



Big Issue founder A. John Bird

## BIRD'S EYE VIEW

# THE ART OF ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

**I** like art that you can look at that you don't have to buy. Art that is in a gallery, on the wall of a shop and you don't have to take it home with you. Sometimes you don't even have to go into a gallery to see interesting art. You can see it from the street, in the window, waiting there for you to encounter.

A newly opened gallery has come up with a novel idea. It will commission artists to come up with works that suit the scale of their vast windows. Only recently the gallery had its first commissioned window. I went and had a butcher's quite early one morning. And met the artist in a local café.

If you looked at Philomena Francis' *Molasses III* in the window of the Institute Of International Visual Arts (INIVA) you would not know it was piped treacle. On a vast white background the lines and marks look like some kind of thin black paint. Only the title is a slight giveaway.

It is big. INIVA commissioned Francis to do the work in their new HQ in Rivington Street, in the now terminally fashionable Old Street area. INIVA's vast windows are a great canvas for the ambitious imagery of the artist. I can't give you dimensions, but go along and stand in the street and stare. Size is important.

According to Francis, the work is on the move. "Each day," she says, "it slips a bit, so a photograph one day is different from the next." But why, therefore, I ask, use such an unreliable material?

The answer for that is buried in 300 years of history. Of the Africa Diaspora, of the forced enslavement of Africans by Africans and sold to the white merchants for their slave businesses. All of this is implied in the treacle, the product of the sugar cane plantations. That provided the economic incentive to buy stolen people in Africa and transport them - at great risk to themselves - across the waters of the Atlantic.

Francis uses treacle with all its limitations because she is conjuring with history, metaphor and memory. It is her history. If her ancestors had not been sold into slavery and exported to the West Indies she would not have been drawing in treacle.

This is her second career. She started work life as a social worker in south London, the youngest of a family of five girls. From a family with a single mother she had a natural inclination to work with people who had not survived well the privations of broken family life.

But due to the growing crisis of social work, with an increase in paperwork and process, she was drawn back to her first loving: art. So in her thirties she went back to college and graduated from Chelsea School Of Art in 2004.

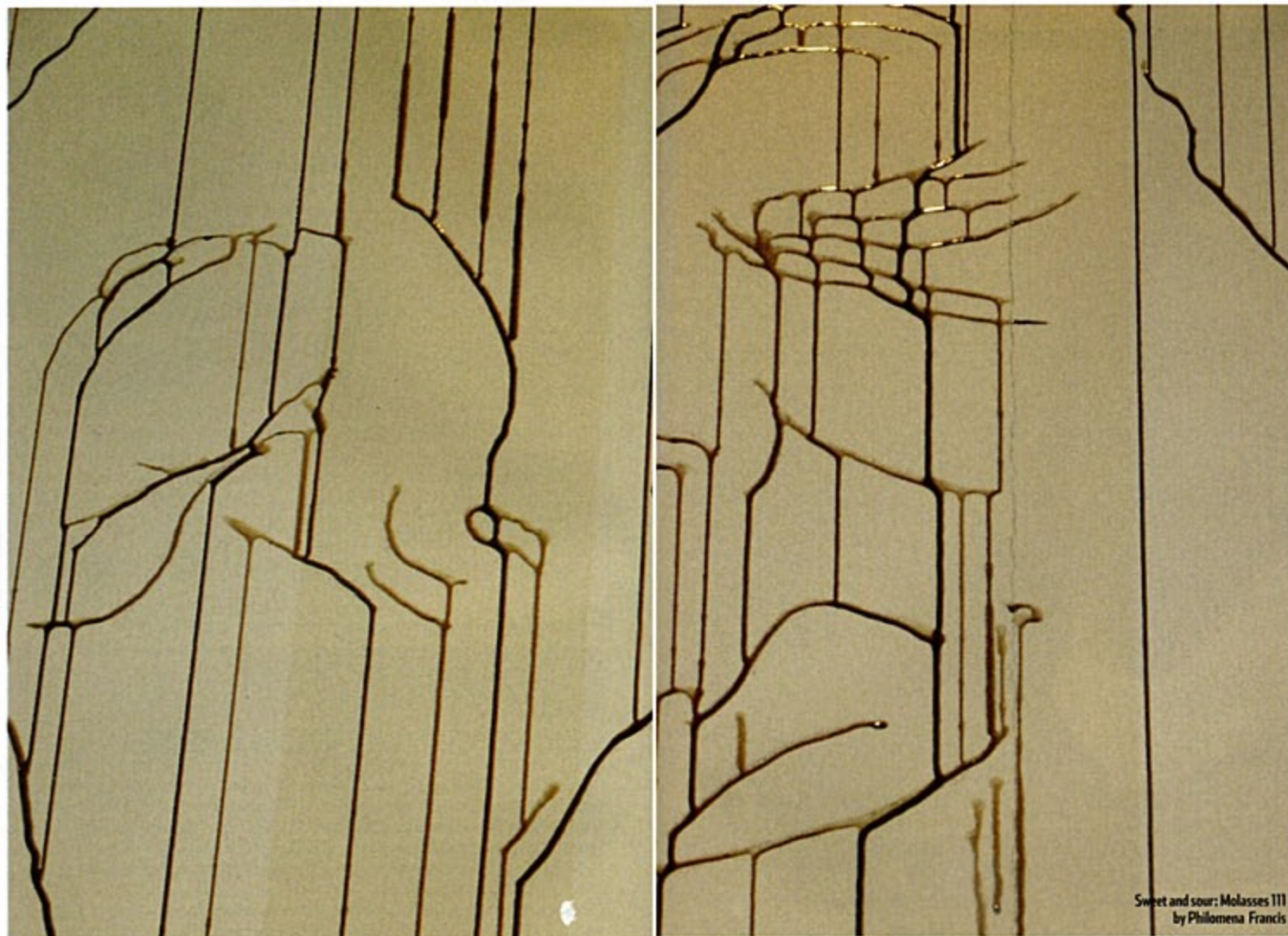
I meet Francis at 7am in a cold café around the corner from Rivington Street. I had earlier looked at the work and was stunned by its size.

It is the blackest and coldest of mornings and I feel I have slipped into the 19th century. Only the lighted windows of INIVA suggest a later century.

But there it is, *Molasses III*, bathed in electric light. I had imagined something smaller. The surprise stays with me. I quiz her in the café to how she managed to work with such a dimension. She patiently explains how she took a cake-piping tool and carefully drew the piece. And how each day it moves down the white background.

She now works as an Art Therapist, combining her art and her former social work. "I love the work," she says, "because I get the chance to combine my experiences and passions."

She talks about some of the problems she runs into with children who have been left out of supportive family life. Art is a good way of giving young people the chance to come at life from a

Sweet and sour: *Molasses III* by Philomena Francis

**"Francis uses treacle with all its limitations because she is conjuring with metaphor and memory. It is her history"**

different angle. We talk about this. Art made sense of her life. And now she sees it working for young people who are struggling with problems of a splintered life.

*Molasses III* is a repeated, drawn image. I ask why. She says she likes repetition. She found Andy Warhol's repeat images fascinating. Especially the one of the electric chair. If you haven't seen it, it is a badly printed, badly photographed image of the electric chair, looking not unlike the chair of a dentist.

She cannot remember the names of other artists who use repetition, but it is something she will continue to use. "I like the rhythm of repetition. The beat of it all."

I ask Francis if this big, brush commission has led to others. She says that she has been asked to exhibit at a big show in Lisbon. A few collectors are looking at her.

We spend an hour talking and then she has to go off to work. We talk for a few minutes in the street by her work. It will be there for another few weeks, closing on January 5.

Francis' work is a very interesting attempt at combining art with a kind of social, historical perspective. Much art that tries to make points is lost in becoming propaganda. I liked the fact that Francis' big piece in a window doesn't really need to have the explanation with it. Too much art now doesn't make sense unless you explain it.

Therefore art becomes about the words, rather than about the art.

But Francis' *Molasses III* stands on its own, down an East End side street. You encounter it. You look at it. You don't need to know all the background, necessarily.

Grab a look at it before the 5th of January. I recommend it.

**A** journalist rang me up a few days ago. Hammersmith And Fulham Council are refusing to give permission to the BBC and Crisis to open a temporary shelter over Christmas for the homeless.

It does sound like Scrooge before he makes the remarkable heart-change in Dickens' Christmas Carol. The council is seen as heartless

motherf\*\*kers who couldn't give a toss about the homeless, and should be castigated.

The council is Tory. Therefore those that are not Tory are upset that the Tory council has demonstrated its heartlessness once again. Last year they refused, and this year they refuse.

I wish it were a nice case of Robin and the Sheriff Of Nottingham. Or the bastard beastly blighters who are fascists in comparisons to us Liberals.

The unfortunate thing is that temporary shelter for homeless people is not a vote winner. That what is left after the homeless temporary shelter is homeless people, who do not necessarily disperse back to their former places, if they have any.

Councils are hard-nosed because they do not want to pick up the tab for people afterwards who may need their help.

To me, the bigger question is that temporary Christmas shelter has always thrown up more problems than they have solved. It means that a lot of people get very involved for a while, and then leave the homeless out on a limb when Christmas is over.

We shouldn't just have a generosity season, followed by three ignoring seasons. Crisis themselves will tell you that they work year-round, and the problem is year-round. Yet each Christmas we have this crescendo of gung-ho activity, followed by the bleak cold winds of January.

The people who suffer in the debate around Christmas shelters are the homeless. Telling councils off for their unreconstituted Scroogisms hides the real issue. Why the hell do people need outdoor relief year after year? Why are we not riding a coach and horses through the problem for the rest of the year?

The homeless become pawns in the game. The game is who can be more outraged at the flinty grimness of some and the temporary overstretched hand of the others.

Grow up! Help the homeless off the street so that they do not need your seasonal goodness for another year!