

Viv Cuba

By Searlina Bodden

Arguably, I am no more qualified to review an art exhibition than the average visitor who will tour *Viva Cuba* – now on display at the National Gallery. Give me a film, a television pilot, a radio spot or a magazine feature and I can go to town on plot, pacing, staging, target audience and tone. With art, I am limited solely to an intuition for emotion and an eye for what I like.

This said, (and without de-emphasizing the importance of qualified, refereed reviewing) in truth I find the experiences of real people more valuable to most readers. Let's face it, every day films are canned by critics that go on to break the \$100 million mark – people will like what they like.

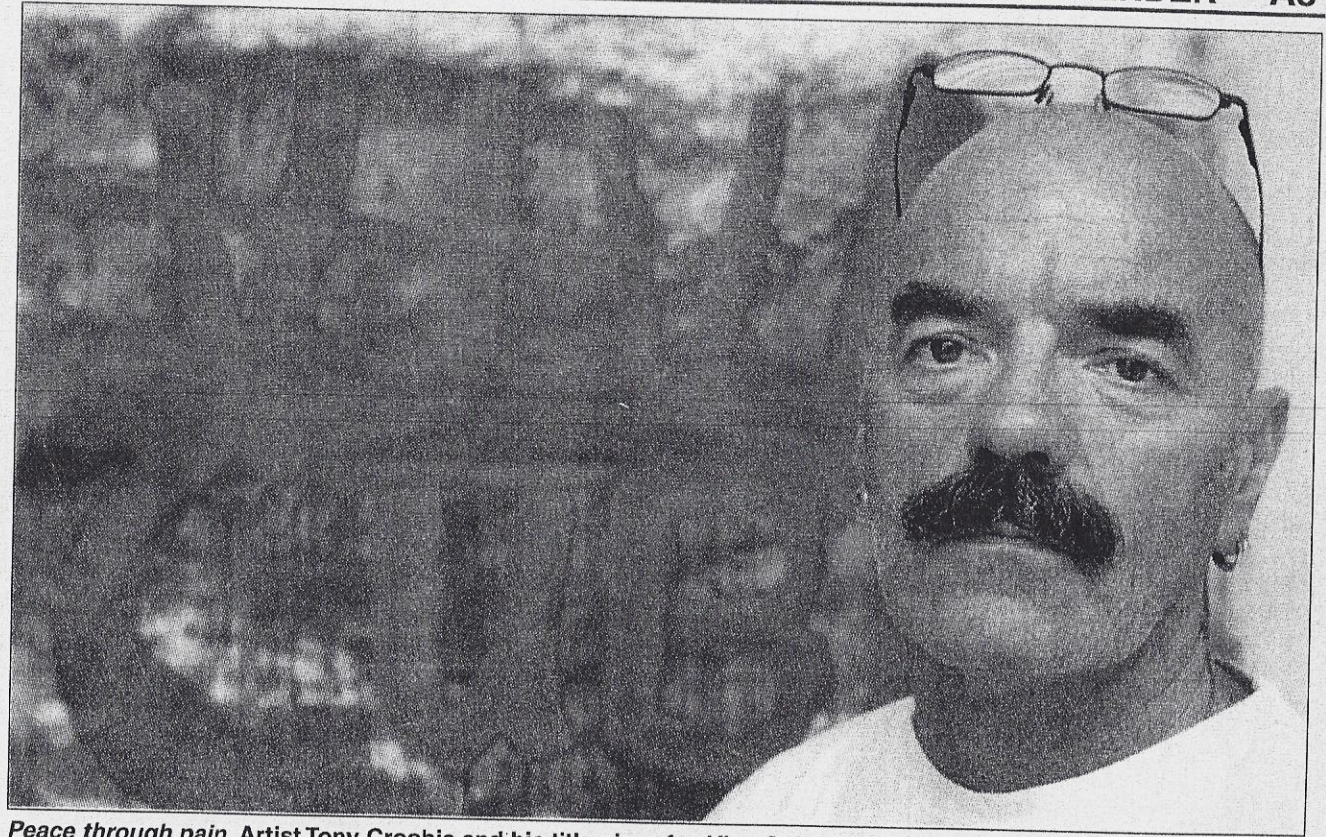
For all these reasons, I flat refuse to wax eloquent on what I think are the merits and failings

The artist. After viewing the exhibition, it was one full day before I was prepared to meet with the creator of these brutally honest images. It took that long to overcome a feeling that I was somehow trespassing into someone else's innermost thoughts and feelings.

In person, Tony Crosbie is a living contradiction to his volatile works. Outwardly he wears the markings of the life he has chosen – he has multiple piercings along with several tattoos, including one on the inside of his left forearm that reads "Obsession". His speaking voice is remarkably soft and gentle – even in speaking of Cuba's most frightening realities he maintains an unobtrusive Irish lilt. There is an air of compassion about him that sharply contrasts the fury of his works.

Viva Cuba is the result

“*This is not recreation for me.*”



Peace through pain. Artist Tony Crosbie and his title piece for *Viva Cuba*. Photos: Justin Uzzell

it and now, as someone who rehabilitates victims – though art. At 17 he married, by 18 he had two children, by 22 he had four and his marriage was behind him by 23. The chaos of this man's life and his art do not differentiate themselves – they are one –

men do it – to supplement their incomes. Their making maybe \$15 a month.”

Secrets. Crosbie gives credence, however, to the positive image that is projected by Cuba's government, although he loudly expresses its one-

sidedness through his works.

“There are beautiful people, there is beautiful music. It is a beautiful place with a lot of deep, dark secrets,” he explains.

At the core of these “secrets”, Crosbie continues, is the flagrant violation of basic human

rights that is commonplace in Cuba. His work takes greatest offence to that blatant depravation and it is no secret why. Crosbie's work with at-risk youth and individuals, which now extends to Cayman, seeks to teach people how to dispose

CONT'D ON PAGE A17

of Tony Crosbie's work, as it is displayed in this exhibition. Work of this calibre - fraught with such raw emotion - begs not to be reviewed but to be understood. It would be presumptuous to take it for anything other than the incarnation of one person's convictions.

Viva Cuba. With over 15 works of abstract art, Crosbie challenges the widespread preconceived notions of Cuba - Cayman's nearest neighbour to the northeast. In the colours of the country's flag, the 47-year old Irish national depicts bloody scenes of mental slavery, identity loss, emotional and physical abuse. The images are powerful - more so in their frightening ambiguity. The overall effect treads the line between beautiful and terrifying.

Crosbie uses an interesting mix of literal images with more metaphorical ideas. His human forms are vague - charred looking and very thin. At times, they are marred with actual wounds - cuts, abrasions, gags, and bleeding from the eyes, head and mouth. In other instances, the effect is more symbolic - footprints covering faces, paint splatters that resemble the lashes of a whip, or an opaque, black box completely covering a head. A particularly powerful piece vaguely resembles a crucifixion scene.

It's taken over my life. ”

of Crosbie's three-month artist's residency in Havana, Cuba. He sensed the intense political social issues at the island's underbelly and felt a need to give a voice to them.

"I am drawn to social issues because of my own background," he says.

Crosbie did not attempt to relate to the plight of the Cuban people from a perch of complacency. The Dubliner has extensive experience with - as someone who has endured

and he seems happiest that way.

Working with at-risk youth in his native Ireland has made Crosbie sensitive to many of Cuba's youth issues - in particular the rampant prostitution industry, which feeds off the hungry sexual appetites of tourists coupled with the desperate financial situation of natives.

"Women are offering their daughters to tourists purely out of desperation - just so they can get by," he said. "The women do it, the

Viva Cuba

FROM PAGE A3

of their most destructive impulses through art.

"I am in awe of what can happen when you give a child a brush and say 'paint'. Children *should* be seen and heard. I know that from experience," he says.

After meeting him, it is obvious that Tony Crosbie's intense connection to the plight of Cubans is not unusual for him. In the same way that he was able to enter a country and capture its heartbreak with his work, he is able to harness a painful adolescence into an acute ear for rehabilitation. His works - among them a gruesome interpretation called "Crimes Against Humanity" - testify that Crosbie may never be free from a thirsty

social conscience and its tendency to devour his creativity. For right now though - with yet another adventure under his belt - he seems momentarily at peace.

"I didn't set out to achieve anything. I wanted to be educated. This is not recreation for me. It's taken over my life," he says, gesturing to the bloody, fateful scenes on the National Gallery walls.

"There's truth here."

Viva Cuba is on display at the National Gallery in Harbour Place. On 1 October, Crosbie's works will be joined by "From Within" - creations from a selection of individuals, whom the artist has worked with while on-island. See the Weekender for follow-up coverage.