

Janet Mullarney : *My Mind's I*

Throwing shapes or quietly sitting, twirling in the limelight or dancing with the imagination, Janet Mullarney's troupe of beguiling inventions act out a radiant new drama on what it is to be alive, to think, feel and to make art. Though standing still, the show goes on for ever, or as far as we can go with it, into her great themes of strength, vulnerability, strangeness, surprise and memory - open to all, our and hers. It's exuberantly visual – that is, rich in meaning: allusive, bountiful, teasing, without dropping into easy reach, layered, without false complexity. Ideas and creative connections tumble through the work, enticing but elusive as a rainbow, rewarding to the newcomer as much as to the long-time admirer. To freeze moments from the flow may be to hobble their grace, but her work has always been forgiving of the imperfect, a champion of the flawed.

Centre-stage of the show is a wide lightbox platform, illuminating a large group of diverse figures or objects (one or two are both). It is at once an offbeat plinth, a disco floor, a theatre set underlighting a cast of fantastical players, a catwalk or an imaginary arena. Its glow softly lights the room, a converted church, made smaller in the dimness. Standing before it, we grow aware of disparities of scale; ours, the little figures; their stage, ours. We are players too. Momentarily arranged, they are performers, but so are we. They seem delicate under our giant's gaze. Their scale is that of playthings. Were we playthings of the God who once lived here? Who might that God be now?

Power, control, freedom: in her work Janet Mullarney has not been intimidated by the essential human dilemmas, but driven by their charge, and distinct in engaging with them so directly, and expressively. If she has in part warred with the forces ranged to tame the imagination - church, family, convention, fashions in art - it has armed her to find her own authority as a maker, inventor and a voice, one that now seems even more empowered. From sculptures to setting this exhibition magically unmoors our given sense of boundaries and of scale, of objects in space, of hierarchies, of ourselves. Big becomes small, the fragile grows powerful, the controlled is liberated - and it works equally in reverse. Our perspective veers from adult to child, knowing to not knowing. Stability was never a concern for an artist who sought what she called 'contained disequilibrium' a viewpoint focussed but not fixed.

My Mind's I; though sensitive to ambiguity and the un-nameable, Janet's titles are as telling and generous as her work is visceral, concrete, emotional. In progressing she does not discard the past. Alongside her last big exhibition, at the RHA in 2010, was a short filmed interview ending with her expressed faith that 'what you have in your mind's eye will come out – and it's wonderful'. That idea introduces this new work, her adjustment to the phrase opening up at least some of the boundless threads running through it; relationships of seeing and expressing, ego and self, of playful inversion and double meaning.

To engage with the work is to traverse wide territory, mapped out on a small plane. Its themes are multivalent, interlinked, coherent, inseparable, like people and the lives they make. We get to meet a whole family of creations, forms, ideas, a rich genealogy of memories and inventions. In *The Perfect Family* (1998) the artist looked with misgiving at the challenge of surviving and being oneself within the 'ideal' unit of

society. Here, the aberrant or the elegant, the winner or misfit can share the stage, different sometimes even within themselves, contrary as beings and as art. In their heightened individuality they compete for attention and prosper, they may both gain and lose something when separated.

Play may be the most natural art, but galleries (and churches) are not conceived for laughter. Both are adult spaces. Another boundary dissolves here as play becomes work, toys become adult tools of meaning, the discarded becomes beloved. Creativity in her work is both transformative and healing. The artist has a tremendous command of metamorphosis, projection, disguise. Anything can hide, or change, before our eyes. Sponge can be stone or flesh, toys great monuments. She will revive old works or fragments in new (as a restorer she once brought the damaged back to health). She will recast titles, adapt what she wonderfully calls 'fond objects'.

Mullarney described in the RHA interview how 'it is space that defines sculpture'. That exhibition incorporated a grand essay in classical form in a two-metre aluminium cast of an upper torso, abstract, impassive, somewhere between India and antiquity. She has expressed respect for such masters of the monumental as Serra, but also her preference now to move in the other direction. In the RHA the viewer walked among the sculptures, here in the Highlanes her space is as much psychological as physical. Only the mind can walk among these pieces. Their smallness is their strength. As galleries internationally grow larger and giganticist works fill them, Mullarney's intimate, penetrating figures suggest there is no space more vast than than the imagination.

We sense the air around and above these beings, and the show resonates powerfully with this space, from the taped sounds of nature that waft in gently, to the shadows playing across the altar – another stage, theatre, installation, refuge. Creativity as an alternative salvation, Creationism another art. For Pliny the very beginnings of painting were the outlines of a lover's shadow traced on a wall. Ghosts of the straightjackets imposed on art and humanity come into focus with the 'found' Neoclassical angels (fixtures of the altar), their demure joy, unstained flesh and decorous academic propriety outshone and outlived by the raw, naked, headless dancers cavorting below.

A dialogue of light and shadow runs through the work, and the installation. The light of revelation, insight, truth and pleasure against shades of mortality, pain, power - only occasionally given a name (one is *Absolutely Untitled*). Picasso is one of these powers, a godlike father-figure whose steps shook the ground of art and whose ambition overshadowed rivals, family and nature. In *Picasso's daughter** Janet adopts and confronts his driving will to manipulate, command and transform. Assuming the role, and Harlequin's garb, of this titan's 'daughter', the artist herself sits quietly, a child waiting poignantly for attention, acceptance. She has noted how behind the commanding forms of Picasso's painting of his son there is a child doing his best to be what the parent wants. She returns to the child something of the voice 'appropriated' by Picasso in his devouring of children's art, as he created what Breton called his 'tragic toys for adults'. Again, the shadows are long: Janet's own father had a framed print of Picasso's son as Pierrot on the wall in the sitting room.

As an artist Janet Mullarney's authority grows stronger, obviously in her expanding prowess, but also in her quality of leadership, her capacity as author to celebrate the creations of others, or of nature, and not to outshade them. She can elegantly adopt the work of an overlooked peer in *Lorenzo Bonechi's Mountain*, reaching back to their shared sources in medieval art, while illuminating nature's effort to survive the maw of religion in *Rocks from S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna*. A fragment can say everything, in sponge or paper. Her desire to take the big 'S' out of Sculpture seems effortlessly realised. All these objects have the spontaneity and expressive depth of drawings, like *Giotto's Circle*, itself an echo of her lovely video *Pongal/ Urban Print* (2010) in which an Indian street artist, surviving on ingenuity alone, inscribes a circular pattern on the ground with a simple chalk-filled perforated tube.

As free as the work is from sculptural convention and predictability, it is just as independent of theoretical dogma, academic or psychological, though its depths may coincide with the insights of others. Cliodhna Shaffery observed how her appreciation of the unaccountable mysteries of the self parallel Julia Kristeva's perception that 'we are strangers to ourselves'¹. Mullarney's extensive travels in Italy, India and Mexico, and knowledge of their artistic traditions, may sometimes figure as sources for her art. But her work is just as likely to enrich our reading of other art, like the outsiders in the images of Jack Yeats, the God's-eye viewpoint in Bruegel's *Children's Games*, or the glassy stage of an ice scene by Avercamp.

Compassionate, generous and humane, Janet Mullarney's art is also unabashed in its virtuosity, its exciting capacity to conjure magic at will. In *Ada*, Vladimir Nabokov's late novel, the young hero Van Veen takes to running around on his hands (reducing some to tears). It is done not just for the performance, but to also to be able to see waterfalls flow upwards. Janet has quoted the insight that power is the antithesis of freedom, but in her infinitely fertile art she seems to have made freedom her power.

1. Cliodhna Shaffery, 'Through a Glass Darkly', *Irish Arts Review*, Autumn 2010, p.80.