

Life & Culture

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New things made to take the rough with the smooth



AIDAN DUNNE

Janet Mullarney's sculptures of human and animal figures often had a rough-hewn look. Now they have a new sophistication

ART COLLEGE in Italy proved disappointing for a young Janet Mullarney, so she gave up quite soon after she had started, she explains. Now an established sculptor, Mullarney says the problem was that such schools in Italy, as elsewhere, can fall short of idealistic, youthful expectations.

Instead she enrolled at the Scuola Professionale di Intaglio in Florence, where she learned to restore and to carve wood.

Learning a craft was rewarding for her in a way that art school had not been and there was strong demand for traditional woodcarving in Italy.

Making copies of intricately carved Renaissance picture frames taught her to be at home with woodcarving, though she had no desire to spend her life engaged in such work.

Now long-established as a sculptor, she remains passionate about craft skills, as is evident in her work to date and in the two major exhibitions of her work currently running in Dublin: *Things Made* at the RHA Gallagher Gallery and *Things Done* in the Taylor Galleries.

Not that she limits herself to woodcarving. This work spans a formidable range of media and methods, including cast bronze and aluminium, found objects, fabric, glass and video. Nor is everything fashioned by her own hand. She has no hesitation about enlisting technical expertise when she feels a piece calls for it including some small-scale woodcarving in her recent work.

Mullarney is known for her carved and modelled sculptures of human and animal figures, which are often integrated into ambiguous allegorical tableaux.

They carry a powerful emotional charge, but their exact meaning is left open to interpretation. Sometimes the animals are identifiable, particularly in the case of the dogs and reindeer that feature in her current shows. Often they are not, however. They are fairytale creatures and their task is to embody and express human emotion, or to "translate our emotions," as Mullarney puts it.

Human relationships in the work are fraught with difficulty and disappointment, but also characterised by great tenderness



and hope. In one tiny three-part work, *Se fosse così*, a little creature brings a series of offerings to a stolid, dependable-looking dog. "The title translates roughly as 'If it were like this' and, in one way, the piece is about unconditional love, if there is really such a thing," she says.

The stoical dog is a benign presence that accepts anything from the other including, if you look closely, poisonous

mushrooms.

Behind the Scenes features a carved diva-like figure in a long green dress, standing atop a wooden platform and munching on what seems to be a person. "It's about cannibalism," Mullarney says, wryly.

Well, in a sense. It is about the way individuals can overwhelm and consume others in the name of an ideology, religious belief, the family or any such abstraction.

Mullarney's latest works, such as *Rishabadev* (above right) look simple compared to her earlier pieces, *Ubiquitous Unwanted Friend* (top), *And Another Story* (above), and *Se Fosse Così* (right)

Several recent pieces look simple in comparison with Mullarney's earlier work. One of the most striking, reworked in several versions, is *Rishabadev*, a graceful, truncated model of the upper human torso. There is



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just the chest, shoulders and upper arms. It recalls the sinuous beauty of statues of Indian deities and it was inspired by a spell in India earlier this year.

The title refers to the figure designated as the earliest enlightened teacher in Jainism. Mullarney's treatment of the partial torso is strangely complete: it is like a whole figure rather than a fragment.

It is as self-contained as an elegant abstract form, but it is also unmistakably figurative. "It took a lot of work to arrive at that point," she says.

"I was thinking about the earliest forms of figuration, about how to make a figurative sculpture without simply accepting the western classical tradition – not because I reject it, but I found being in India introduced a new kind of energy, and a chance to look at figuration again. I was looking for what is essential in figuration."

One could add, perhaps, what is essential in being human, and what one hopes to find in art. Her video installation, *Corto Circuito*, features three men displaying an arcane virtuosity in imitating birdsong. They regularly take part in competitions in Italy doing just that. On three screens we see each mimicking, respectively, a finch, a seagull and a robin. What is striking, apart from the fluency of their vocalising, is the extent to which each physically mimics the bird.

"For me, that's what it's about," Mullarney says. "Each is absorbed in what he's doing. He becomes the bird. I like the fact that they are men – quite masculine men too – doing something so nuanced and delicate. That complete immersion in doing something to the point that you forget yourself – that's what it's like when you are truly in touch with your work."

Things Made by Janet Mullarney can be seen at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Gallagher Gallery, 15 Ely Place, until Dec 22. *Things Done* by Janet Mullarney are at Taylor Galleries, 16 Kildare Street, until Dec 11, 01-6768055

