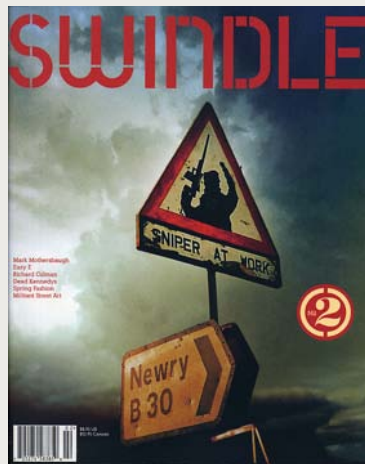


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Painting The Town

By [Caroline Ryder](#)

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Fitz Carlile, a 31-year-old from Los Angeles, visited Belfast in 2002. “What has to happen within a community for it to become not just acceptable but inspirational to have paintings of masked terrorists directly over children’s playgrounds?” he said. “It’s simply mad, given the amount of mourning around the world after September 11. To them, the men in these murals are freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives for a noble cause, not terrorists who slam jets into skyscrapers. The old saying that ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’ could not be more simply illustrated.”

Ironically, while Belfast’s murals continue to attract dollars from Europe and beyond, many local people just want to whitewash their walls and move on. “People are sick and tired of the murals, especially the paramilitary ones,” says Jarman.

“They believe there’s more to life in Belfast than terrorism and murals.”

Community and religious leaders have been negotiating with paramilitary groups to have the more intimidating paintings—the ones that attract the most attention—replaced. Recently, a mural depicting paramilitaries was painted over with characters from C.S. Lewis’s children’s classic, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (C.S. Lewis lived in Belfast at one time). “I think the threatening ones will

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eventually disappear,” says Jarman. “It’s part of rejuvenating an area and changing its perception to the outside world. People are saying, ‘Yes, put pictures up and depict popular culture. But there’s more to pop culture than men with guns.’”

The Troubles

“Imagine if East L.A. Was under Mexican rule – that’s a comparable scenario,” says Belfast academic Neil Jarman when asked to explain the conflict in Northern Ireland. The term “The Troubles” refers to the bloody violence that took place in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s until the mid-1990s.

The conflict has its roots in the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, when Ireland was split into two separate states. The largely Catholic Southern Ireland, now the Republic of Ireland, was granted independence, while mainly Protestant Northern Ireland remained a region of the United Kingdom.

Those in the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland were called Unionists, and they supported British rule. The most radical among the Unionists were known as Loyalists. Those in the Catholic minority, Nationalists, were against the partition. The most radical Nationalists are known as Republicans.

Each of the radical groups have had links to paramilitary groups like the Provisional IRA, Real IRA, and Irish National Liberation Army on the Republican side, and the Ulster Defense Association, Ulster Freedom Fighters and Red Hand Commandos on the Loyalist side



The violence started in 1969, and British soldiers were sent over to “keep the peace,” although they quickly became hated by the Catholics. The world was horrified when British troops shot and killed 13 protestors on Bloody Sunday, January 30, 1972.

The IRA launched a military campaign, which would continue for 20 years with killings at home and large bombings on the British mainland.

The Troubles officially came to an end in 1994, with the start of the Peace Process, in which most terrorist groups agreed to a ceasefire, troops were removed from the streets, and a new police force created. The authors of the historic Good Friday Agreement were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But tensions remain high among the two communities.

Face to Face with Paramilitary Artists Jonathan McCormick has been photographing street art in Northern Ireland since the mid-'90s for the University of Ulster's web-archive, the Northern Ireland Mural Directory (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick>). His archive has recorded the peace process during its most crucial years. "The politics have always been reflected on the walls," he says. He recounted the time he got "the call" to meet muralists working for a loyalist paramilitary group.

Getting invited to a secret meeting with one of Northern Ireland's most dangerous paramilitary armies is not an everyday occurrence. But sometimes you've got to take a risk.

I was asked to meet muralists from the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) to ensure their murals had equal billing on the impartial University website. Only one other person at the University knew about it.

I'm met by a man in a deserted car park in a sprawling loyalist ghetto dominated by LVF flags and murals. I climb into his car and we drive around the grim streets, brightened only by red, white, and blue curbstones. This is the Protestant heartland, an area with a bloody history of sectarian killing and civil disorder.

As we drive, I quickly lose all bearings. The districts would fade into gray monotony if not for the distinctive murals on the urban landscape. The driver tells me how muralists steal paint from their workplaces to paint-bomb murals in Republican districts. He talks about acquaintances doing time for brutal sectarian executions.

We stop at the house of Billy "King Rat" Wright, the founder of the LVF. Irish Nationalist Liberation Army prisoners shot Wright dead in prison in 1997. Wright formed the LVF from a faction of his hard-line UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) unit, and more than threats are traded between the former comrades-at-arms. Signs of rivalries between the local loyalist factions are evident in graffiti that chaperones the murals ("UVF supporters will be shot").

I learn that the muralists are paid between 200 and 400 pounds (about \$360 to \$720) per wall; some are also paid in drugs and counterfeit goods. The cash and ideas often come from the top, and I'm informed that Wright's successor, Mark "Swinger" Fulton is keen to maintain the murals as a source of power over the community.

We pull up at an unremarkable house and two men meet us. Introductions are brief, and nicknames are used. I follow them through the house and into the back yard, down the concrete steps into a basement garage. My eyes adjust to the darkness, and I see chipboard canvasses stacked against one wall. LVF flags and crests adorn the central image of a side-lit portrait of Billy Wright. I'm shown small Perspex duplicates of original prison murals, smuggled out to allow the painters to produce full-scale reproductions.

As we move the boards to the yard to be photographed, the owner of the makeshift studio asks why I created the Mural Directory. There's a silence after this well-built loyalist asks outright which side I'm on. "Not that we're really bothered, but we like to check," he says. His words are flippant, but his eyes are serious. There can be only one answer to this question.

That cold spring day taught me more about the processes of mural creation and evolution than any other encounter could have. Sometimes, it pays to take risks.

