Court of Human Rights.

This naturally held Ireland in low regard and proved not just to the Irish public but also to the European public that the Irish Government and therefore the Republic of Ireland had little if any respect for the minority issue of homosexuality, and questioned whether the Irish Government was blind to its obligation to support minority rights in general and perhaps a lack of interest in fighting for the equality and fairness for all.

Although there was constant questioning of the validity of the Norris case on the grounds of the Irish Government contending that Mr. Norris could not claim to be a 'victim', because the legislation complained of, had never been enforced against him. The Government was blind to the fact that associating the Gay community with criminals comes close to condoning or justifying any acts of cruelty or discrimination towards them.

David Norris also feared a change in the political climate with the resuscitation of prejudice over the AIDS Virus at that time. He was right to the extent that it was used by the Government. Dick Hogan said, "In the midst of an AIDS Epidemic any measure which would increase the practice of homosexuality in Irish society is to be deplored" (Power V., 10/88, p. 3).

This shows irresponsibility on the side of the Government. In reality it was important that society made no attempt, conscious or not, to drive homosexuality underground because this would immediately result in the AIDS epidemic being compounded and exacerbated.

The Government has made many efforts to assist in the depiction of AIDS as a 'Gay disease', misleading the public with statistics, which in reality carry no significance to their case - homosexuals are not part of high

risk groups⁵ because they are carriers of a 'Gay disease'. Homosexuals are part of high risk groups because the act of Gay sex can cause damage leaving some Gay men more vulnerable to infection.

Due to ignorance and misguidance from the above an environment has been created for the heterosexual majority of Ireland to discriminate against the Gay community and anyone directly or indirectly involved with homosexuality and AIDS.

Finally, in October 1988, Ireland was found in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights, meaning that the hundred year old repressive legislation on homosexual acts had to be changed in accordance with the rules of the convention or Ireland would have risked expulsion from the Council of Europe.

However, the Government did not treat the law reform with the urgency needed. Albert Reynolds said once that homosexual reform was at the bottom of his agenda (Philpott, p. 54).

What kind of attitude did this portray to the public. In reality we have to ask if Ireland was trying to preserve existing legislation simply for collection purposes, and without the efforts of David Norris, and the European Convention of Human Rights Ireland would have the Legislation incriminating homosexuals in the existence to this day.

The Government's policy to ignore the existence to create law reforms in their favour added to the cautious Catholic outlook in Ireland has unfortunately strengthened the discrimination that the Gay society are the victims of.



Moral Monopoly

- The Catholic Church and Its Views on Homosexuality.

In Ireland a stream of hatred, malice and violence has been released against the homosexual community and those who support them, extending from verbal abuse to incidences of extreme 'Gay bashing', some resulting in murder.

Unquestionably those in authority in Ireland cannot avoid a share of responsibility for this hatred that is released against the Gay community. Politicians usually insisted that they were not responsible, however, the previous section provided evidence that the Government helped to create a climate in which such hatred was possible. However, an even greater share of the responsibility must be given to the Catholic Church which up until recently was a power bloc able to limit the practice and discourse of the State and other power blocs and alliances in Irish society.

According to Tom Inglis, author of *Moral Monopoly*, there are three types of ethical religious behaviour found in Irish Catholicism. All seem to be highly apparent in the day-to-day running of the Catholic Church. These are magical practices - that is one of relics and holy water, legalism - a form of adherence to the rules and regulations of the Church and principled ethics, in other words, principles about moral conduct (Inglis, p. 78).

The Irish community have always had a higher level of confidence in their Church, than most other western societies. They believed that the Church's answers on individual moral problems were adequate. Unlike other European societies who were turning to individual responsibility, gradually depending to a lesser extent on the regulations of the Church, Ireland has held on, not only to the magical practices, in the form of relics,

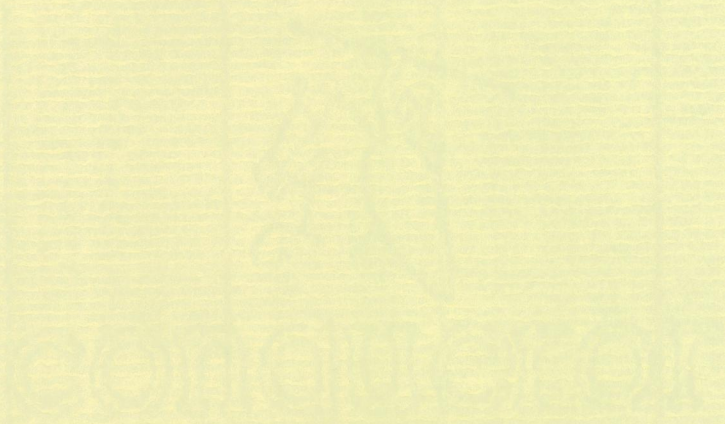
but also constant referral and adherence to the rules and regulations of the Church. All of this has been maintained through the enormous bureaucratic organisation that the Church has developed in Ireland since the middle of the last century (Inglis, p. 216).

The Catholic Church has developed a virtual monopoly on Irish morality through physical and moral control. This has been mainly exercised over the Irish people by priests, nuns and brothers, operated through Churches, schools, hospitals and homes. It was not only full-time clerical members that the power resided in, thousands of voluntary, part-time workers are equally responsible for the maintenance of adherence to this hierarchical organisation. The Catholic Church became a dominating power to such an extreme that what many Irish Catholics have understood as right and wrong would have been defined purely by the rules and regulations of the Church. This can be clearly seen in regard to issues of sexuality.

IN NINETEENTH CENTURY IRELAND SEXUAL RIBALRY WAS REDUCED FROM THE PHYSICAL TO A VERBAL LEVEL. SEX BECAME A SERIOUS SUBJECT AND THE CHURCH DEVELOPED A MONOPOLY OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT IT. SHAME AND GUILT ABOUT SEXUAL PRACTICES WERE INSTILLED IN EACH INDIVIDUAL, PRIVATELY IN A HUSHED MANNER, IN THE DARK ISOLATED SPACE OF THE CONFESSIONAL.

(INGLIS, P. 141)

Sexual morality became a major issue in Catholicism, which still stands to many Irish Catholics. Sex was often seen as a sickness that could never be cured, a disease that could only be monitored and controlled by the priest. The complete control of sexual knowledge was crucial in the maintenance of the Church's power. The rules and regulations in regard



to sexual acts and sexuality, especially that of homosexuality, were heavily enforced from the beginning and it was these that contributed to the modern attitudes in Ireland, of homosexuality as a disorder that deserves to be discriminated against. With the full support of the Catholic Church, the Irish public are especially prone to discriminate, naming all homosexuals abnormal and criminal.

CHRISTIANS OPPOSED TO POLITICAL AND SOCIAL EQUALITY FOR HOMOSEXUALS NEARLY ALWAYS APPEAL TO THE MORAL INJUNCTIONS OF THE BIBLE, CLAIMING THAT THE SCRIPTURE IS VERY CLEAR ON THE MATTER AND CITING VERSES THAT SUPPORT THEIR OPINION. THEY EXCUSE OTHERS OF PREVENTING AN DISTORTING TEXTS CONTRARY TO THEIR CLEAR MEANING.

(BUCKLEY, P. 12)

Catholics were brought up to believe that the Bible condemned homosexuality. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah⁶ was taken from the Old Testament by the hierarchy and twisted. It was often cited in regard to moral issues on homosexuality when in fact the

SIN OF SODOM WAS THE SOIN OF INHOSPITALITY, OF ABUSING STRANGERS AND VISITORS, IT WAS IN THIS CONTEXT ONLY, THE CONTEXT OF INHOSPITALITY THAT JESUS HIMSELF MENTIONS SODOM.

(BUCKLEY, P. 14)

While many Irish Catholics, for their own reasons may perceive that the Bible is at heart God's word, it clearly cannot be taken literally,

IT WAS A BOOK WRITTEN AT A CERTAIN TIME IN HISTORY BY HUMAN AUTHORS WHO BROUGHT THEIR OWN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL BAGGAGE TO WHAT THEY WROTE.

(BUCKLEY, P. 14)

Irish Catholics often confuse the hierarchy with God, to the extent that their morality is never purely derived out of their own conscience and the experience of their own society due to much contrivance enforced by the Catholic Church, resulting in a nation that proceeded to support the Vatican when it issued a declaration saying that it was morally justifiable to discriminate against homosexuals. Although such incitement to hatred is criminal and only a notch or two down from condemning Gays to concentration camps and gas chambers, the Vatican, and hence the Catholic Church continued to portray homosexual behaviour as intrinsically evil.

Less than six years ago a well known public figure, Archbishop Desmond Connell of Dublin, publicly implied a criticism or rejection of people with "that orientation" of homosexuality when he declared it a "disorder". He referred to it as a psychological disease and condemned how it was being "presented as an alternative lifestyle". He went as far as to declare it a curable disease by immediate institutionalisation (Power, 1990, p. 10)

This display by an authoritative figure had huge effects on the public giving them justification to act in accordance to their feelings about the subject of homosexuality. Members of the public criticised the media for making heroes of homosexuals, by devoting time to them; claiming that by doing so the media debased Christianity and normal family life and weakened a society where moral virtue restrains the passions and guides individuals towards the common good.

Family solidarity was constant in its fight against homosexuality especially in regard to the legislation, although the Catholic Church chose to support them, their claim to be the vanguard of Christianity was often suspect. They promoted homosexuals as immoral sexual criminals whose intention it was to undermine family life and pervert society at large. This

often prevented the general public from seeing the true side of the Gay community, i.e. as ordinary people with a fundamental right to self determination like everyone else.

Family solidarity continuously created anti-Christian sentiment against the Gay community, proving their hypocrisy to be remarkable given that Christianity preaches tolerance and compassion. However many of the public still supported Archbishop Desmond Connell, claiming as Christians, compassion must be shown to all people with "unnatural" tendencies by setting up centres to cure homosexuals similar to those of St. Louis⁷.

Many unjust remarks directed towards homosexuals during public declarations by the Church were often supported by references to the AIDS virus, which is often regarded by Irish Catholics as a symbol of moral decline, supported by the notion that AIDS is God's punishment for "the arrogance, the sin and the moral heresy of the Gay militant " (Lang, p. 181), a notion which originated from the teaching of the Catholic Church.

When it came to issues of morality, the Catholic hierarchy never expressed, and still hasn't, a need to change. They have gone to the extreme of declaring the AIDS epidemic a cause for panic, while at the same time condemning all use of contraception, especially condoms, in the prevention of AIDS. The Catholic Church caused a sense of fear in the eyes of the public which resulted in many treating HIV carriers, people living with AIDS, the Gay community and all those who support them like lepers or untouchables.

How can issues of discrimination towards homosexuals be resolved when the initiators are those of authority. It causes problems for a Catholic society to resolve such issues when there is often very little difference between the 'Gay bashers' in leather, declaring membership to the

national front and the Gay bashers wearing episcopal purple who are members of the Catholic hierarchy (Buckley, p. 14).

The centuries of Irish Catholicism is on the decline and, helped by worldwide media and interaction with Europe, the monolithic Church which brought a holistic view to Irish social, economic and political life is beginning to fragment; there is still a deep-rooted moralistic Catholic background in Ireland and for many the word of the Church is the word of God.

This creates a nationwide moral dilemma in regard to the discrimination of homosexuality. This joined up with the prejudice displayed by the Government and the State body in general, creates a forum where the public can easily discriminate against the Gay community. This automatically creates an unjust prejudice foundation for those who wish to introduce images of homosexuality and AIDS into the public space, one that would leave them vulnerable to violence and abuse from members of the public.

END NOTES

1. The European Commission on Human Rights - created in 1950, an international treaty protecting human rights. It has twenty one signatories (including Ireland) covering most of western Europe. The convention protects civil and political rights such as the rights to life, liberty and privacy; the freedom of thought and expression, assembly and association as well as freedom from torture and slavery. These rights are enforced by the Signatory States and the Council of Europe. (Power, p. 8).
2. Section 61 and 62 of the Offences Against the Persons Act 1861 (Irish Legislation) - penalise buggery with a maximum punishment of life imprisonment (Kilroy, p. 6)
3. Section II of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 (Irish Legislation) - punishes acts of gross indecency between male persons with a maximum sentence of two years imprisonment (Kilroy, p. 6).
4. Article 8 of the Convention -
 - Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his house and his correspondence.
 - There shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of the right except such as in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety or the economic well-being of the country, for the protection of health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others (Power V., p. 8)

5. High Risk Group : a term used to denote someone whose lifestyle puts him/her at a higher risk (of HIV infection).
6. The incident of Sodom and Gommorah in Genesis 1:10 has traditionally been translated from Hebrew as the attempted homosexual gang rape by the towns people of Sodom and Gommorah on the Lord and his angels. There are 9 verses in the Bible vaguely related to the subject of immorality of homosexual activity but of the 9 Genesis 1:10 is believed to be the most explicit text for it is believed that God demonstrated his wrath specifically against the men's homosexual intentions. This text constitutes the backbone of the Christian argument of the immoral nature of homosexual acts.
7. St. Louis : an institute for treatment of homosexuals at St. Louis, U.S.A., where scientists reported (April 1979) that 84 % of patients responded to treatment and that 65% of those who wished to become heterosexual achieved their aim.

CHAPTER THREE

Billy Quinn - The Beginning of New 'Gay' Art in Ireland?

Billy Quinn, an Irish Artist from Dublin, left Ireland over twenty years ago and has only returned to live in Ireland in 1995.

Quinn's work deals with issues surrounding sexuality. He is one of the very rare Irish artists who deal with the subject of homosexuality and especially AIDS. Quinn had the strength and ability to look beyond his background of Catholicism in a narrow-minded city and growing up Gay during an era of sexual repression in Ireland. This gave him the means to produce vivid art about homosexuality and AIDS, courageously incorporating images that refer to Irish traditionalism and Catholicism.

This moral courage may be a direct result of Quinn's twenty years living away from Ireland, which perhaps gave him an insight into problems within Irish society, problems that may be invisible to many of the Irish public. Although Billy Quinn attempted to keep out of Irish affairs while living away from Ireland, he admits that his art is about Ireland, about sexual repression and the need to get beyond it. His art is ideally a product of who he is, or who he was, an Irish Catholic.

Billy Quinn left Ireland for many reasons, the most important of which was to educate himself. He knew he wasn't going to get much of an education in Ireland, but he wanted to have a more experienced horizon, one beyond the limits of the society he came from.

TRAVEL HELPS YOU REALISE THAT THERE IS
MORE THAN THE REALITY THAT YOU HAVE
BEEN BROUGHT UP IN, AND MAKES YOU SEE
THROUGH WHAT WAS HELD TO BE THE
ABSOLUTE TRUTH IN IRELAND.

(REID, 1995)

Billy Quinn admits to being very religious as a youth, however, after eighteen years of association with the Christian brothers, this was to be expected. While attempting to relinquish the society he was brought up

in, Quinn realised the truth and reality of the Catholic Church, he witnessed the power and control they sustained within Irish society and through his own experience, as a victim of child abuse, he became disappointed with the lack of truth behind their promises. He talks of a nation whose,

veneer of respectability and decency
was incredible because beneath it was
savagery, incest and denial.

(REID, 1995)

Billy Quinn started work on the subject of sexuality and AIDS six years ago, when he wasn't working towards an exhibition. As he said himself,

I do this to stay sane, I want to express
sex in a positive light in my work, and
to express the pain and rage around
AIDS and the people we have lost.

(REID, 1995)

This work was the beginning of a body of work called *The Plague of Angels*. A series of work that contains references to homosexuality, heterosexuality and AIDS. It is a multi-media encounter, an interplay between photography and text, and directly refers to the aesthetic treatment of religious iconography through Quinn's use of gold and silver leaf. These works echo elements of Catholicism.

All thirty one portraits, each life-size figures, stand frank and naked, robed only in condoms or nothing at all and each person hold onto something chosen from his or her private life. All individuals however, carry the dichotomy of exposure and protection , each nude wearing a condom suit of armour to go into battle; by putting on this condom to

protect oneself one exposes oneself more by admitting to being sexually active in a dangerous world.

Each are very different due to their pose, their possessions, their titles, and the sparse verse, which is laid across the outer silver frame (a verse chosen from the sitter's conversation).

Brian and Rachel stand together tweaking their nipples. Rachel has two black bags, which are closed beside her, her verse says, "We look very happy". Brian is covered from head to toe with all kinds of sores, at his feet are at least 18 cures for his ailments, all tidily bottled. His verse reads, "My being sick is more visible without my clothes on. I want to announce to people : Hey, look at me, I'm dealing with this". Brian, along with two other angels in this series died (Illustration 1).

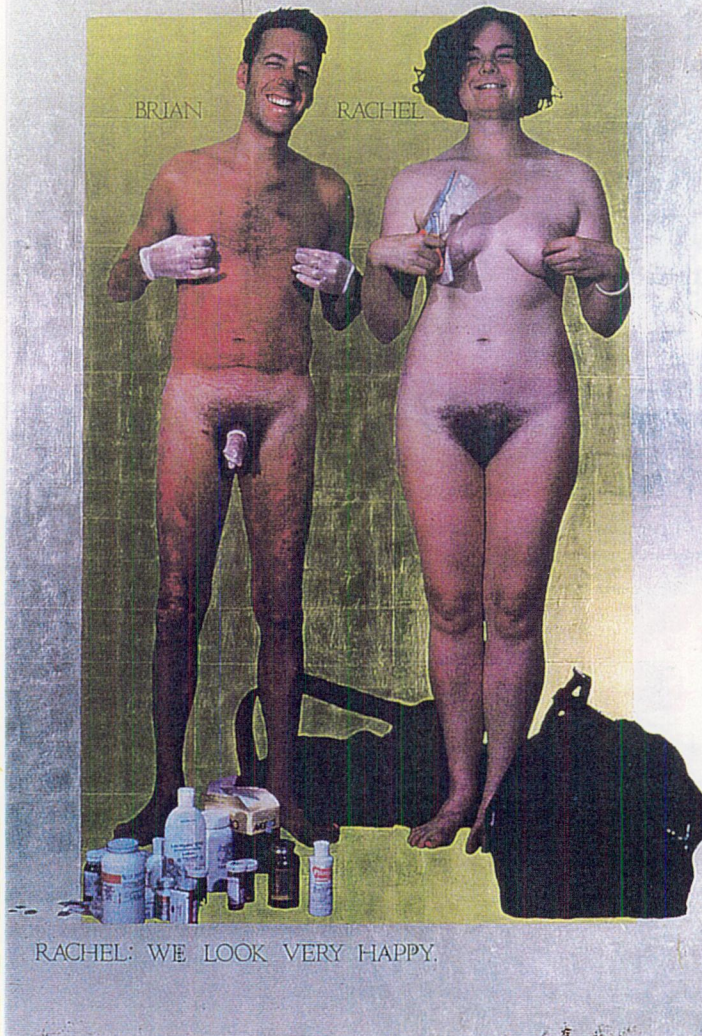
Mike has his back turned and a condom tossed across his shoulder, he glances sideways at the cameraman. A slip cover from one of his recorded albums is on show and his verse reads, "Let's just say that I had a hand in the invention of safe sex". Mike remains a longtime survivor of AIDS (Illustration 2).

Billy the painter stands in a very popular - artist - like pose, similar those of Michelangelo or Duchamp when they themselves are included in their paintings. His verse reads, "AIDS pushed me it pushed all of us into the realisation of our own morality" (Illustration 3).

Kelly and Martin are together in one frame. Kelly stands with his arms around Martin, who is sitting. Kelly wears a pair of wings and Martin holds a globe. Their verse is for both of them, it reads, "For a long time my dreams kept me alive" (Illustration 4).

These are four of thirty one paintings, all stand on their own, as well as together.

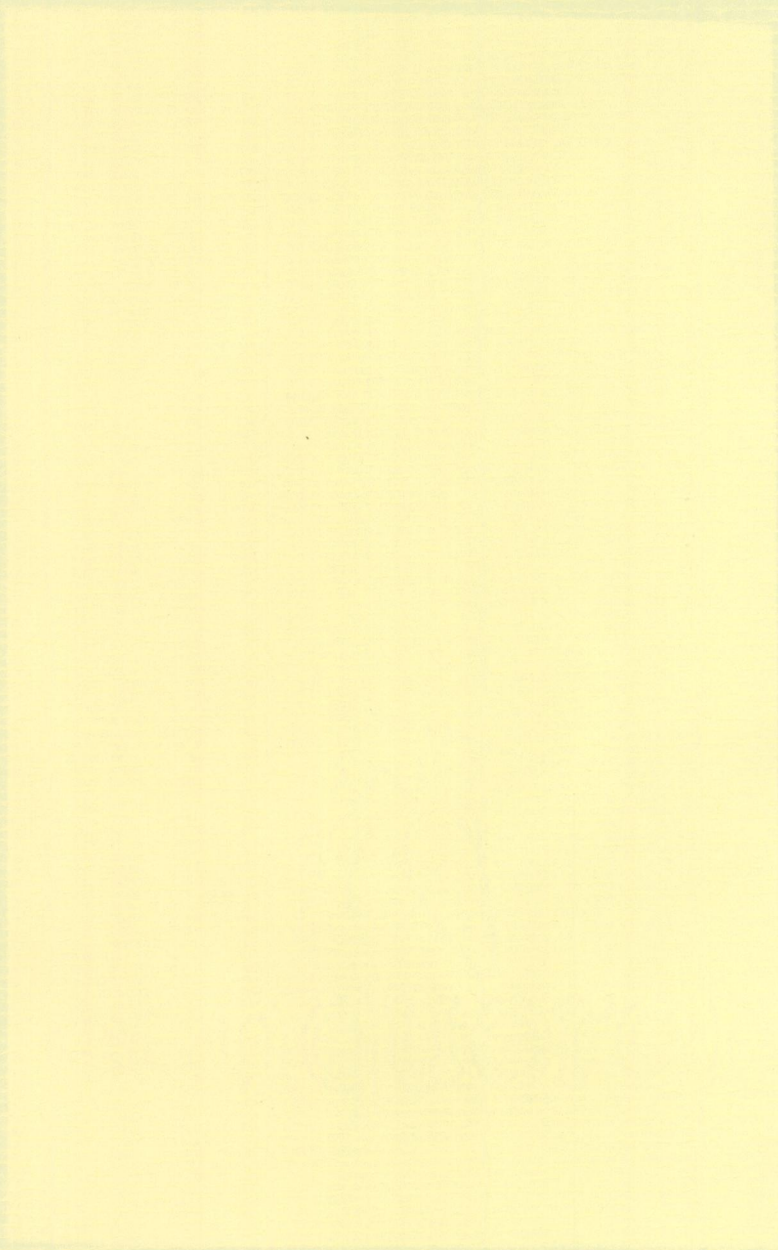
BRIAN: MY BEING SICK IS MORE VISIBLE WITHOUT MY CLOTHES ON. I WANT TO ANNOUNCE TO PEOPLE - HEY, LOOK AT ME, I'M DEALING WITH THIS.



RACHEL: WE LOOK VERY HAPPY.

ILLUSTRATION 1

BRIAN AND RACHEL



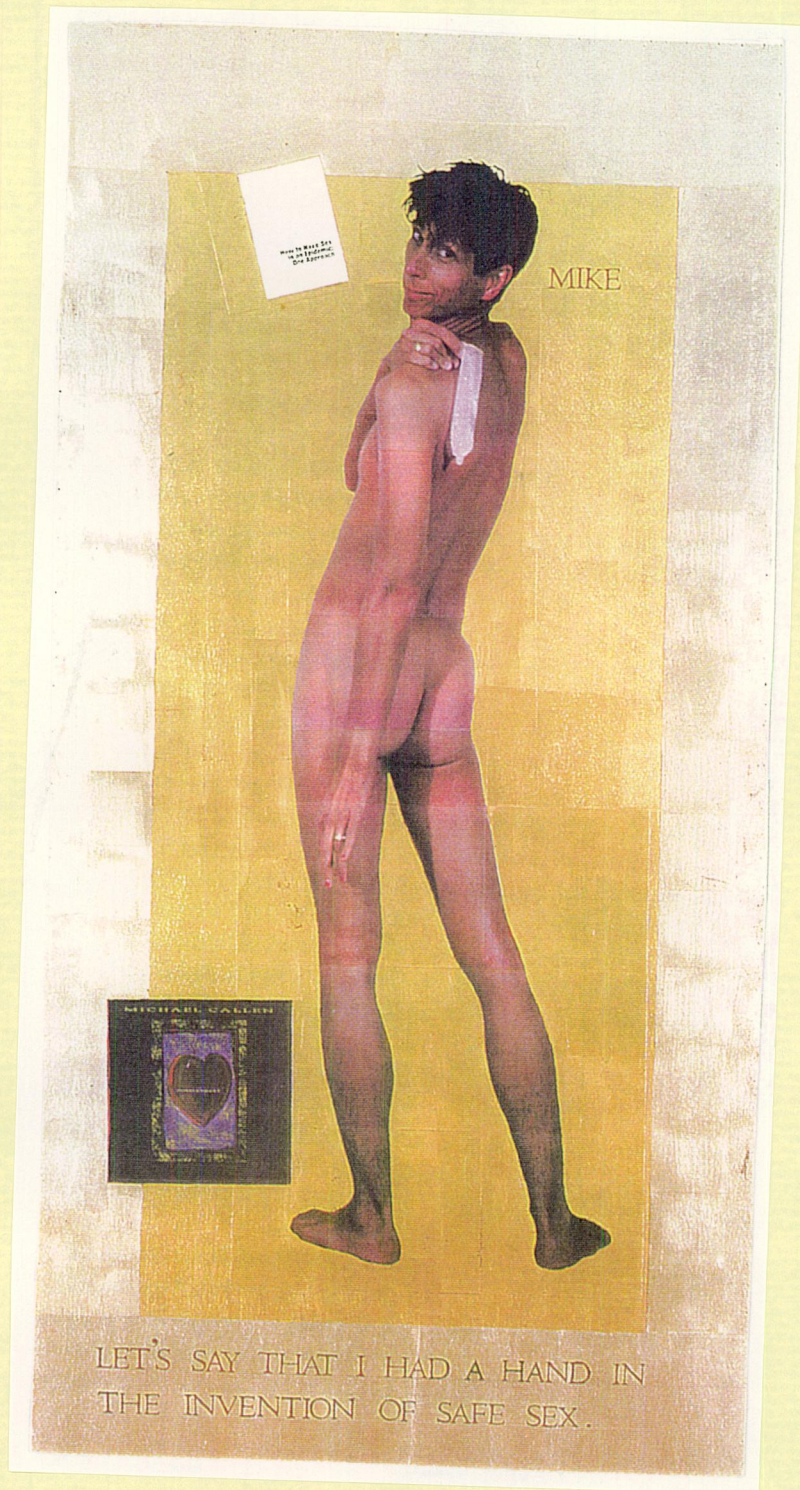
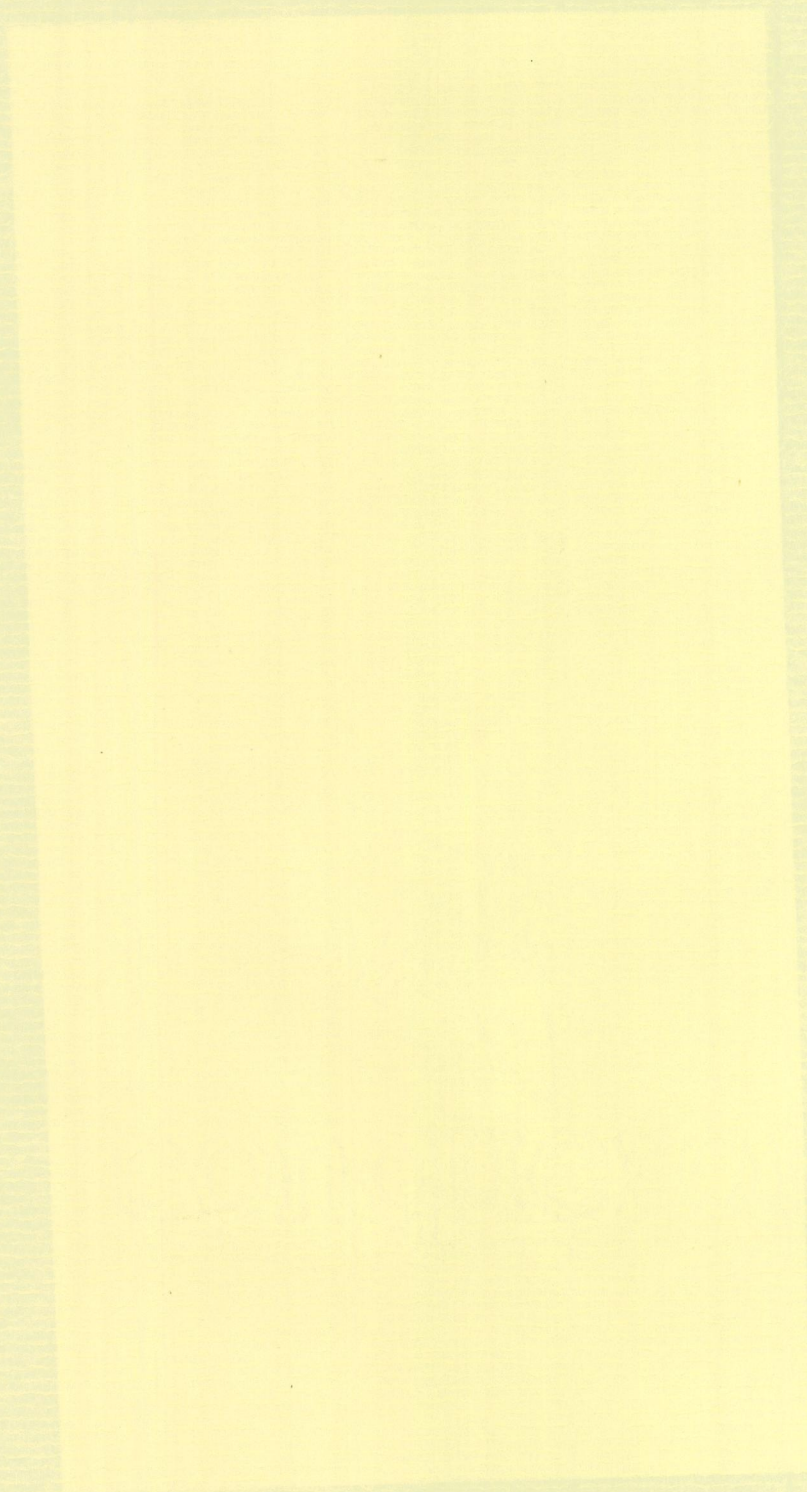


ILLUSTRATION 2

MIKE



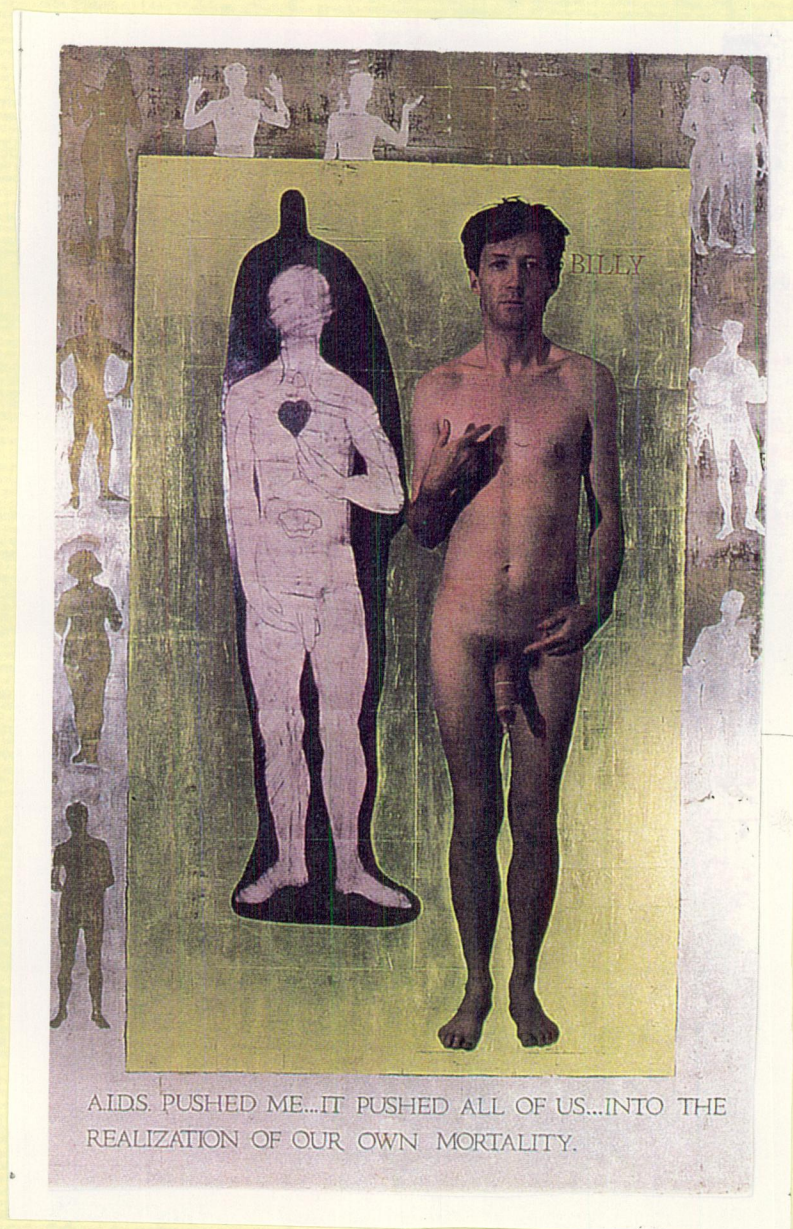
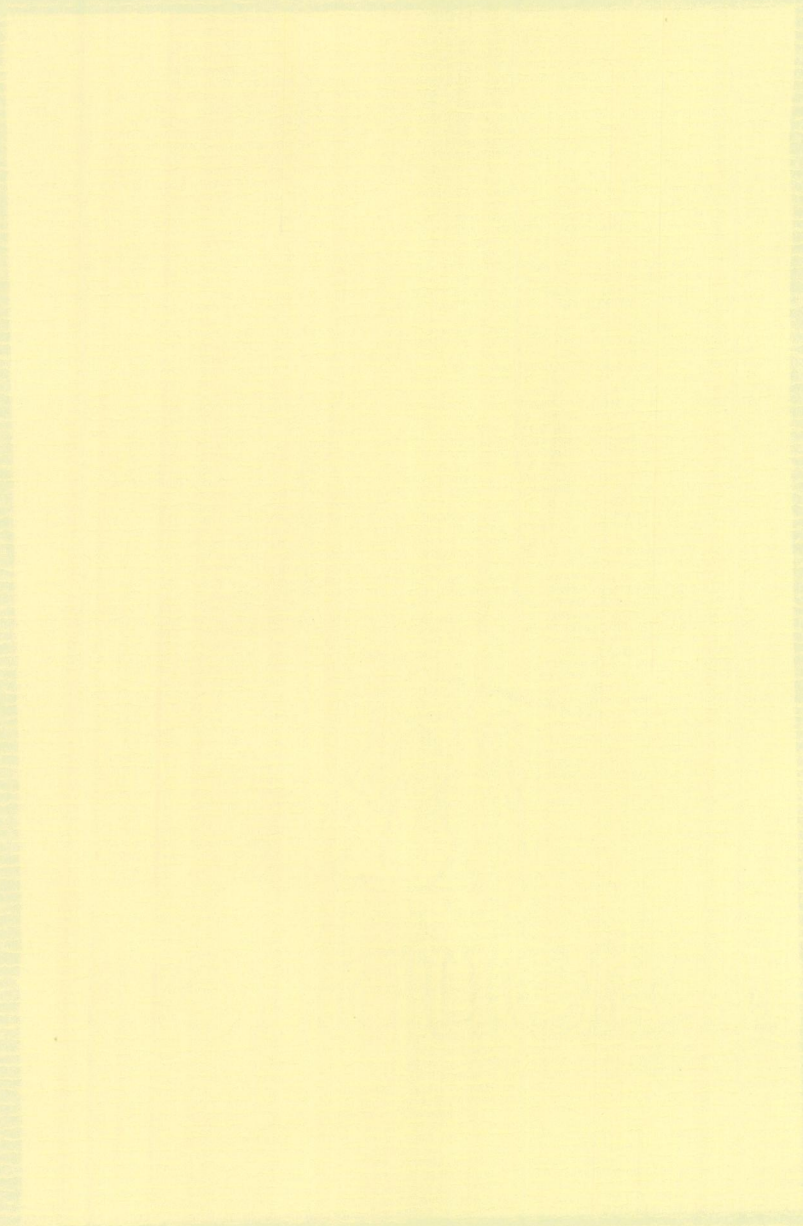


ILLUSTRATION 3

BILLY



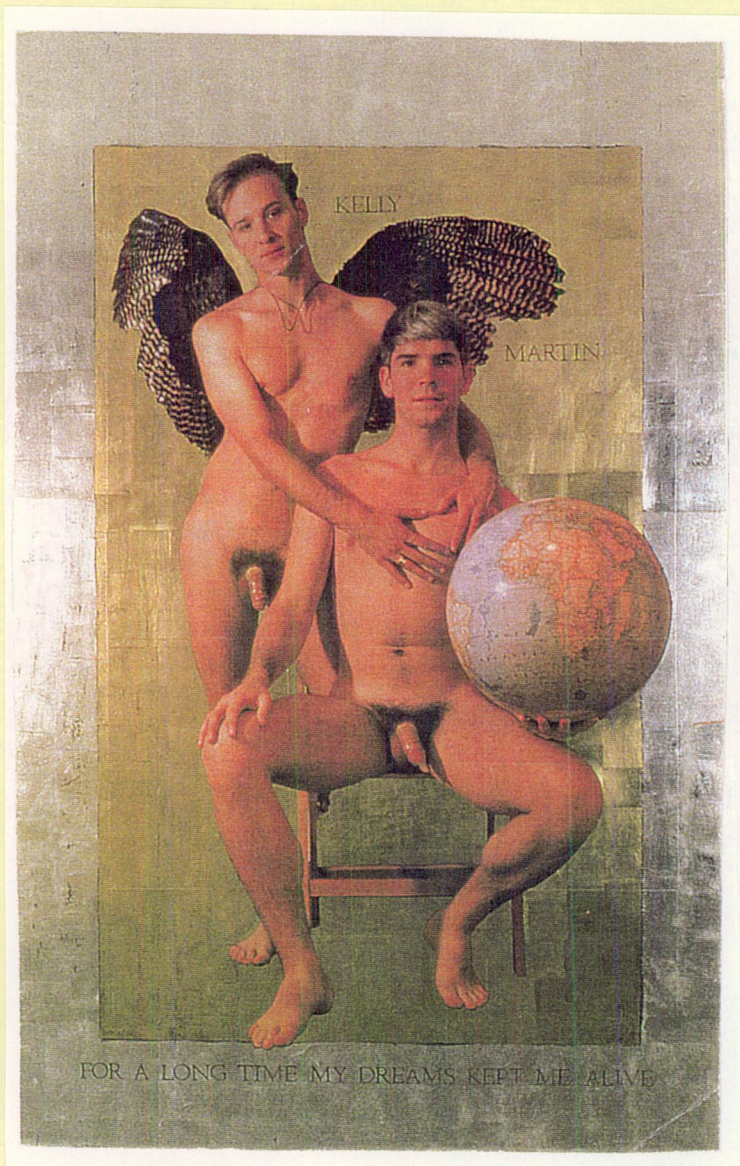
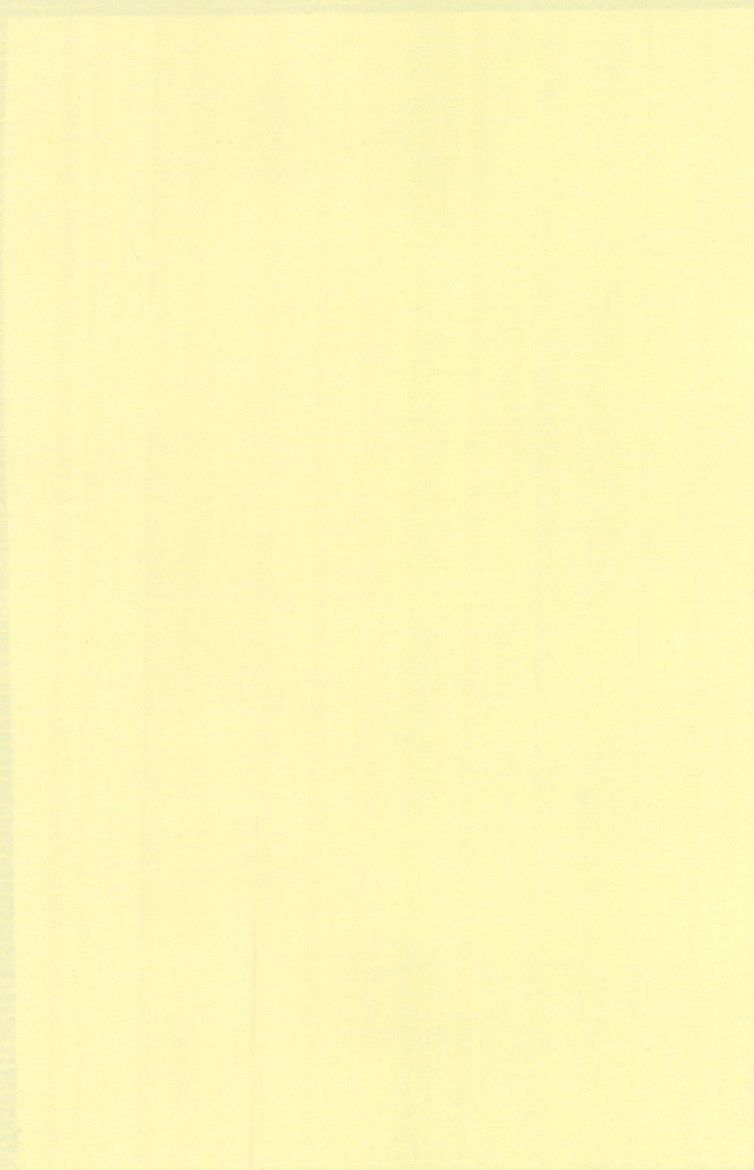


ILLUSTRATION 4
KELLY AND MARTIN



BILLY QUINN'S GUILDED PLAQUE OF ANGELS IS AT FIRST GLANCE BOTH SHOCKING AND SWEET. IT IS THE PLACE WHICH MANY OF US DREAD TO BE IN - BUT WE ARE LENT A FEW MINUTES TO LOOSE OUR FEAR. WALKING INTO THE ROOM INSPIRES THE SAME FORM OF AWE EXPERIENCED WHEN ENTERING THE BASILICAS OF RAVERNA, WHERE SAINTS CAST THEIR AURAS TO WHOLLY ENVELOP ONE. IN QUINN'S ROOM WE ARE TAKEN BY THE HAND AND LED UP TO HIS ANGELS WITH THEIR COMRADES-IN-ARMS NURSING AND WHISPERING IN THEIR EARS; AND INSTEAD OF DEATH WE FIND POETRY.

(NICHOLSON, P. 4)

There is an edge to the candid, ordinary sexuality implicit in the paintings for, despite the recurring message of safe sex, few will feel safe in the room filled with them and neither the topic nor politics of the collection is in the least bit safe. In Ireland this work may be seen as a threat to an ostensibly safe and stable heterosexual society. This work is a threat to the morals and traditions of that society.

Billy Quinn, a victim of child abuse, was also heavily influenced by a connection he made between child abuse and HIV, a subject which he further believed made immediate connections with Ireland.

THERE IS A PARALLEL BETWEEN AN ABUSED CHILD COMING TO TERMS, REGAINING IN SELF ESTEEM, AND A COUNTRY WHO WAS ABUSED FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS BY ANOTHER COUNTRY AND IS NOW REGAINING SELF-ESTEEM, BOTH PRODUCTS OF A PAST, AN INTENSE PAST.

(REID, 1995)



What would be regarded as Quinn's most important piece in relation to his nationality, his past and his breaking away from Irish traditions is *The Sodomy Piece* (Illustration 5). It is a piece that is unparalleled - in its subject matter - to 'Irish Art', that lays open the boundaries of privacy. It is a torso sized photograph of lovemaking inscribed with a text that reads,

A 38 YEAR OLD RECENTLY BEREAVED IRISH EX-CATHOLIC (POST-CHRISTIAN), HIV NEGATIVE UNDOCUMENTED ALIEN IS SAFELY SODOMIZED BY A RECENTLY BEREAVED 33 YEAR OLD HIV POSITIVE AFRO-AMERICAN CHRISTIAN.

(NICHOLSON, P. 9)

It is a panel belonging to a series of works called *The Cremation Series*.

THE CREMATION SERIES STANDS ALONG WITH *ULYSEES* IN AN HISTORICAL LINE OF SUBVERSIVE ART WORKS WRITTEN BY QUINN'S FELLOW SCATOLOGICAL DUBLINER, JAMES JOYCE. *ULYSEES* WAS CENSORED FOR ITS SEXUAL EXPLICITNESS. IT WAS VIEWED HYSTERICALLY BECAUSE IT TALKED ABOUT THE THINGS THAT ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE TALKED ABOUT. IT MADE AVAILABLE THE INTERIOR REALM WHERE WE TREMBLE WITH EXCITEMENT AT TH RECOGNITION OF SECRET PLEASURE.

(NICHOLSON, P. 9).

Forbidden works are nothing new, however bending rules and going against traditions always upsets the public especially in a nation steeped in tradition.

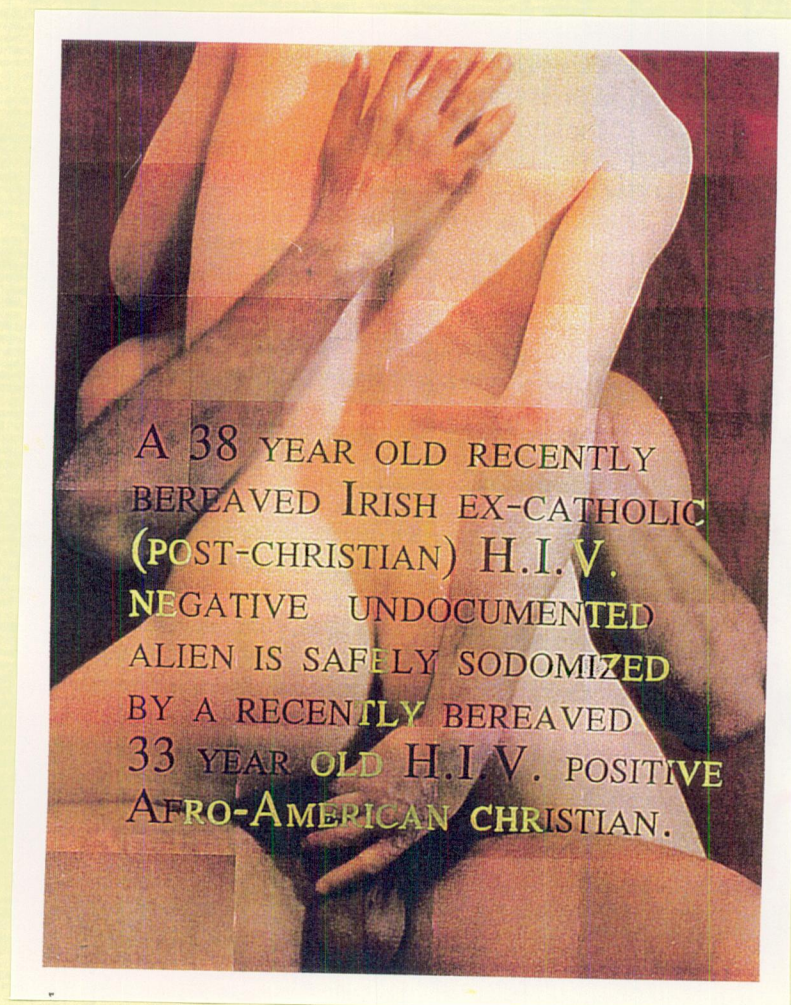
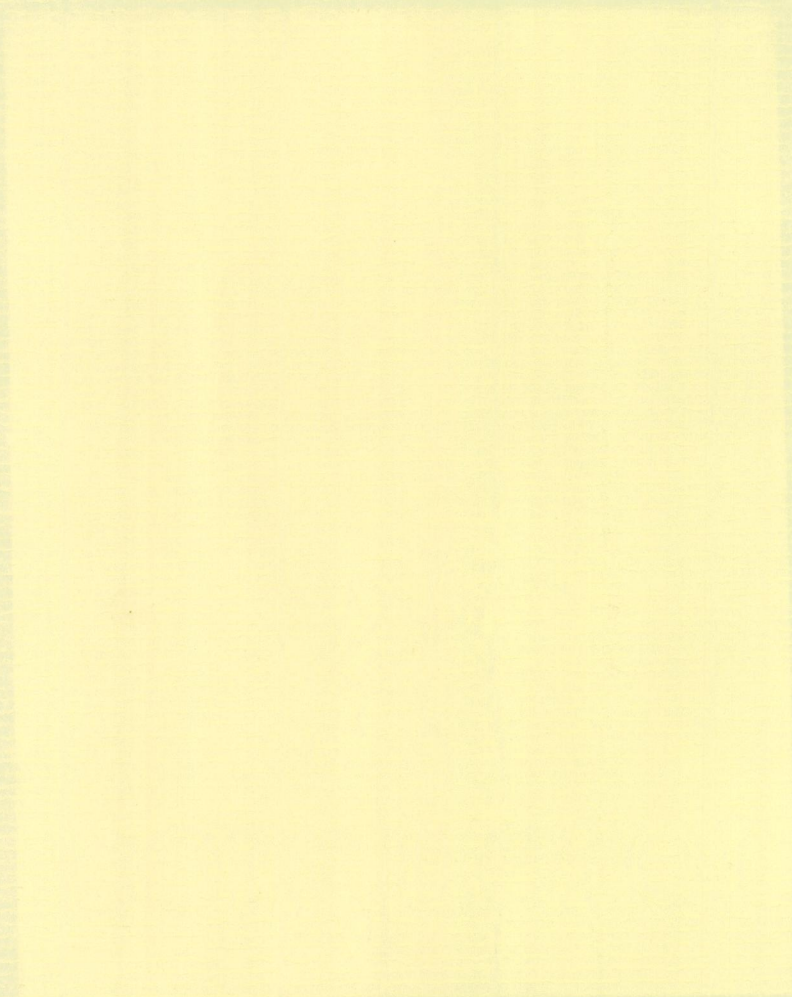


ILLUSTRATION 5

THE SODOMY PIECE



Billy Quinn has borrowed into the collective unconscious to see what he could find, and on finding it he has lent it the necessary poetry that makes what is difficult bearable.

Although Billy Quinn's exhibition of the *Plague of Angels* in Chicago was something indelible, it did not receive Government sanction from the National Endowment for the Arts (USA) and, as Benjamin Nicholson said about the exhibition,

FOR MOST, THE WORK WILL NOT BE
WITNESSED. IT WILL REMAIN IN AN EVER
THICKENING FILE OF THOSE WHO TRULY
BRING TO VISIBILITY THINGS THAT ARE
USUALLY LEFT HIDDEN FROM THE STATUS
QUO.

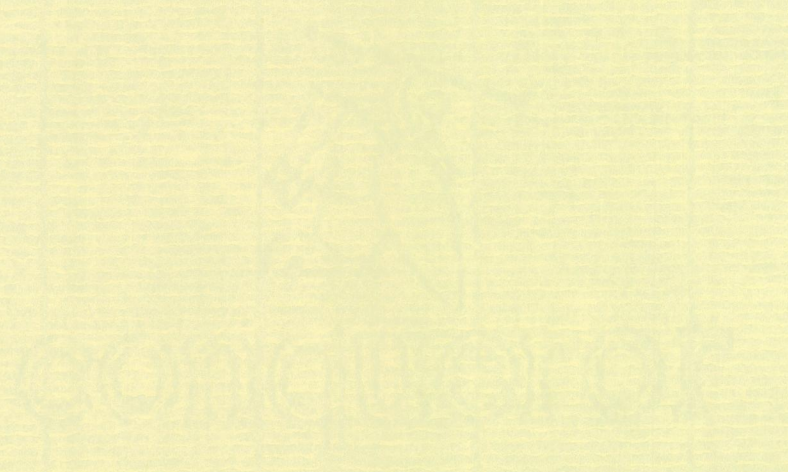
(NICHOLSON, P. 12)

Undisputably Billy Quinn, along with many American artists, has succeeded in encouraging some people to stand up and recognise the urgency of the AIDS pandemic by taking on similar tactics as those used by death in its,

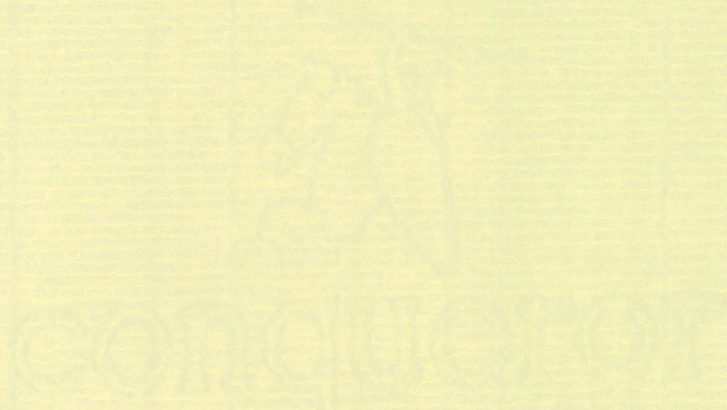
UNAMBIGUOUS FRONTALITY SILENTLY
FILLING THE URBAN VOID WITH THEIR WORK
AND THEIR HOPE, RETURNING TO SOCIETY
THE CONSCIENCER IT DESIRES TO IGNORE.

(NICHOLSON, P. 12)

Billy Quinn has created a forum for artists to follow. He has forced many questions on sexuality, especially homosexuality to be surfaced and has introduced elements of the reality of AIDS. This has left him vulnerable to abuse from an unpredictable public, creating an urgency for artists to react by producing work that will bring awareness, work that will further question the prejudice that has thus far in our recent history been associated with homosexuals.



CONCLUSION



Billy Quinn's self-employment as an artist presented him with the task of making the unutterable uttered and the invisible, visible. His art about homosexuality and AIDS goes beyond the boundaries of Irish art set by previous artists who worked with issues of sexuality. He lays open the boundaries of privacy.

Billy Quinn found the ability to look beyond his background of Catholic access in a society of a conservative nature, and produced works on homosexuality and AIDS that are important for the Irish public to witness. Art that deals with Irish traditionalism, Catholicism, homosexuality and AIDS in one breath, questioning his past, and the past of many Irish.

However, due to Ireland's history, it is understandable why so few Irish artists have attempted to deal with issues of homosexuality and AIDS. Discrimination against homosexuals and ignorance about the truth and reality of AIDS is prominent in Ireland. The lack of direction from the Irish Government shows little respect for minorities, especially homosexuals and a dominant Catholic Church where the hierarchy often declared homosexuality a disorder and looked beyond AIDS prevention education in fear of moral panic helped to create public ignorance and fear of AIDS. The procrastination of the Irish Government in decriminalising homosexuality contributed to that ignorance and fear, providing a forum where prejudice can grow.

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