

Medb Ruane

"Representing Art in Ireland" , The Fenton Gallery, Ireland

Janet Mullarney's sculptures and drawings emerge from a ground where the heat of tango dancing meets the restraint of a quadrille. A sensuous beauty whispers promises of invitation, and being provoked, through materials grafted as skins to hold together ideas about relationship, and about art.

The look of things beckons you in to curious, precisely crafted objects which take shape as apparently magical creatures - dogs, ravens, cows. Here, the creatures symbolise something otherwise absent from the dance, or unacknowledged: the beast within, the animal who may devour you, the nurturing, simple domestic who drip-drips milk on demand.

Hewn, carved, then paint-battered, some of these forms grow from traditional materials, such as wood and plaster, used by craftspeople and artists for hundreds of years. You see especially a fluent exchange with Romanesque and medieval Italian carving and their art historical prestige, letting culture and tradition from past times open into time present.

Here's the provocation, as Mullarney up-ends times past by speaking to the dogmas as well as the inheritance. The gifts of imagery, iconography and technical know-how create a tradition, like a family almost, in which you can position yourself as a person or an artist. They are rich, seductively reassuring, comforting because they are familiar.

Time past offers comfort and consensus, but who wants to stay there? As well as a sense of security, belonging has a cost. The struggle to speak from within those comforts yet go beyond them is the journey on which she embarks, playing with resin, paint, hand-blown glass, fabricating human figures to see how and where they stand.

Mullarney's early work on Family caught similar tensions: how you can't change the family, tribe or nation into which you're born and how much time you can spend trying to accept that limit. It's about the challenge of the social network in which you find yourself versus the challenge of emerging as a person in your own right.

Without the spatial relationships of great art and sculpture, little could be said. The start point would be chaos. Mullarney wonders about what may be represented and what may not. Her questions are about whether something that can't be said, seen or heard may be shown or indicated if materials and symbols collide in certain ways.

With such forces involved - that constraint which is so pressing - Mullarney's work is bound to be passionate. The quadrille sets the story, the tango drives the mood.

*Medb Ruane*