

MULLARNEY, JANET (b. 1952). Janet Mullarney was born and raised in Dublin. After graduating from the School of Painting at the Academia di Bella Arte in Florence in 1974, she established her home in Tuscany and pursued a career in conservation. The experience of specializing in wood carving restoration gave Mullarney a deep understanding of materials and traditions of craftsmanship and provided the artist with a strong sense of the association between art making and the skills of mending and repairing.

While Mullarney's work is informed by the traditions of Italian sculpture, it is equally indebted to modernist art and to global ideas of sculptural form that exist in non fine-art contexts such as the street, the temple or the home. From the combine sculpture of Pablo Picasso Mullarney gleaned the significance of humour and pun and a close association of art and play remains a defining feature of her work. Like other artists of her generation, she revisits Surrealism's stress on the unconscious, giving her work a powerful psychological dimension. An international artist, she visits India regularly and the richness of Hindu culture and religion inform much of her work. She draws on the parallels between the temples and shrines of India and the churches and monuments of Italy, both of which are part of a living tradition, connected closely to contemporary life.

The catalyst for Mullarney's return to fine art was the creation of little pieces of sculpture in her thirties, giving her an almost childlike sense of achievement. She began exhibiting in Italy and Ireland in the mid 1980s, participating in the International Sculpture Symposium in Dublin in 1988. Her first solo exhibition, *Radici* ['Carving Roots'] was shown in the Palazzo dei Priori, Perugia, and Teatro Trianon, Rome, in 1989 and at Limerick City Gallery, Crawford Gallery and Project Arts Centre in 1990. This consisted of carved and painted wooden figures whose forms extended from poles or were attached to ceilings or floors to create a dynamic installation,

evocative of a ritual dance. The artist drew from childhood stories and myths in the creation of the work which alluded to psychological states of freedom and liberation.

The title piece from her 1992 exhibition *Straight and Narrow* (Orchard Gallery, Limerick City Gallery and Triskel Arts Centre, Cork), was purchased by IMMA, becoming a key work in the permanent collection. The 1996 exhibition, *Squilibri Contenuti* (Istituto Francese, Florence; Model Arts Centre, Sligo and Limerick City Gallery) showed the impact of a visit to India in 1994. The use of vibrant colours, the construction of forms using diverse materials and the juxtaposition of animal and human elements found in both Hindu and Western religion and mythology permeated the work. *Aftermath* (plaster/cloth, mixed media, 1995, Model, Sligo) represents two entwined lovers, a blue woman and a red bull, lying on a white mattress. It evokes a moment of calm in which two extremes are momentarily reconciled. Mullarney was nominated for the Glen Dimpex Award by IMMA for this exhibition in 1998.

Like Melanie Klein and Louise Bourgeois Mullarney believes that the creative process has a profound psychological function in its ability to resolve trauma. Her 1998–99 exhibition *The Perfect Family*, (HLG, 1998–99, Limerick City Gallery, Butler Gallery, 1999), used the idea of household gods to convey the disturbing impact of family life, and particularly guilt, on the individual. In *Dietro le Quinte* [Behind the Scenes] (polychrome wood, 1997, HLG), a female figure, stands like a Renaissance saint with her hands folded in an attitude of prayer. Her beast-like head is thrown back and in its mouth is trapped the body of a tiny girl. The cannibalistic act recalls Klein's idea that anxiety in the pre-Oedipal phase takes the form of a fear of being devoured and destroyed.

In another work from the exhibition, *Compound Equation* (wood, plaster, papier-mâché, 1997, collection of artist), redolent of a tabernacle, three figures, dressed in white robes, with

animal heads mourn the death of a child. An inner tension is conveyed in the awkward positioning of the figures and the concealment of their expressions behind beastlike masks. The complex way in which the work is constructed adds to the tension. It consists of a delicately carved wooden box with roughly hewn figures, at the centre of which is a tiny child made out of papier-maché.

A period in Mexico resulted in another critically acclaimed exhibition, *The Bermuda Triangle*, at the Crawford Gallery in 2002 (first shown at the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Oaxaca, Mexico, 2001). Using materials ranging from plaster, tin, wallpaper, clay, salt and sponge it confirmed Mullarney's reputation as an 'outstanding talent and one of the foremost Irish sculptors' (A. Dunne, *Irish Times*, 20 November, 2002). Its works included an installation of tiny chairs facing a wall mounted with strait-jackets. *Ubiquitous Undesired Friend* (terracotta, cloth, acrylic, 2001, M.A.C.O., Mexico), depicting a dog on a mattress, evokes feelings of vulnerability and aversion.

The survey exhibition *Things Made, Things Done* (RHA Gallery/Taylor Gallery Dublin, 2010) incorporated both old and new work. It brought together the underlying concerns of Mullarney's work – 'an interest in the human condition and the frailty that lies within its dark and more malevolent sides' (RHA Press Release, quoting from Shaffrey, 2010]. *Hand on a Bull*, (aluminium, 2010) a graceful rounded torso pays homage to Hindu traditions of figure sculpture, especially the bronze Chola temple statuary of southern India. The use of the fragment conveys both an engagement with sculptural form and a contemporary anxiety about transformations of the human body. Two video pieces shown at the Taylor Gallery brought non-art performances into the gallery space, each emphasising a link between skill, aesthetic form and communication. In *Cortocircuito* (3 screen video projection, 2006), middle aged men imitate the calls of

songbirds and physically assume birdlike forms in their attempt to empathise with another species. *Pongal* (video, 2009), an Indian scene, shows a man making a circular pattern of coloured pigment on the ground using a perforated tube.

A significant part of Mullarney's practice is in the public sphere where her ideas on art and healing come to the fore in playful but sophisticated installations. Her work for the Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast 2001 plays on ideas of escape and comfort and draws on the artist's own experience of serious illness in 1990s. Her artworks at St Ultan's National School, Cherrywood, for a newly designed building by O'Donnell +Tuomey, 2003, impishly engage with the fabric of the school. These, like all her work, acknowledge a belief in the transformative powers of the art work, in its potential to alter both its maker's and its viewer's relationship to physical and psychological encounters. Above all her work combines close attention to craftsmanship with insightful wit.

Róisín Kennedy

Selected Reading:

Paul Cahill, *Carving Roots*, exhibition catalogue, Limerick City Gallery, 1989; *Janet Mullarney*, Morgana Edizioni, Florence, 1996; *Janet Mullarney. The Perfect Family*, exhibition catalogue, HLG, 1999; Clíodhna Shaffrey, 'Through the glass darkly', *IAR*, 27, no. 3, 2010, pp.78–81; Kristin Leach, 'As fit as a butcher's dog', *Sunday Times*, 5 December 2010.