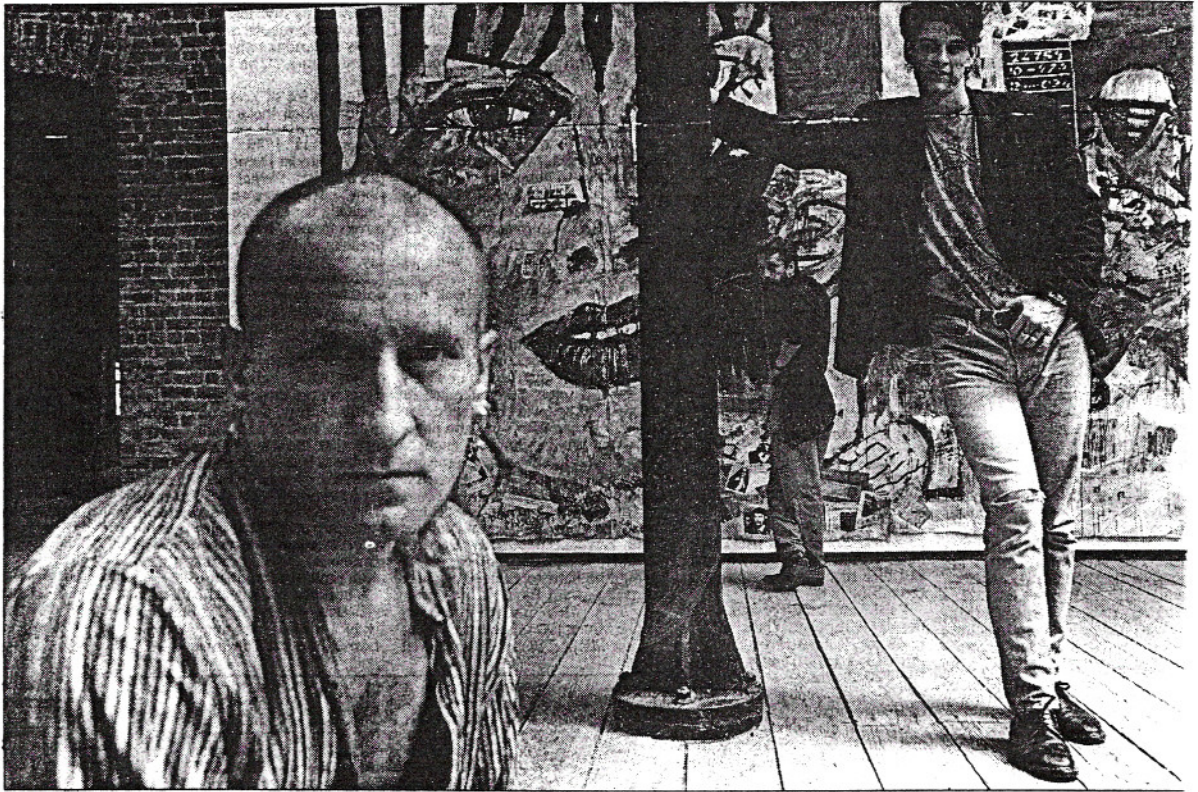


Art

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Not-so-innocents abroad Francis Caprani (left), Gerald Pedros (centre) and Scott MacLeod in front of their bold, unframed canvases displayed on a Dublin gallery's brick walls. One Irish newspaper compared the paintings' "lurid impact" that of Northern Ireland's sectarian political graffiti.

N.D.G. artist confronts his Dublin past

After 20-year absence, ex-bad boy resurfaces in Ireland with exhibition focused on anger

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

DUBLIN — Across from the old brick row-house where his family once lived on East Wall Rd., Francis Caprani peered over the stone embankment into the Tolka River, and drifted back to his boyhood:

"We used to go swimming in there," the 41-year-old N.D.G. artist said. "One day, though, I came up from underwater and there was a dead dog full of maggots on top of me, half sticking out of a bag. I never went in that water again."

For Caprani, the experience was something of a baptism into life in Dublin's working-class northside, a distinctly unscenic environment, especially in the artist's memory, which is awash in images of grimy children and bloody gang rumbles. Then there was the time he injured a woman by hurling a large rock through a train window — a rather unholy act for a child whose mom used to splash holy water on him whenever he came in off the streets.

Lasting impression on Dublin

All of which explains why Caprani has rarely felt comfortable revisiting Dublin.

This month, however, after a 20-year absence from Ireland, the former bad boy resurfaced back home to confront his past — with an art exhibit that may just change the course of his future.

For the past four weeks, a series of paintings by Caprani and his partners in the Montreal-based La Raza Group — Gerald Pedros, 39, and Scott MacLeod, 26 — have been the featured exhibition at the Guinness Hop Store Gallery, one of Ireland's most popular art showrooms. The show, the only Canadian entry in Dublin's 1991 European City of Culture Festival, is now headed for a week-long showing at the Kilkenny Arts Festival.

La Raza, and in particular Caprani, clearly made a lasting impression on Dublin. Close to 200 people attended the exhibit's opening, among them painter Anne Yeats, daughter of Ireland's late literary master William Butler Yeats.

"It's always magic to see Anne Yeats at a public event," said David Rose, Dublin correspondent for *London Arts* magazine. "She is not someone who is everywhere all the time."

Yeats was recruited to open the exhibition by Robert O'Driscoll, a Celtic studies scholar from Toronto whose poem *NATO and the Warsaw Pact Are One*, was presented as the titular theme of the show.

But while O'Driscoll may have laid out the conceptual foundation of the exhibition, the most striking impressions of theme belonged to Caprani, whose fierce, punk-like disillusionment with politics and militarism has obviously influenced his Raza colleagues. One Irish newspaper said the group's large, unframed canvases, all of them pinned to the gallery's brick walls like manifestos, had the "same lurid impact" as Northern Ireland's sectarian political graffiti.

Indeed, even a few of Caprani's East Wall relatives were taken aback by the boldness of the art: "(The exhibit) is picking up on the mood of the times," said Doreen Caprani, Frank's cousin by marriage. "But they aren't the type of paintings I'd want in my sitting room. They seem to have all the worries of the world in them, all the aggro (violence)."

Caprani's paintings project aggression in all directions, even toward himself. Doing Time, a lean self-portrait slashed on to a raw, ragged canvas, shows a man whose figure has been twisted into the crouching form of a gargoyle. The image is only slightly less agonizing than Please, No Pictures, his portrait of a boy carrying a wounded friend away from a Belfast riot — and into the cold, voyeuristic eye of a cameraman's lense.

"One woman apparently left the exhibit in tears," said Raza member MacLeod, grinning. "I think we can blame Frank for that."

Caprani agreed that the paintings he selected for the Guinness exhibition are on the intense side: "Most of the stuff I did five or six years ago," he said. "It's got a lot to do with the violence I felt in myself at the time. Painting it was a kind of exorcism of the feelings I brought with me to Canada from Ireland."

Caprani left Ireland 25 years ago and joined his family in Montreal two years after he'd quit school in Dublin to work in the merchant marine. Caprani's father, Victor, a

printer, had found a job in the composing room at *The Gazette*; his uncle Alex, a retired electrician, remember driving the family to the airport.

"I shipped them off to Montreal," Alex said. "I even made arrangements for the dog's transportation. Boxer was his name, a bloody big mongrel. They just couldn't leave him behind."

But the Capranis did leave behind one of the most unusual family sagas in Dublin's recent history. The days in the Dublin telephone book, there are 17 Capranis listed.

But printing, not butchering, is the true Caprani calling, a trade initiated in the family by Giuseppe Caprani, who emigrated to Ireland from Italy via London (where he married a vicar's daughter), in 19 Guiseppe and his Protestant wife obviously took up to Dublin: James Joyce, in his revered novel *Ulysses* described the master printer as "more Irish than Irish."

Politically savage artist

Generations later, Caprani the artist is more Italian than Italian, and perhaps even more Irish than Caprani, even after 25 years in N.D.G. where he is expecting a third child with his second wife.

"The Irish are strange people," Caprani said on Guinness at Dublin's United Arts Club, a musty Georgian-era retreat for the city's cultural establishment. "Here, you can always find someone who doesn't give a bollocks. It's the type of attitude that undermines a lot of what we accept in North America."

Caprani has become a freelance Irish angry man: politically savage artist with a crucifix dangling from one ear and a rusty ponytail sprouting from the back of his shaved scalp.

"The reason I wanted to show the work here is because of me, it's because the work is relevant to me and I think also to what's going on here.

"I don't want any #@&*c! laurels from anywhere," he said, eyes narrowing down to a streetwise "because these people are the first to take you down. You come back here with a condescending attitude and they'll suss it right out (detect it). They won't have anything to do with you."