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Marc O’Riain / Cork Institute of Technology

Maser Interview

Exploring the influences behind Ireland’s leading urban artist

Street Art exists in a tenuous paradigm of legality. Much like skateboarding, graffiti expression can be seen both as a crime and as an art subculture. Maser’s work creates a definitive transition from traditional street painting, beyond typography, into 3 dimensional geometric patterned environments. His work is inspired by Bridget Riley and Kevin Feeney but unique in its own right.

This interview is intended to give an insight to his thought process, the points of transition, the limitations of commercial practice and the relative freedom of creative commissions. Maser studied Art and then Graphic Design in Dublin; he has collaborated with musicians, worked for social enterprises, and created a seminal installation at Limerick’s City of Culture in 2014, which became a watershed moment in his work. Since then, his geometric work has gone international and is now influencing designers in all mediums..

Q. When you first started “urban art” what form did it take? Was it Graffiti or pavement art?

I first started graffiti at the age of 15, back then I don’t think there was a such thing as pavement art, with the exception of us playing hop scotch as kids. I started off tagging and quickly progressed to creating larger pieces. During my late teens I became obsessed with graffiti art, it’s all I did and thought about, I doodled everyday and at any opportunity I went out painting. Like most young guys I had a lot of pent up energy, so I put that into the subculture I love. I really loved those years, made some great friends and travelled across Europe in my early twenties painting different cities.

Q. How did you find your design training influenced your subject choice or application?

I first studied fine art and hated it, so I dropped out and went back to working in a kitchen. Maybe it just wasn’t right timing for me, a year later I went back and studied visual communications, thinking “I need to get a job”. I loved the course, it clicked with me straight away, that creative environment worked for me because at the time I probably needed to be taught discipline rather than left to my own devices. I had some incredible tutors and visiting lectures too. My main tutor was David Smith, I called him the Gordon Ramsey of Design, he’d tear my work apart, but when he praised your work it felt like you won the lotto! I owe him so much, I don’t think I’ve learnt so much from one person.

Another was Anton Mazer, a visiting lecturer, he taught me that great design is problem solving and this attitude can be used in all aspects of life, we instantly clicked and are still friends today.

Q. Graffiti tends to be organic, text and message led, typography tends to be far more controlled and your more recent work is far more graphic and abstract. What were the points of transition for you? What were the influences? Was the observer important in the transition?

It was a natural progression, yes graffiti is loose/organic from an outsiders view point, but also has a lot of rules that lend themselves to typography. It’s abstract typography of sorts. I amalgamated what I learnt in graffiti and typography to create a lot of the type based public works I did years ago. After years of painting letters, I felt if I put them aside I could communicate more concepts. I created this graphic language as a tool that would allow me to cross more boundaries. Even when I painted letters I never wanted the viewer to be told a direct message, I wanted them to take ownership of it, I have my reasons, but I like the idea of them making their own options, it’s a narrative I still use.

Q. You say your work is influenced by the late Kevin Feeney’s hand painted sign writing in Dublin and traditional Guinness ads. How would you describe this influence or how you have interpreted the precedents?

Yes that’s true, for the ‘They Are Us’ type

based mural project I created in Dublin with the musician Damien Dempsey in 2010.

Damo was signing songs that a lot of young Dublin guys like me could relate to. So the concept was simple, find Damo and ask his permission to transcribe his words onto the walls of Dublin. I needed to create a style that most people could firstly read, and that not only my generation could appreciate.

I wanted to pay homage to Dublin just like Damo did in his songs, I drink a lot in old boozers, I love story telling, especially hearing stories of 'the way Dublin use to be', it clicked then, use old Dublin sign writing as the style, a lost art form.

I came across Kevin and the legacy of work he left behind. Not only were his pieces hand painted, I heard stories that he nearly painted a sign on every street in the city centre. This guy instantly became my hero!

The project spanned over 2 years, researching, talking to Kevin's sons, painting 24 murals across the city, spending a month painting in Mountjoy Prison and St.Pats Institute for young offender, working with Dublin Simon Community for the homeless. The project resulted in an exhibition in Dublin, where we sold editions of prints, original pieces and photography, all in the hope of raising enough money to buy a medical van for the Simon Community. It was a great time, Dublin came together, we sold everything over that weekend and they got their van.

Q. Is there a piece or installation that you can pinpoint that was a notable point of transition for your movement to a more graphic representation?

Yes, a few years ago I transformed a disused Petrol Station in Limerick, it was an eye sore on the main street next to the bus and train station. We painted it over 5 days in December, which wasn't the easiest of tasks with our Irish weather. When it was finished I was taking the final photos and people were walking within the space, right then I realised I created an experiential painting, watching people inside and interact with my piece, I knew then I was onto something. Previously, with all my mural work people interacted with it by giving opinion, what they took from my murals, but now I literally had people physically interacting with the work. This then lead onto creating more 3 Dimensional paintings and developing the idea of interrupting landscapes.



Q. Your work has transitioned to the three dimensional creating time based spatial environments, are there particular problems or findings you have from this transition?

As I mentioned there, the transition was natural, but yes plenty of problems arose for each new piece, it was all new to me, challenging but exciting. I had to look at the work differently, rather than a 2D painter, I had to now factor in construction, budgets, crew, timing. Scale was never an issue, I could apart to that easily, it just meant longer hours painting. But saying that, the more planning I had done and prep before we were onsite it became easier. Each piece I learnt from my mistakes make it easier for the next.

Q. Your work could be compared to pop or op art of the 1960s even to dazzle patterning of WW2 warships. Is this a comparison that

They Are Us project with Damien Dempsey.
Photo: Aidan Kelly

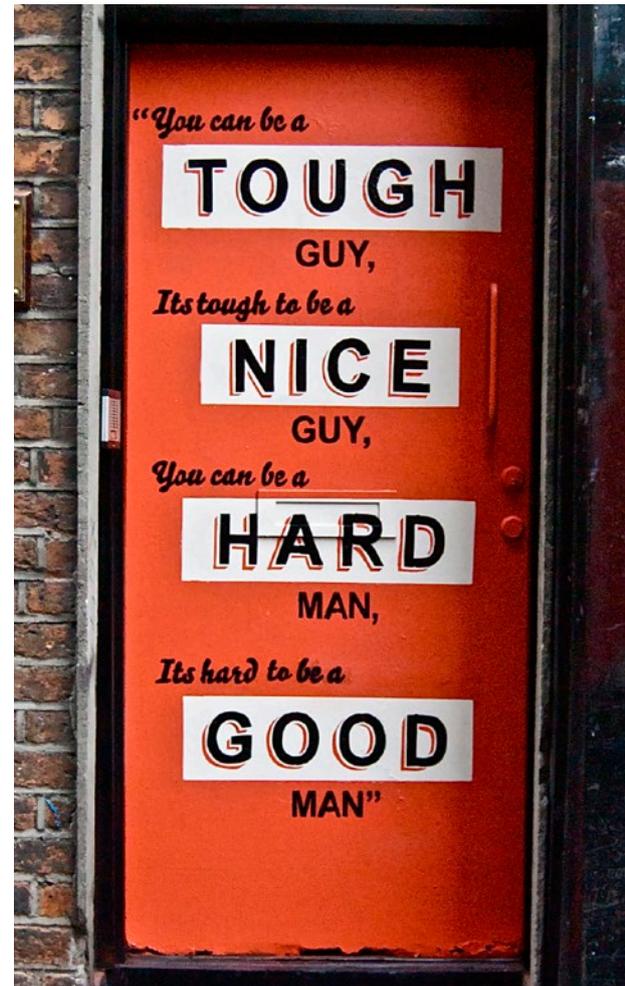


They Are Us project with Damien Dempsey.
Photo: Aidan Kelly

you would accept our would you find your transition to be more organic and without such references?

I love the 60's! Well not so much the music, I'm more a 70's head when it comes to that. I can certainly see the resemblances. I came up with the stripe pattern while painting graffiti, I used it as a background to my letters, having that clean graphic pattern always complemented the loose complex letter forms. And with my formal education in graphic design, the clean vector look always looked well when painted.

I have to admit when I was younger I didn't follow much art or artists, I think my lack of attention in art history class is responsible for that. But now I see how my work can be compared to the Op Art movement, the work of women like Bridget Riley was revolutionary! If there is a comparison to that movement I take it as a complement. Currently, there is such a cross over with styles and disciplines, it's like the world is getting smaller with social media. There is a lot of similar work out there, so it drives me to try create work that hasn't been here before.



Q. Your work has transitioned into the commission. How do you feel your current position in being commissioned or under brief reflects on your training as a designer or description by many as an artist. Is it relevant to you?

Everyone's got bills! Luckily for me now I get to choose projects that suit me. Most of the time if the piece is commissioned, it's usually a case where they let me do my own thing. For example Sydney Festival last year, it was my largest installation to date, I certainly didn't have the funds or resources to build a 5 level installation on the other side of the world, so when they approached me and we chatted over Skype I knew it was a great opportunity for me. They were a great crew of people, everyone from the painters, to builders to curators and festival organisers.

I guess I've come to the conclusion after many years of work. In 2007-ish I set up a company called KrookedType. It mainly consisted of sign writing and murals for brands, accompanied with video production. The reason I did it was in some way to 'fund my little revolution' but it ended up consuming all my time, leaving



Maser Motel, Las Vegas

very little if not any time for me to create my own work. It got to the stage where I was emotionally and physically drained, not the fault of the client, but more so I wasn't happy with the direction I was going in, I knew the lifestyle didn't suit me so I packed it in and put all my energy into my own work. I learnt a lot from that period, and how to work with others.

I feel when it's commissioned work, so long as there is respect for one another (artist, curator, brand, whoever) it becomes a more collaborative, enjoyable process.

Q. Can you describe a common project process for you?

There isn't a usual process, I guess I come up with ideas unintentionally, from experiences. Lying there thinking, or walking to the gym, or chatting with a friend over a pint. You know what, this is a hard question, really making me think. Maybe I have all these ideas stored in my head, then when it comes to creating let's say an installation, some of those thoughts just develop more, like the dots join in my head and I find the solution. Each project is different and

its purpose, some ideas come to mind instantly and the answer is right in front of me, other times, it takes much longer, bashing through it and its obstacles until it comes out.

But let's say painting canvas works in the studio, that's different. I'm patient with myself, I know what I want to communicate so the discovery is in the process.

Q. How does research impact on this process?

Research is a lot different than it used to be. Now we are bombarded with information, usually having to filter through half truths. I don't sit down and read books, I realised I pick up a lot through travel and new experiences and it then comes out through my work. I'll always make time to visit a city's contemporary museum, I take a lot of photos out and about of things that catch my eye. I use the notes in my phone to jot down captions, conversations and sayings I hear, ideas that spring to mind, I'm very forgetful sometimes!

I love discovering the in-between moments, people interacting with each other and their environment. I do have books in the



studio about the human anatomy, more for reference and understanding, I find it very interesting how the body works. I do believe everything relies on everything else, that ideas of relationships, support, integration.

Q. Is collaboration a part of your process?

All the time. Even when I'm not actually 'collaborating' with a particular person, like a lot of things, my works relies on others for it to have purpose. If I create a huge installation

and no one views it or walks inside it or on it, well then it doesn't fulfill its purpose. This idea of collaboration is a current theme in my work. Even down to the process, the people help building it and painting it, I want them to take ownership of it too, to be proud of the hard work and hours they put into it. I'm always open to other people's opinions when working together, I know I'm never the smartest man in the room, so when I'm open to collaborate I learn a lot too.



When it comes to particular collaboration like Damien Dempsey or painter Conor Harrington, I think there is a lot of respect for each others disciplines, knowing that if we work together something new can be created from it. You simply have to understand each other, you'll spend a lot of time with that person so the relationship needs to be more than just work. I can safely say Conor and Damo are now great friends! - I can't speak for them though!

Q. Is your work intended to be political, art, design, commentary, entertainment or a commodity?

As an artist, in someway my work touches on all these points. We use art and design as a tool for commentary, the art of creating work is political, people go to galleries to learn, escape and be entertained, and we live in a monetary world so nearly everything has a price tag on it!

Bram Stoker Festival, Smithfield Square