

As fit as a butcher's dog

Janet Mullarney's sculptures and videos explore our animal instincts with a dark kind of humour. Her latest shows confirm her dynamic reputation, says Cristín Leach

Janet Mullarney's last solo show was in an empty butcher's shop. That this was an entirely suitable venue for the dark, disquieting passion and unexpected humour of her art might just tell you all you need to know about Mullarney's sculptures and installations.

Those who braved the punishing rain that drenched Kinsale Arts

Week in 2009 encountered art in temporary galleries including a hairdresser's and a cafe. Colohan's Butchers was a good match for Mullarney: a place of death and nourishment, beginnings and ends; a suitable venue for art that melds the deeply unsettling with the reassuringly familiar, almost by sleight of hand.

Mullarney was born in Dublin in 1952 and left at 18 to study

painting in Florence. Uninspired, she switched to woodwork, learning to restore and carve, and has essentially remained in Italy ever since, working predominantly with wood. Her Kinsale show was called *To Make It Home*, her first since a 2003 outing at Dublin's Taylor Galleries. This month, she is back at the Taylor with *Things Done* and at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) with *Things*

Made. Like a mini mid-career retrospective, these twin surveys bring old and new work together and copper-fasten her reputation as one of Ireland's most interesting artists.

Just seven works effortlessly fill the RHA's enormous Gallery I; and they do it with a quiet yet theatrical panache. In a corner on the ground near the wall, a small dog carved from sponge gazes between his front paws at his own red erection. The piece is called *Ubiquitous Undesired Friend* (2009) and there is another, earlier version of it at the Taylor.

Apart from Mullarney's canine carving skills, what is most notable about this piece is its humour: here is a dog in a moment of absurd self-discovery. If such doggie "navel" gazing wasn't inherently funny on the level of physical comedy, the implication that the dog is experiencing a profound flash of self-knowledge and the dual-meaning implied by the work's title are. He may be man's best friend, but a dog will always bring things back to basics.

It is this slight grubbiness, this interest in the base element that gives Mullarney's work its unsettling edge. Much of it pivots on a fascination with the moment when curiosity and pain, be it physical or emotional, collide. In *Aftermath* (1995), a blue woman lies in the arms of an orange animal with horns, on a paint- and oil-stained mattress. It's a messy and uncomfortable scene, legs and body entwined. The animal's tail touches the woman's knee, probably a practical arrangement from a sculptural point of view, but with such tiny gestures Mullarney twists the knife she so skilfully plunges in her dramatic tableaux. This is the aftermath, she tells us. But of what? Sex? A fatal battle?

This sense of muted drama persists around Mullarney's work. Although she often uses bright colours and scale for impact, her art is not showy or loud. It is marked by a reassured sense of

inward-looking contemplation. There is a quiet confidence to her hybrid animal-human figures. And her sculptures don't need to shout for attention, they burst with carefully choreographed passion.

Her wooden carvings are both beautiful and coarse. *Dietro le Quinte* (1998), which translates as *Behind the Scenes*, might look like a maiden going quietly to her fate at the top of a gallows-style platform, but there's defiance in her upturned head, and retaliation in the mouthful she chews: the flailing legs of a tiny human protrude from her closed lips. She also has the head of an animal, a recurring motif in Mullarney's work.

Five hand-blown deer heads hang at the Taylor Galleries, echoing the trophy heads of hunters. But these deer are clearly not victims: they cast a friendly eye over the room, amused, bemused, each with a different expression. Sparkling, smooth, like carved ice, they seem to be casting wry judgment on the absurd and tragic world as it passes them by.

Mullarney says her work is about "human dilemmas and





Awkward moments: Ubiquitous Undesired Friend, 2009; below, Reclining Nude, also from 2009

one metre broad. Polished and silvery, it is truncated — cut off at sternum and bicep — a big, beefy, headless chest that speaks of heart and breath, strength and comfort. It is both an elegant abstraction and an unmistakably figurative physical presence. There are two more of these at the Taylor: *Rishabadeva* (2010), a smaller version in aluminium named after an Indian deity, and *Same Same But Different* (2010) — formerly called *Drawing from Memory* — which is carved from wood and stained with graphite.

Wary of the “craft” label, Mullarney has also begun making video art. *Pongol* (2009), at the Taylor, is a looped video of beautiful simplicity, in which bare-foot men roll out circular patterns on the floor using a dowel dipped in paint. Each movement is accompanied by a split-second flurry of ascending piano notes and the pattern appears as if by magic under hand, leaving the man standing in a perfect circle of pretty decoration.

Corto Circuito (2005), also at the Taylor, is a three-screen video projection that entices viewers into a room apparently bursting with birdsong. In fact, it’s a room filled with footage of Italian men demonstrating their bird-calling abilities. Their skill is impressive, and also funny, especially as one of them appears to be having an actual conversation, responding with tweets and twitters to the others. Both videos are about ordinary people making magic through everyday creativity. The same kind of alchemy is at the heart of Mullarney’s art — something entirely of the now, pointing always towards the moment of unexpected beauty, the defiant soul, the laughter in the dark. □

Things Done, Taylor Galleries, Kildare Street, Dublin, until December 11; Things Made, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, until December 22

aspirations”; one could argue it is also art about being strong. For that reason, it is also about power, and how it plays out in different situations.

There are two versions of *Se Fosse Così/If it were like this* (at

the Taylor it is called *And Another Story I, II and III*). It features a kneeling female with the head of an animal in conversation with a benevolent-looking shaggy dog beneath a series of glass domes. These domes are bauble-like,

recalling the covers people put over religious icons, known in parts of Ireland as shades. The dog could also be a bear or a lion; the woman sometimes wears antlers, or the head of a rhino. She offers him objects: a golden cube, a poisonous mushroom; she is kneeling, pleading, supplicating. Their noses are almost touching. Mullarney has said this piece is about unconditional love, but it is also about a fragile balance of power.

Her influences include 15th- and 16th-century sculpture, and there is a strong medieval feel to large-scale pieces such as *Dietro le Quinte*. She also makes reference to Catholic religious iconography and ritual — although that element is not to the fore in these shows.

Physical discomfort is a recurring motif, evoked in the long

joint-less legs that stand in a row of three at the Taylor Galleries (*Untitled*, 2009), or the unexpectedly titled *Reclining Nude* (2009): a leg with no knee that stands almost two metres tall at the RHA, both elegant and awkward.

At the RHA, Mullarney also intervenes in how close the viewer can comfortably get to the works. *Aftermath* has been placed in the middle of a low wooden plinth; *Dietro le Quinte* stands on her platform. On the other hand, *All Ears* (1995) has been placed in the corner of a large L-shaped plinth, an arrangement that allows viewers to step right up to the tortured-looking animal-woman on a rusted trolley.

The work is marked by a blurring of the lines between love and pain, beauty and roughness and the push-pull action of embrace-repulsive. A series of untitled drawings at the Taylor casts further light on Mullarney’s process, but it is clear that one of her key drivers is the pleasure to be found in the making of objects.

Hand on the Bull (2010) is a huge aluminium half torso, almost

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