

Cherry Orchard

St. Ultan's National School 2007

A commission funded by the Department of Education and Science



The search for an artist

An inspiring vision for the care and education of children, matched by excellent architecture presents an ideal context in which to commission art.

With such a strong context, it seemed appropriate to use a curatorial process which is designed to identify a small number of excellent artists and to give them an opportunity to respond directly to the context. With this in mind, a curatorial panel was established which included the architect, Sheila O'Donnell, professional artist Patricia McKenna, curator Cliodhna Shaffrey, and myself, curator and project manager. Each member of the panel was invited to nominate up to five artists (bringing C.V. and visual material) and a meeting was held at which we short-listed four artists. This meeting was particularly rewarding in that it gave rise to thought provoking dialogue regarding the nature of the project (school and care unit), building and commission.

The final selection was undertaken by the arts committee established to oversee the commission, which included the school managers and representatives of the development committee. The proposals submitted by the short-listed artists brought four very distinct ideas for the commission, each responding to the building, space and ethos of the project in different ways. In the end Janet Mullarney was a unanimous choice for the commission as we believed that in her proposal to make a series of works, she had responded wonderfully to the architecture and created a sense of wonderment which was perfect for the commission.

Curator - Ruairí Ó Cuív

Cherry Orchard, despite its name which should conjure up images of beauty and fruitfulness, has over the years been dogged by educational failure, unemployment, anti-social behaviour and a general atmosphere of bleakness. Although populated by very many courageous and caring people its children lived in a shadow that is perhaps best summed up in the words of an elderly resident who observed, with sadness, that she had never heard the sound of children's laughter on her street. A small but successful local project inspired a new approach to education to break the cycle of helplessness and despair. At its heart was the conviction that the physical, social, emotional, spiritual and educational needs of children should be attended to in an integrated fashion within a warm and loving atmosphere from the earliest years. The Department of Education and Science was supportive of the concept and engaged O'Donnell + Tuomey Architects to build a complex that would include not only sixteen classrooms but also a fully equipped food facility, a pre-school nursery and a care unit providing warmth and support during and after school hours.

The architects embraced the philosophy of the project with insight and enthusiasm and translated it into a building that is both practical and uplifting. The spaciousness, openness and light within the building have created an atmosphere of welcome that makes children and adults alike happy to be there. This is important in an area where school has often been a negative experience. It is remarkable how many people commented, when the complex first opened, that it was hard to believe that they were in a school building. They seemed to relax as if they were walking in an art gallery, opening out onto attractive courtyards.

The arrangement of the various elements of the building facilitates the integration of education and care within the project and lends itself to the progression of children through each stage of their development. The use of high quality materials such as the brick and timber as well as the pleasing and imaginative design of the curved roofs providing an attractive light on the top corridor lends a sense of worth that Cherry Orchard has never known before. The architects used the concept of walled gardens planted with cherry trees to meet the challenge of securing the complex from threat of vandalism. In doing this they transformed the notion of security into the provision of a beautiful space embracing children in a safe environment within which they can play, interact and develop.

We are indebted to Ruairí Ó Cuív for making us aware that our building would qualify for the Per Cent for Art Scheme and subsequently generously curating the commission. Out of a number of fine proposals for art works, Janet Mullarney's submission was selected as most appropriate. Hers had a magic that would appeal to the imagination of children and adults, complement the architecture and resonate with the playfulness of our chosen patron, Saint Ultan. A relatively little known Irish saint, Ultan, had been chosen as patron for our project not simply because of his care and education of orphaned children but most of all because of the playful legends that have transmitted his story to us. Not for him a solemn history with boring dates and statistics. Instead we are given delightful pictures of a bishop who in his care for

children invents new means of feeding the many infants in his care and averts invasions with a blessing from his left hand while he continues right-handed with his urgent task of ploughing a field to provide for his adopted family. The joy of the children is summed up, not in a solemn vote of thanks, but in the image of children dancing around him on his feast-day in heaven.

Janet Mullarney's sculptures lead us in a joyful dance of imagination around the building and invite us to enter a creative world where everything is possible and laughter inevitable. What child would not delight to take flight with the acrobats that float above the stairwell or to plunge into another world through a concrete beam? This art awakens the creative imagination that beckons children into their individually invented world to emerge so much better equipped to shape and transform the reality of the world they find themselves in each day. Children learn best when they are at play. At every turn Janet, like a visual Pied Piper, leads them through the building, now observing most unlikely saints suspended overhead on an upstairs corridor with an unspoken message that there are no templates for holiness and that each one of us bears the seeds of sanctity, now welcoming home storm-tossed boats and inventing tales of their mysterious journeys.

At play a child is rarely conscious that they are engaged in a learning process. With blissful abandon new discoveries are made, deeper and fascinating awareness of surroundings grows, affectionate bonds are forged and the beauty that surrounds them is contemplated in moments of reflective solitude. This art is in tune with such a mood. Clouds with soft textures and gentle hues conjure up a comforting, safe world of dreams; sheep with most unlikely colours display themselves endearingly in the ever changing light that pours through the window above, teaching the viewer to marvel at the power of sunlight to transform with its magic our grey world. And what child would not fall in love with the bright red, soft dog who contemplates quizzically on his multicoloured blanket? With a light touch, Janet introduces the child to the exquisite world of uplifting art by providing a visual concerto resonating with the spectrum of their world of fun and play, colour and texture, keen observation, creative subversion of reality, affection, dreams and adventures in unlikely worlds.

The philosophy of our project is to treasure the innate value and dignity children have and to accompany them at the beginning of life's adventure. Given warmth and loving support they can aspire to greatness in happiness, achievement, beauty, imagination and love. Our building affirms this worth and is a testament that wonderful things can happen in Cherry Orchard. It is a statement that Cherry Orchard may rightly aspire to the beauty and fruitfulness that its name evokes. Janet Mullarney's art is an infectious laughter echoing through the building, inspiring joy, summoning us to play, leading our imaginations on a merry dance and inviting us to forsake the obvious, break free of any dreariness that imprisons us and reach out and up to love and hope, to create and learn.

Management of the School - Shán Ó Cuív

Background

The architecture of Cherry Orchard School was intended to create a special place, a haven of learning and play, protected from the harsh reality of this suburban context.

The predominant character of this part of the city is one of anonymity or lack of identity. Other public buildings in the area have been subjected to considerable vandalism and are hidden behind palisade fencing. It was part of our briefing from the Department of Education and Science that the school building should be designed in such a way as to minimise its vulnerability while retaining an architectural expression appropriate for a primary school. The challenge was to find a design solution that would give the school a strong identity and to an extent create its own context, a context that would be welcoming and attractive for pupils from all backgrounds, including the most socially deprived.

The two storey school is arranged around and between a series of courtyards planted with cherry orchards, within 3.6 metre high brick garden walls. The brick walls establish the character of the gardens. The height of the garden walls has been carefully gauged to allow



the trees to be visible from outside above the walls while also discouraging climbing. The vaulted concrete roofscape with projecting rainwater gutters reinforce the distinctive form of the building whilst deterring unauthorised access to the roofs. The concrete vaults, half vaults and columns establish the character of the interior; they focus the space inward, while allowing strong shafts of sunlight in the upper corridors.

The art project

We have always enjoyed the spatial qualities and character of vaulted Romanesque chapels in France and Italy. We had visited such chapels in Tuscany with Janet Mullarney and seen the beautiful rather primitive painted wooden sculptures which seem such an integral part of these spaces. When Janet submitted her proposal for the school we felt that it had a wonderful resonance with the architecture of the building. We also felt a connection back to the sculptures in the vaulted chapels. Her creatures, which inhabit vaults, walls, corners and columns, are surprising and arresting and yet feel at home in the spaces. They are uplifting, cheering and also full of serious intent. They seem to reinforce the character of the spaces which they occupy.

The experience of working with Janet on this project was very special because of the way in which her work gradually developed. As she got to know the building better she added new pieces in response to the physical dimensions and shapes of spaces, but also to their character and light; a small flock of five sheep live high in a concrete half vault - when the sun comes out you can see that they are "walking" up an angled shaft of sunlight.

These works allow the imagination to soar, they provide moments in which a child could be surprised and thrilled. By their character and their placing they suggest the potential for a one to one relationship; a private contact with something outside and above the mundane and sometimes oppressive experience of school and teachers. They are beautiful, they are strange, they are irreverent and they belong in this building. They live there. When the first person arrives in the morning, the building is already occupied. You are never alone in the corridor; you can always talk to a red sponge dog or a saint, or sail away in a magic ship in the air.

This work enhances and enriches the school; it is a gift to the people who will learn and work there.

O'Donnell - Tuomey Architects







"All that they {the worldly} desire, we, on the contrary flee, and that which they flee, we desire, like those jugglers and dancers, who, with head down and feet up, in an inhuman fashion, stand or walk on their hands and attract the eyes of everyone" ⁽¹⁾

Epistola, 87, 12

Janet Mullarney's work lies somewhere between the imaginary and the real. A reconnection to a lineage of art historical references from ancient and Egyptian art, and in particular the medieval era – the Dark Ages – through to Modernism. Her sources – the cave paintings at Lascaux: 10th & 11th century Romanesque cloister sculpture; gothic carvings from Chartres Cathedral; the trecento master Lorenzo Monaco, whose works are praised for their luminous beauty of colouring and a graceful rhythmic flow of line – inspire in Mullarney an inventive contemporary imagination that carries within the fantasy of a Romanesque imagier – who capable of overstepping (religious) boundaries creates those ridiculous monsters in that marvellous and deformed beauty, in that beautiful deformity. Mullarney's 'creatures' – the acrobats, fantastic beasts, holy personages, boats, clouds, animals – possess the irrationality of the hybrid with a classical purity of balance. A strangely primordial presence is evoked, with essence distilled and the unexpected released from any confirming narrative. A restless free-flow of another world delights in theatrical spontaneity. Mullarney's capacity to tune into a collective memory, to look back and find in ancient (medieval) sources a continuous returning creates an ever renewable disturbing ambiguity. Her work is strangeness enjoyed. A deep-seated curiosity about the world, invigorated by an unbridled imagination allows her to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. A bony white cow sprints across a field – he is bigger than normal, faster than expected, his legs stretched in a full-on gallop, more gazelle than cow, cinematic, almost mythological. The remembered event cast in bronze, this cow becomes a part of her menagerie. Mullarney's sculpted creatures – carved, moulded, built and stitched – out of all kinds of material – resin, wood, bronze, glass, foam, found bits and pieces, fabric, crochet – demonstrate an incredible dexterity of skill and deep knowledge of her craft. She can produce works of exquisite finesse as well as making work out of the crudest of forms – blob-like shapes in foam or of discarded rubbish. They have immense power, a simple beauty that stirs the senses crossing a threshold into the unfamiliar.

Commissioned under a Per Cent for Art Scheme for Cherry Orchard National School, Dublin, Janet Mullarney was the inspired choice of a selection process curated by Ruairí Ó Cuív. Ó Cuív's ingenious approach was simply to invite artistic peers to present a list of artists whom they thought could make good work for this context – a national school in a disadvantaged

area in Dublin's inner suburbs. Designed by Sheila O Donnell and John Tuomey, Cherry Orchard National School is a building of exceptional architectural quality. An allegiance to traditional (craft) materials – concrete, brick and wood – creates a restrained architecture reminiscent of the Bauhaus. It is functional, tactile, elegantly substantial – a beautifully formed building. The interiors are generous well-lit spaces with high ceilings and views focused towards several axes. A striking barrel vault roof immediately evokes the Romanesque. Rooted to its place, cathedral-like, the building possesses gravity. It confirms a keen commitment to the children of Cherry Orchard who will learn and play here.

Janet Mullarney's artistic intervention readily connects to the architecture, yet springs from another world, imparting a different text, a touch of magic fantasy, of bold colour. She brings to the scheme a different decorative filling – distraction. Like medieval cloister sculpture – often demonic, without didactic meaning or religious symbolism – Mullarney's sculptures invites no systematic intellectual apprehension, but are grasped as individual irrational fantasies – playful and surreal. At Cherry Orchard, Mullarney's sculptures defy gravity – a bronze cow walks walls: acrobatic creatures tumble lithely in perfect synchronised flight, their graceful alien bodies, suspended from the barrel vaulted ceiling, wearing glass masks – a witty oxymoron – in the shape of deer heads. A figure plunges into a concrete beam in a splendid dive clutching a chair, we see only the blue splayed feet and arms and the orange chair, the torso remains submerged in a concrete sea. A red dog sits in the air, his head bowed, front paws stretched out on his dog-crocheted-blanket made especially for him. He epitomises vulnerability. So poignant, so genuinely touching, it is incredible to learn that Mullarney actually dislikes (fears) dogs, yet she finds in them something elemental. Her series also includes groups of clouds, saints, sheep – green and pink hues of a Piero della Francesca – and boats, each taking their place – prime and marginal – in architecture's ordering of space. Sheep beneath the clerestory; clouds under a 'concrete' sky – and the boats within a void. Arriving (we imagine) after a long sea-voyage, their little wooden bodies battered, they've survived, carrying a bird's nest on a bamboo tree, jewels and precious stones, doors blasted open to the winds. Like a de-brutalised Bosch Mullarney's commissioned artwork for Cherry Orchard National School is a garden of constant delights.

Clíodhna Shaffrey

⁽¹⁾ Notes from Saint Bernard's letter to Abbot William of St. Thierry, against the Cluniac art of his time as quoted in Meyer Schapiro *Romaesque Art*, Volume 1, 1977. Chatto and Windus, London, P6.

Gropina Revisited/beasts and boats and things

There is an expression I could use to convey the sense of pleasure and fulfilment I felt seeing my sculptures embedding themselves, over the months, within the essential proportions of this safe and solid civic building. It was an expression used by a couple of young boys skidding to a halt before a fleet of battered ships paying me the ultimate compliment with "deadly!". I don't know if they noticed that these vessels were made out of the very type of paper and plastic that flies around the fields to enmesh itself in railings and grassy verges. I hope that they do. I hope that they may notice that Things can be made of anything and anything can be metamorphosed into a Thing. I am honoured to have had the possibility of residing in and leaving a mark on such a beautiful and assertive building.

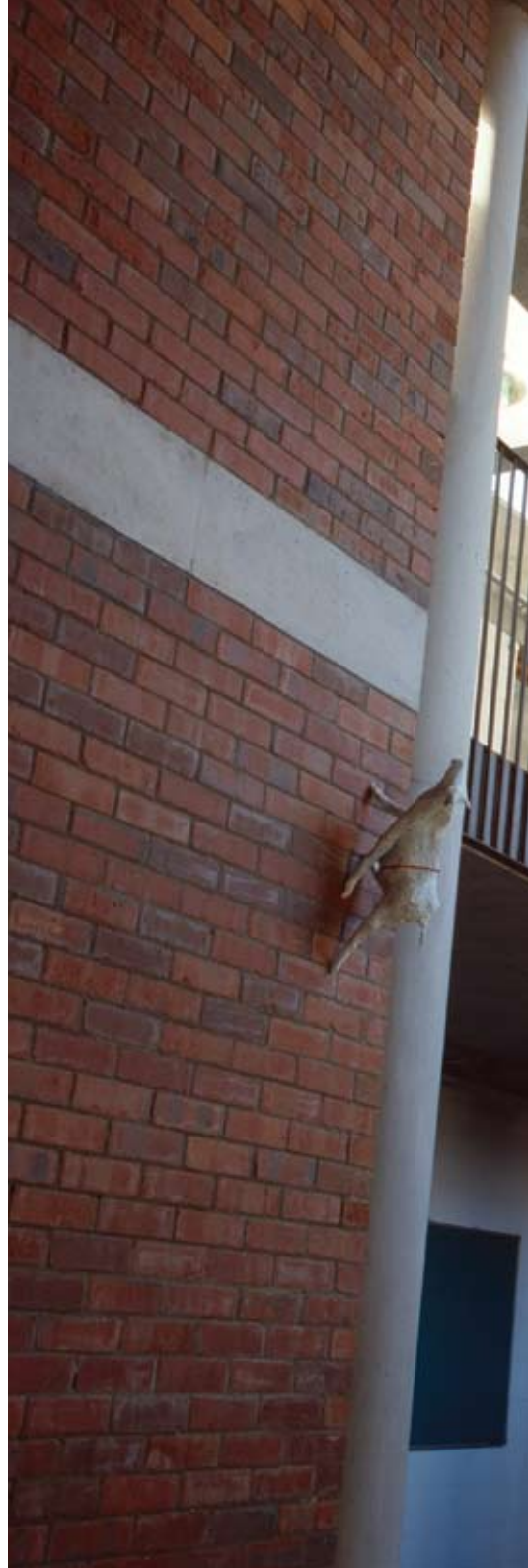
Artist - Janet Mullarney



























































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