

And you thought we were slow at making peace with the past

Andersonstown News

Belfast Blogging - Máirtín Ó Muilleoir

03/12/2007

Artist Conrad Atkinson suggested I look up his New York agent, **Ronald Feldman**, during my Big Apple sojourn and so I found myself in his spacious Soho gallery today.

Ronald, who was also agent to **Andy Warhol** and many of Gotham's famed pop artists, first met Conrad over 30 years ago when his first works on Ireland were making waves and the pair have collaborated every since.

It's my hope that we can team up with an Irish American partner in New York to show Conrad's new works on wounds and healing in the Big Apple after its Belfast run at the Grand Opera House in August and I wanted to pass that suggestion by Ronald.

And by coincidence, the theme of healing the wounds of war was uppermost in Ronald's mind because he's exhibiting powerful new work, [Deep Wounds](#), (pictured) by **Brian Knep**, artist-in-resident at Harvard Medical School, which tackles the surprisingly still-fresh scars of the American Civil War.

As the catalogue blurb explains: "Brian chose the Memorial Hall as a venue, and using the Civil War as a metaphor for unfinished healing, created Deep Wounds, a site-specific, interactive installation about memory, history, pain and reconciliation. Built between 1870 and 1878, Memorial Hall honours the Harvard graduates who died in the Civil War while fighting for the Union....each of the men's names, year of graduation, death and date of battle are permanently inscribed on the marble walls. The graduates who died while serving in the Confederate army are not mentioned, prohibited in the building's deed."

The artist laid 'marble tiles' on the floor of the Memorial Hall which showed hints of tombstone inscriptions. When someone walks on the 'tiles', they burst open like wounds to reveal the details of alumni who fought on the Confederate side. After being split open, the 'skin' closes back over. This theme is carried over into another Knep work in the gallery, Healing (pictured with person walking across it), "a seemingly magical carpet in which the morphing of organic shapes disappear and regroup into new patterns when the surface is walked on or disturbed." While the shapes reform and 'heal', they are never the same again for the fact of having been 'slashed open'. It was a privilege to meet the artist at the gallery and share with him details of Conrad's attempt to tread the same path with his works which will feature photographs of real wounds suffered in our war, a slashed canvas and the wound-like rusting gate of Crumlin Road jail.

Ever decade or so, the issue of honouring the Confederate dead comes up at Harvard but to date the African-American alumni have nixed any suggestion that those who fought to defend slavery should be put on a par with the Union dead. No such qualms in Ireland where the national day of commemoration honours every Irish person who ever died in war, regardless of whether they were part of the firing squad which shot the 1916 leaders or fallen heroes in the battle against fascism. Which is the better approach?

The promoters of the Hiroshima Prize for art works which deal with war and reconciliation have expressed an interest in the new works by Brian Knep. There's a little bit more about the award promoting world peace, and presented once ever three years, [here](#).

Wouldn't it be interesting to team up Conrad and Brian and let the sparks fly.