

# Irish Examiner

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September 9, 2008

## BETWEEN THE EYES *Graphic Art Installation Divides City Opinion*

LARGE-scale art installations dotted around Waterford's city centre depicting war images are causing controversy because of their graphic content.

The exhibition, *The Last Child*, by Austrian-born and Waterford-based artist Gottfried Helnwein, is part of the Waterford Fringe Festival and includes a variety of work placed at strategic locations in the city, such as the Quays, the Clock Tower, City Hall and John Roberts Square. Among the material featured in the images are depictions of children with guns and a child lying down, covered with blood, as well as various shots of children with their eyes closed, as if dead.

Fringe festival organisers have admitted a mixed response to the art work, with calls to the office about the exhibition equally split for and against.

Mayor of Waterford Jack Walsh said yesterday he hadn't yet seen the most controversial pieces, but had heard concern from parents about the material.

"They certainly seem to be dramatic and I'd have no problem with the art itself being displayed in art galleries, where you're knowingly going in to see it, but around the city you've no choice but to look at it. It's the impact on children that I've been picking up, the adults themselves are probably not that offended."

Labour Party city councillor Seamus Ryan said the majority of the exhibition was "very fine" and that he welcomed public displays of art.

However, the image of blood coming out of a child, in a prominent position, "is not suitable in that particular area where there's a lot of young children with their parents".

Several parents had contacted him about the most graphic pieces.

"Art is art, but sometimes things are done to generate discussion and debate and I think there's a bit of that in this as well," said Mr Ryan.

A local businessman who did not want to be named said it was "inappropriate" for such work to be on show in the city centre at a time when Ireland's biggest slow food festival, *Terra Madre*, was being held in Waterford and when crowds would be gathering to watch the county's hurlers play in the All-Ireland final and to welcome the team home on Monday.

Festival director Jim Gordon said the exhibition was aimed at highlighting what happens when children get caught up in war situations.

"The idea behind it is that if we see an image of a soldier shooting another soldier or whatever, we just pass it off as commonplace, but an image like this has a shock value to it and we're forced to think about the effect of war," he said.

Now living in Waterford, the artist was brought up in Austria and Germany and felt the effects of the second world war, Mr Gordon said, and wanted to bring his thoughts on war to the wider world.

The exhibition, which totals 18 images, has previously been shown in Moscow, Los Angeles and Prague.

Mr Gordon said the festival had received several phone calls, “some positive and some negative”, with visitors generally in favour of the exhibition and most of the negative reaction coming from locals.

“The calls are about 50-50 at the moment.”

At the launch of the fringe festival, Mr Helnwein said of the images: “My art is not an answer — it is a question.”

