

ART / *The Montreal-based La Raza Group's exhibit at one of Ireland's most popular art galleries may not win any friends at the Irish tourist bureau but the 'fantastically powerful' show may gain some notice for Canadian artists*

A slap of colour on a 'faceless nation'

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LIKE a large, colourless void on the canvas of world geography, Canada triggers off little more than a blank in many a foreign imagination. But blandness doesn't necessarily deprive one of vision, certainly not in the case of a Canadian trio of painters currently exhibiting in one of Ireland's most popular art galleries.

"As a faceless nation, Canada essentially plays an observer type role on the international stage," said 26-year-old Scott MacLeod, the youngest member of the Montreal-based La Raza Group. "I supposed that what we're doing here is enlarging on that role by using our observations to put a face on the world."

The exhibition at Dublin's Guinness Hop Store Gallery by MacLeod and his two partners in La Raza — Gerald Pedros, 39, and Francis Caprani, 40 — countenances a fairly disillusioned view of modern civilization, a view frequently projected with (or through) print media clippings, TV camera lenses and rifle scopes. In one of Pedros's works entitled *Going the Distance*, the blurred figure of a runner is sighted by a sniper's cross-hairs at the finish line of a marathon.

La Raza's angry and despondent commentary on the human race has clearly touched a kindred nerve in a historically-wounded capital whose mood often runs as grey as its weather. The Dublin-based Irish Independent described the group's large, unframed canvasses as having the "same lurid impact" as Belfast's sectarian political graffiti. The description is particularly accurate in the case of the exhibit's collaborative centrepiece, a 10-by-20 foot collage originally shown by the group at an Amnesty International benefit in Montreal last year. The expansive artwork assaults its viewers with a dense riot of symbols and colour, the only relief being a space where Ca-

prani scrawled his streetwise creed: "I don't like prison. It don't have my kind of bars."

"It's a fantastically powerful exhibition," David Rose, a correspondent for London Arts magazine, said at the opening. "Of course, the images aren't likely to win the artists any friends in the Irish tourist bureau."

The images most likely to grate on diplomatic sensibilities belong to Caprani, a working-class Dubliner who left Ireland for Montreal at age 16 but — as he admits — never really escaped the complex emotions of his homeland. In one portrait, he transforms Northern Ireland's ultra-conservative Protestant demagogue, Ian Paisley, into a savage, vampire-like champion of hate. Another Caprani portrait, *Please No Pictures*, zooms in on the victims of hate, ordinary people whose lives are strafed by violence only to be invaded by another monster: the strife-obsessed media.

"At the time I did these paintings, it was a way of looking at the violence I felt was in myself," said Caprani. "A lot of those feelings came from growing up here. They are not easily expelled, not with all the television reports we've seen from Northern Ireland. TV is in the process of seriously misshaping humanity. It always shows with its cold eye to look at people when they are at their most injured and frightened."

Whatever their standing with Irish tourism officials, La Raza's ingenuous political commentary has won the artists some influential admirers in Ireland, including Irish painter Anne Yeats, daughter of the late, universally revered poet, W.B. Yeats. "I like the exhibition," said Yeats, who opened the show. "These artists certainly don't hesitate to express themselves. And they do it on a very large scale."

The Guinness Gallery obviously liked the show, too, holding it over for an extra week. (The exhibition moves south next week to Kilkenny where it will be shown as part of a

week-long arts festival.)

As the sole Canadian contribution to Dublin's 1991 European City of Culture festival, a year-long affair held annually in a designated city within the European Community, the exhibit has clearly added a dash of colour to the Canadian identity abroad — partly due to the inclusion of a video-taped recital of an "epic action" poem by University of Toronto professor Robert O'Driscoll.

The poem, a ranting and — at times — rhyming stream of eccentric consciousness called *Nato and The Warsaw Pact Are One*, was published in booklet form last year in Toronto. However, it wasn't until securing space at the Guinness Gallery for an exhibition of Canadian paintings (La Raza's, as it turned out) that O'Driscoll found a prominent platform from which to launch the poem. In *Nato*, the Celtic studies scholar attempts to spear the conspiratorial dragons of his imagination: a grey order of men steering the world — and, interestingly, the U of T — into the jaws of Apocalypse.

(Among other things, the poem asserts that Toronto is a dangerous terminal of NATO power; the U of T figures in the scenario because NASA donated the school a \$16-million computer.)

"It seems mad, but it really isn't," O'Driscoll told an audience of 200 at the exhibition's opening as he sank to his knees to deliver a live sampling of his video recital.

One Dublin newspaper cited O'Driscoll's contribution to the exhibition — and the festival at large — as an amusing exercise in High Nonsense. Indeed, the poem and O'Driscoll's reading of it elicited a variety of descriptives ranging from fecal to brilliant.

"He's touched the outer reaches of the mind," said an admiring James Flannery, director of Dublin's prestigious Yeats International Festival.

Ultimately, the exhibit has shown that while the Canadian mind may not be well, it certainly is alive.