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Belfast: A Museum of Walls (with apologies to André Malraux)

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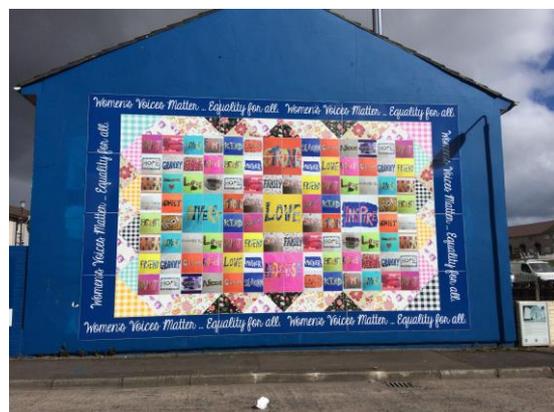


This morning I walked around West Belfast. I walked from the Protestant Shankill to the Catholic Falls Roads and I saw one of the best rainbows I have ever seen. It arched magnificently across the "Peace wall" that divides the two districts so recently and violently at war with each other. It seemed a natural blessing conferred by the sheltering sky on this injured place.

I wrote a book about the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo many years ago. In finding Frida, before she became an icon – St. Frida of the many wounds – I also found her husband Diego Rivera and his colleagues in the Mexican muralist movement, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco. I spent weeks travelling through Mexico tracking down their revolutionary murals. I discovered the potency of political thought expressed in the form of painting on public walls, where anyone and everyone can understand the iconography of suffering.



Bobby Sands: The Falls Road



Women's Voices Matter: The Shankill Estate

What Belfast has left me with is the thought that making art matters. Especially public art. As a painter I know only too well that what I do has a limited audience and a limited significance, occupying a very small place in the echo chamber that is my life. But going to Belfast makes me feel the same thing I felt long ago in Mexico. Going to Berlin gave me the same feeling. Making symbolic images is a very good way to send messages. Better than pamphlets, better than editorials. Yes, the murals in Belfast are angry, exhortative, commemorative, and often very crude and naively painted. But they pack a very hard punch. I found the people of this city understandably reluctant to talk about the "Troubles". They want to forget. They want to move on. But we know only too well that people fight each other and they die. For borders, for religion, for land, for ideals, for past transgressions. But walls stand and they speak and bear testimony.

Longer than rainbows.