

Colin Davidson's latest portraits reflect a troubled region, says John P O'Sullivan

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hen Colin Davidson was seeking a theme for his latest exhibition, he wanted to incorporate the power of a unifying concept. The Belfast painter's show at the Oliver Sears gallery in Dublin two years ago featured a disparate collection of striking "headscapes" – portraits of poets, painters, rock stars and a few friends. These all worked well individually, but Davidson wanted to do a show that embodied a vision greater than the sum of the individual paintings.

The backgrounds of Davidson and Sears were both blighted by sectarian conflict, and it was not surprising that the latter proposed Israel as a theme for the painter. Sears's mother was a Holocaust survivor, who was thrown from a train bound for Auschwitz and survived the war by being passed off as the daughter of a family maid. Growing up in London amid Polish Jews traumatised by their wartime experiences, Sears admits to having "a heavy and confusing legacy". For him the notion of Israel as a sanctuary for Jews is not an abstraction but a visceral reality.

Davidson, born in 1968, grew up in south Belfast during the Troubles and experienced "a tangle lurking fear". His unease was frequently reinforced by the deaths of people known to him.

Far from being embittered by these histories, Davidson and Sears share a passionate belief in the power of love and tolerance to heal their damaged communities. Davidson mulled over the idea of Israel for a few days, and then suggested Jerusalem might be a less contentious theme. Israel is a divided country in which many of the population do not describe themselves as Israeli. Jerusalem, alternatively, has a more inclusive quality. All creeds – Muslim, Jew and Christian – are happy to be termed Jerusalemites. Davidson is "interested in the common humanity that we all share", and felt this theme could be explored through paintings of people living in Jerusalem.

Armed with a few introductions, they travelled to the city last January. The aim was to select 12 subjects – a number with obvious religious resonances. The guiding principle of selection was to make the

subjects chosen as representative as possible of that ancient city.

Many of those selected would not be comfortable in the same room, and indeed one threatened to pull out when learning of the identity of another sitter.

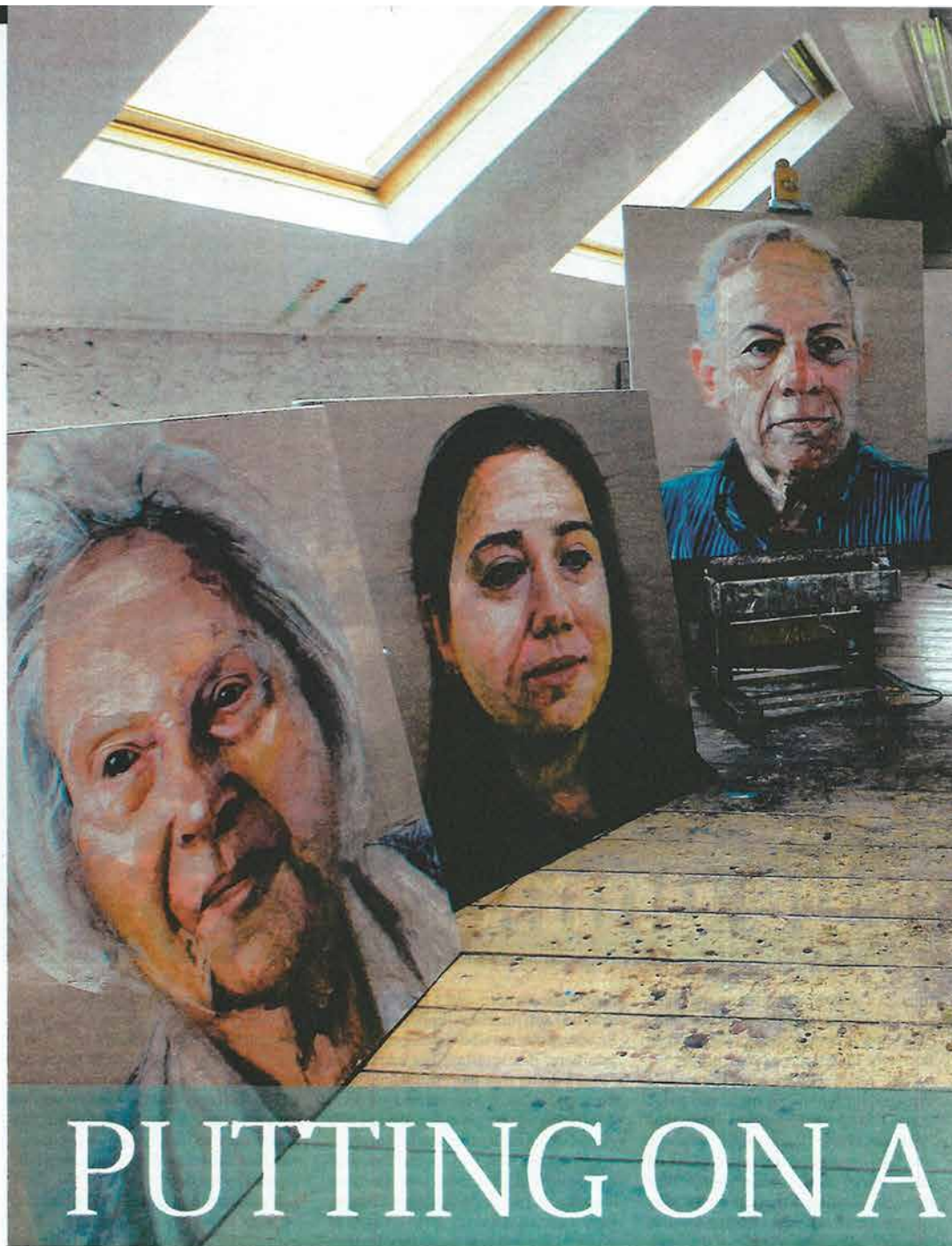
The chosen 12 include a professor, the mayor of Jerusalem, a prominent opponent of illegal settlements, two Holocaust survivors, the founder of Israeli cinema, a renowned author of children's books, a Nobel prize winner, a hotel worker, two doctors and a Benedictine abbot.

Sears handled logistics and organised

the line-up in a Jerusalem hotel, where Davidson took photographs and did the multiple sketches on which he bases his paintings. Davidson returned to his studio in Bangor and worked his raw material up into the powerful, sombre paintings that now confront you. A decision was made to identify the subjects in the show by first name only. Those au fait with the politics of Israel may identify a few, but I suspect not all. The backgrounds of the paintings are neutral and offer no help. The names may offer some clues as to religion, but only the apparel of the Benedictine abbot

actually proclaims the man. The latter was born in Belfast around the same time as Davidson, so they had plenty to talk about during the sittings. Davidson is passionate in his antipathy to divisive labels and gets "angry and frustrated with our inability to see each other as fellow human beings".

One of the most significant moments in recent Irish history – Queen Elizabeth and Martin McGuinness shaking hands at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast in June 2012 – occurred in the presence of a set of Davidson's headscapes. Afterwards the monarch was introduced to the artist, and



PUTTING ON A



Portrait of an artist
Davidson's exhibition resulted from a series of conversations with Dublin gallery owner Oliver Sears

BRAVE FACE

brought on a guided tour of the paintings which included portraits of Brian Friel, Basil Blackshaw, Michael Longley and other prominent figures from the arts. Some may wonder why Davidson hasn't tackled a sectarian conflict closer to the Irish Sea than the Red Sea. The answer is that he intends to begin a project involving events "closer to home" over the next 12 months.

There have been several twists and turns in Davidson's career as an artist, and he remarks on the role that chance has played. Taken on by dealer Tom Caldwell

directly after art college, his early work consisted of landscapes and urban scenes, competent but modest in ambition. He describes it as "genre painting". He also ran a graphic-design company for almost 10 years. He had his first solo show in 1997 with Caldwell and became a full-time artist two years later. His Cityscapes series and his Window paintings, urban scenes viewed through pane glass, were well received and he became a successful participant in the burgeoning art market.

At the start of the decade Davidson's work took a new direction. He had met

Peter Wilson, songwriter Duke Special, about 20 years previously and on renewing their friendship he decided he'd like to do a portrait.

An admirer of the music, he was also intrigued by the Duke Special look: the velvet clothes, eyeliner and Medusa hair. He decided to make the portrait larger than life size — befitting, perhaps, his sitter's persona. He had been working on a series of large window paintings and found a blank canvas just under 4ft square that matched his ambitions. It was the start of something big. Davidson exhibited

the painting at the RHA annual show in 2010 and it won the portraiture award and was on the cover of the Irish Arts Review.

Then Wilson introduced him to singer Glen Hansard and the resultant large-scale painting won the perpetual gold medal at the Royal Ulster Academy in October 2010.

Portraits of Paul Brady, Roddy Doyle and Mark Knopfler followed, as well as a who's who of the Northern Ireland arts scene including Ciarán Hinds, Adrian Dunbar and Brian Kennedy. What was initially intended as a one-off became a new phase, and Davidson embarked on a series of exhibitions and commissions featuring these monumental heads.

The Belfast artist likes to get close to his subjects and speaks particularly warmly of Longley, a close neighbour, and of fellow painter Blackshaw. He painted the last portrait of Seamus Heaney and it's poignant to compare that elegiac image of the fading poet with Edward Maguire's version in 1974, which hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland, of a virile, ambitious Heaney complete with Beatles hairstyle.

Visitors to this show will be struck by the sombre and reflective expressions of the subjects. The scale of the works (127cm x 117cm) means that this impression is magnified. Davidson's Jerusalemites are posed looking slightly away from the viewer so neither we, nor the artist, seem to engage them. He has captured them in quiet moments of reflection and reverie. Indeed, Davidson entitled a recent exhibition *Between the Words*.

When sketching a subject he usually chats for a while, but he lets the conversation die, and waits for that quiet moment when the sitter looks inward, oblivious of the artist and his activities. While Davidson is also interested in the topography of the face, that reflective moment is the essence of these works. In different people it may induce feelings of meditative calm or gnawing unease. In either case it's a uniquely human experience, where beyond the noise we feel more fully the fragility and transitory nature of life.

These 12 paintings are best viewed as one exhibit, and would lose power if split up. One piece alone is merely a reflective individual. Together they demonstrate that these disparate individuals, professor and plongeur, Jew and Muslim, share something unique that lies beneath labels and beyond the pomp of power. Davidson is eager not to be seen as offering any easy solutions. "It's important that there's no perception of being patronising," he says. "I'm coming at it as a painter, not offering answers." But of course the answer is implicit in the work. □

Colin Davidson: Jerusalem, Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin, from Thursday