Stepping up
By D.V.B.

Chancing on the character that is **Francis O'Toole**

came via a conversation, about his need to find

"an
emancipated Jesus
Christ like figure to paint", I became
engrossed by his dead still yet unnerving
intensity. Communicating slowly in calm clear confi-
dent tones, Francis is a serious man. An Artist.
Drawing him out of his studio and meeting him in a more
comfortable zone than some Gallery, or an opening of one his Art
Show, feels like a bit of a treat. Getting Fran to walk somewhere other
than around his easels, in which he studies the application of the paint he
applies, to share some reflections, is surreal.
Born in 1979 Ballymun, his first memory is "being uncomfortable in a pram in
Fatima Mansions". Mentioning P-Block, M-Block and The Arch. Family names are
called out. Fatima Mansions, Ballymun, Fatima Manson's, Crumlin and more Fatima
Mansions. Bad people in good communities, recalling youthful mischief, burnt out cars
and Christian Brothers threatening "to put him through the wall with the dead souls."
Getting out of the Basin Lane School and being advised to work at a carpet factory in an
industrial estate. 17 years old, it felt good to get paid. Three weeks in and doing well, with
his own carpet aisle to manage. It was a Thursday and covering for a colleague who is suf-
fering from the night before, he takes over the forklift and the process of moving the rolled-
up carpets.
IN a split second/
The now jolting, out of control, forklift reverses and trying to save his spine from being
crushed he continues, "visually I remember the sound of steel hitting steel and the cracking.
The cracking of bone in my leg. Seeing the blood come down the side of me leg, my foot
was a ball of mushed up muscle and bone. With the blood pouring through like a wet
sponge, you know what I mean? Because it was so mashed up". Falling on his back into a
pool of blood.
Ambulance. Saint James Hospital. Dreamlike states. Toes going black. Sleep / ake up.
A toe is missing. Repeat. Repeat. Repeating this cruel process till his whole crumpled
foot had disappeared one morning.
Fran tells me about the months of numerous operations which were filled with
even more pain. Slowly he became "institutionalised". The Doctors, the pretty
Nurses, the visits from Family, the comradery with other patients. The
attention, "there were no worries, nothing to think about. Your food
is brought to you every day, free drugs..... Morphined up to your
eyeballs when you want to".

After Seven months of Rehabilitation in James's,
the transformation of being back on the
couch in his Mother and Fathers
and missing the

sugar coated life of the Hospital, is when the reality flooded in. "Here I am. I'm Francis O'Toole. I've had an accident. It's pretty horrific. What do I do now? What happens now?"

Initially he says he didn't mind the sympathy. The sympathy from his group of friends, but the boys were becoming young men, naturally, the girls were young women and when he got back the mentality to step out into the World again, Fran explains how he didn't want the sympathy anymore, didn't want the subject brought up. The "pack" mentality (something he mentions more than once) which certain people would use the "accident" to keep him down. To keep him controlled. The hierarchy. The testosterone of young men. Recollecting hurt-full memories, inner anguish and confidence issues, from this turmoil he turns phrases for effect, like, "the flap of the butterfly's wings".

Feeling like an outsider with the limp. Hiding through clenched teeth the brace on his leg. 18 years old and socially anxious he spent his days watching TV, while waiting for his mates to come back from their jobs, He began to misbehave. The drink, the fights, the drugs. He drifted into a different social group, up in the Drimmnagh area.,. This "pack" and it's attention. Getting picked up in stolen cars. The nights out. The girls. It was appealing. The "pack" standing around by Masseys on the Crumlin Road, they were "the up and coming criminals". An aggression was manifesting around the patch. Small drug wars pursued with violence fuelled by cocaine. "People got glassed then. Quite badly". I don't really press him here any further, but he describes some fairly nasty images which don't need to be documented.

"Your kind of around that, you kind of know some of the people. . . Inside, almost like you stepped onto a road you no longer want to be on, but you don't know how to step away because you're afraid. They're different than me, their nature is different. You're an Actor among people who aren't acting. They could smell it off me. I can remember the moment I got put in that box".
The weak box containing a soft side, a weakness for the vultures to prey on with dangerous nerves.
Around this time his Mam and Dad sensing Fran was heading down that wrong road, pulled him up to do something with his life. From conversations about colour therapy stemming from his Mam's study of human psychology as a special needs assistant, came the idea to paint. A suggestion. Initially it felt like a cop out, "oh yeah I'll do that".
"You must realise I'm not painting all that long. I got to Florence in 2005 and I couldn't even draw. Do remember. In Dublin I was painting with Acrylics on ply boards and shitty canvases that I would buy in town. I liked acrylics because they would dry fast. An hour or two wasting time before I'd head out to my mates or whatever.

Then I did, really, start to like it. I'd drift off into it almost meditatively. It was all imaginative. I had never studied Art or been involved in art, so I wasn't taking it too seriously. Fast forward and the paint starts stacking up, one day my Dad say's" You know we should frame some of these and bring them down to this little thing on at Stephens Greens.".

We did and some chap from a Gallery turns up and shows an interest and my paintings end up in Wicklow somewhere. He keeps ringing me saying, I've got to PAINT PAINT PAINT PAINT. I'm telling him I don't know how to do this. He says, "people seem to be interested in your work".
"Sniffing around NCAD I remember being rejected. I couldn't draw. The paintings went to the Wicklow, the chap from the Gallery hounding me for more works. Which I couldn't do all that quick, as I had no real technique. He kept asking me to paint faster. I wanted to try school".

Closed doors and depression. His eyes light up as he recalls seeing Caravaggio in The National History Museum of Ireland for the first time. "I wanted to learn those techniques, the application".

We talk about Artists. Competition between Artists. Schools feeding the competitive mentality, hyper nasty narcissistic egos are talked about. When the ego becomes beyond the output. It makes him uncomfortable, these types of people make him uncomfortable, but being in those Florentine surroundings with such talented people (not so much the Narcissist's), shaped his craft.
Returning to Ireland, the Art scene and its' business. Initially, peers mocked him for learning The Old Academic Techniques' that had been lost everywhere bar Russia. "The insecurities of the Irish" he says, also telling me, "that the very same people then went abroad to learn these very methods". Anyhow, awards and sold out solo shows

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Actually, they were neither attained nor achieved in such a simplistic manner. Because after all, who was he? You see, firstly, you need to create a name to add value to your name, which isn't as easily achieved without work and time, and the time of this type of work in its self, consumes all of time. Always in the studio (place here: a joke about an Agent called Timeless). He was constantly moving paintings about, entering them into different competitions, sometimes they returned damaged, vandalised. Purposely? Eventually, (even if initially, people inside the Royal Academies were working against him) they; The Establishment, had to notice, to take notes of his paintings, to applaud them and Honour him. Still so young for the talent honed, the name of his first solo show (late 2015) was, "A work in progress".

As I see it, Francis is a Master Painter and in Ireland, they seem a rare breed. Will he always be a realist. I'd like to think so. The reality is: Realism is real and that's what critics can't face up to, the truth! Ask around, subjectively.

Quotes taken from two audio interviews over the middle weekend of January 2017.

THE END OF TIME