

# 1. Malcolm X speaks to North Belfast

BY LAURA FRIEL

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Mike Alewitz of the American based Labour Art and Mural Project has travelled the world bringing his street paintings of working class issues to countries as diverse as Iraq and Germany. Inspired by the images of Holy Cross, this summer Mike came to North Belfast to share his visual message of international solidarity and struggle with the people of Ardoyne.

As a political muralist Mike has a formidable reputation both within the USA and internationally. His most famous work, the Pathfinder mural in New York, reproduced on numerous posters and book covers, has become an image instantly recognizable in many countries throughout the world.

Denied expression in most mainstream mediums, Mike sees mural art as an important mechanism through which working people can address political and economic marginalization.

"It's working people talking to the world," says Mike. The main focus of Mike's art has been the depiction of labour issues and union struggles but for North Belfast he chose Malcolm X as his theme for the mural.

"Malcolm X was the greatest voice of Black nationalism," says Mike, "but he was also an internationalist. He understood the interconnection between nationalism and internationalism. I hope that the imagery will encourage people to read Malcolm X not just as an American leader but as a World leader."

But Mike has already been pleasantly surprised by how many ordinary people in North Belfast recognize the image. "People here already know who Malcolm X is," says Mike, "I guess that's a reflection of the level of politicization within these communities."

The mural also includes images of Holy Cross and Little Rock. "Television footage of the children of Holy Cross being attacked as they made their way to school immediately reminded me of the image of children being confronted by an angry mob in Arkansas," says Mike.

US President George Bush and British PM Tony Blair are also included in the mural as a couple of poodles. "I would like to take the opportunity to denounce the criminal activities of the US and Israeli government against the people of Palestine," says Mike.

Despite being sympathetic to the struggle for freedom and justice in the north of Ireland, this is the first time Mike has actually visited here to witness the ongoing problems of ordinary communities like Adrienne.

"I didn't realize the level of segregation and victimization," says Mike, "or the ongoing level of violence being endured by people within this community."

Mike Alewitz is traveling home from Belfast this week but his mural will ensure that while he may have gone, he will not be forgotten. And he promises to visit again.

## 2. US Artist Inspires New Street Art

By Judith Maas  
*Irish News (20/08/2002)*

An American artist has drawn on the history of the United States civil rights movement to inspire a new Belfast mural.

Mike Alewitz has painted murals around the world and lectures on the subject in a US university, and yesterday he brought his talents to Northern Ireland.

Belfast artists invited Mr. Alewitz to join them in the city and offered him the chance to create a new mural for the Ardoyne area of north Belfast.

Being free to choose his own topic, Mr. Alewitz dedicated a wall in Havana Walk to black power leader Malcolm X.

"Malcolm X was the greatest voice of black nationalism and also of black internationalism. He saw the black struggle in the context of the working class struggle," he said.

"There is something to be learnt from that. I am not here to explain the Irish struggle, but there is the fact that the American civil rights movement was able to convince white working class people of their rights.

"The images of Holy Cross children are similar to the children of the civil rights movement. They were faced with similar problems."

He argued against seeing the Troubles as a religious conflict and called for working class unity.

"It seems that the struggle is between Catholics and Protestants, but that is not true. The struggle is two-fold. There is a struggle to unite Ireland. All you have to do is to take a look at the map to see why," he said.

"Secondly, it is a struggle of the working class. Unification wouldn't solve problems of education, unemployment and poverty."

Malcolm X, who was murdered in 1965, is depicted in a 3 metre high portrait. To his left and right there are corpses painted in orange and green.

"Do you see the green and orange corpses in the painting? The only ones that gain here are the capitalists," he said.

Dogs shown being walked by two pigs depict US President Bush and British Prime Minister Blair, he explained. He said it was reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

"Orwell didn't have confidence in the working class. I would be more positive. I have seen people change," said the muralist, whose work features in a recently published book *Insurgent Images: The Murals of Mike Alewitz*.

Mr Alewitz will discuss his work in a slide show at 8pm tonight in An Chulturlann on the Falls Road. Entrance is free.

### **3. The Wailing Wall**

*Outspoken Mike takes wrecking ball to loyalist murals*

The Anderstown News

American mural artist Mike Alewitz is on his way back to the United States this week after an all too brief visit, but anyone listening to the radio last Friday afternoon will no doubt remember him for a long time to come.

Having been asked by the BBC to critique a number of republican and loyalist murals – he is an expert in the field – his frank comments caused the switchboard to light up with furious loyalist listeners.

He says he never thought his opinions on loyalist murals, including pointing out similarities with paintings of Hitler's Third Reich, would provoke such anger. "I stand firmly by what I said. The BBC asked me to critique several murals, which I am qualified to do, as I teach mural art at the Central Connecticut State University in the United States," said Mike.

The talented artist says he wasn't being deliberately provocative – he simply told the interviewer what he thought of the paintings. "I wasn't attacking individual painters by any means, I was trying to explain a whole body of work. I just pointed out the differences between republican and loyalist murals. "The loyalist murals are so neatly ordered, nothing is out of place and the figures in the paintings are usually carrying flags."

Mike says this points to an underlying ideology and shows loyalism's preoccupation with the British state and the Monarchy. Mike claims he can tell if a person really believes in what he is painting just by looking at the finished mural. "I don't believe that the young artists on the streets of the Shankill or wherever really believe in what they are painting. It's not human nature to be so orderly and methodical. If you compare these to a republican mural like Danny Devenny's of Bobby Sands on the Falls Road, you can see how passionately he believes in his subject."

Mike says he came to the North to see for himself what has been happening here since the ceasefire.

The first thing that struck him, he said, was the overt segregation of Catholics and Protestants in certain areas.

"I'm used to a lot more subtle form of segregation in America but it's nothing like here."

A visit to Short Strand was an eye-opener. "I was standing there with a few people and there were rocks and stones and fireworks being chucked over the wall at us. It was quite shocking to see it at first hand."

Starting out as a sign painter more than twenty years ago, Mike has become one of the most highly respected mural artists in the world. His strong political beliefs led him to Nicaragua, where he painted his very first mural. Since then, he has painted in Baghdad, Chernobyl and Mexico, to name only a few.

The Martin Luther King mural in Ardoyne, representing non-violent struggle, was his gift to Belfast, and has been warmly welcomed by renowned local mural artist Danny Devenny. "Mike's work is remarkable, his use of colour and style of design is incredible. "Mike and the republican artists of Belfast come from the same palette."