

JANET MULLARNEY

Her work put to question

AN INTRODUCTION

I suppose the best writing about works of art happens when the writer feels deep empathy for the work but can also deal with some degree of objectivity. The sense the writer makes of the work should then be both deeply personal and comprehensive enough so that nothing of importance in the work gets taken for granted.

I have been for some years now and continue to be smitten with work of Janet Mullarney. Writing this essay offers the opportunity to put these feelings about her work to the question, and perhaps find out why this is so. This entails as well putting her work itself to the question - to a series of questions - concerning: 1. what her work represents, how it refers to the outer and inner worlds we experience in common; 2. what it presents by way of materials, media and decisions about design; and 3, how it relates to its audiences, to the people by, through and for whom it is made.

To say that I like the work of Janet Mullarney is an understatement. It is more a matter of love, respect and admiration. Her work is of the best being done today at any level of comparison. What draws me to the work is that it is centered on the human body, flesh and spirit to the full; that it makes free and full use of the complexities of how colour behaves: and what the array of skill, technique and craft always serves and never subverts her imagination and self-expression.

These judgements are based on a great deal of first hand contact with her work through a number of exhibitions in recent years held in Dublin, Sligo and Limerick, and especially through prolonged contact with one of her works, *Waiting for Illumination* (1996) which is part of the Permanent Collection of Limerick City Gallery of Art where I work.

The judgements that follow have this contact as base but are also the result of listening to the new body of work entitled *The Perfect Family* which this catalogue celebrates.

THE QUESTIONS

REPRESENTATION – LITERAL/ VISUAL

The Question: To what does the work of Janet Mullarney refer; what references does the work make to the world we live in, to things found in that world?

Human bodies. No; say, rather, human beings: body, mind and spirit. In a wide cast of characters. And animals. Male and female.

Adult: mother / father; dominant, superior, in charge, authoritative, paragons. Children: shrunken people; submissive, dependent, vulnerable; in a domestic world, family sized, centred on interpersonal family relationships in which religion has presence and place. The reality these figures refer to does not require that their surfaces be smothered with literal visual details. Such details come and go, are here and there strategically placed in the work. The full sense of the real comes more from the gestures the figures make within themselves or toward one another. There are elements but no preponderance of caricature and stylization in these figures. There is no glamour. Yet some kind of glory inhabits them.

The sense of ordinary domestic reality is furthered by the ways the crafted figurative elements are set within or astride and so supported by actual, found and appropriated elements i.e. bed, wardrobe, table, shrine, shelf etc. These conjunctions and juxtapositions heighten the surreality in the work by stretching its range of contrasts from the ordinary plainness of such found objects to the extraordinary, those aspects of the figuration that surprise and puzzle us far beyond what we normally might expect to handle.

REPRESENTATION – EMOTIONAL

The Question: what emotions, feelings, moods does Janet Mullarney's work refer to or seem to refer to, arouse or express?

The figures possess an aura of dignity. They seem set in deep repose and stand before us in reverence. The work is warm, open-handed and open-hearted, itself vulnerable. It is not cool, cerebral. It is committed, involved, complicated, messy and nervous, yet rigorously disciplined, lean and tough. Part of its toughness resides in the irony that much of the work engages in at a literal level, with titles themselves: *The Perfect Family* is far from perfection; *Dietro le Quinte*/(*Behind the Scenes*), *Raising Dragons*, *Red-handed*, all carry forward feelings of resentment, complaint and grievance in ironic recall of past hurts. But this irony is a witty minor theme; a counterpart to the major theme of compassion and forgiveness. So the work is tender as well as tough. I once heard a judgement made by a well respected curator about some of Mullarney's earlier work that identified in its emotional range the quality of pathos, taking this to mean feelings of pity, sadness, or a tender melancholy.

This judgement was based only on evidence provided by photographic documentation and though slides always hide as much or more that they reveal about works of art, there is in the literal visual references Mullarney makes the hint of such emotion. But however much Mullarney's work arouses feelings of pathos (from the Greek pathos: suffering) there is in it the harsh, obstinate, unrelenting presence of the materials out of which her work is made

and this, unrecordable by photography, forms a counterbalance to any potential the representation might have for emotional indulgence or exaggeration. In these and other certain ways the works seem determined to amaze and confound as though set out for us in a theatre devoted to surprise, contradiction and puzzle.

PRESENTATION

The Question: what is actually physically given to us in Mullarney's works in terms of materials, media and design behaviour?

The list is long: wood, plaster, metal, bronze, papier mâché, cloth, wallpaper, foam, alabaster, mirror glass; and all the other varied materials brought into play by the expropriation of domestic objects. Paint, pencil, collage, gilding, patination and kinetic devices.

Calling all this "mixed media" does not accurately describe the material basis on which the representation in Mullarney's work rests. The various disparate materials and media brought together in association, juxtaposition and coincidence, each of them keeping its own character while at the same time joining in the overall effort to be something or say something in common. Nothing is hidden, nothing is covered up or overlaid or buried beneath or cancelled; however large or small the amount of any particular material put to use, it maintains its own distinctive quality and yet works openly toward the common good, that overall sense that chooses, decides and drives the image on its way toward and audience. In a way another sense of this exhibition's title, *The Perfect Family*, may be found at this level and in this inclusive approach to the presentation of materials and media often making of them a family well nigh perfect.

What encourages each material and medium to take its own place in the sun is found in Mullarney's sense of design, in the roles she has the elements play, in the overall way she makes the design behave. In many if not most cases an artist's sense of design tends to favour certain elements at the expense of others. In fact most successful design behaviour depends on developing a strict hierarchical arrangement of elements with some, often the majority of them, given only minimal roles to play in how the design does its job.

Consider line, shape, tone, colour, texture. In many artists' work line and shape do relate but one or the other takes the upper hand; shape and tone are very often given major roles at the expense of colour and texture – if texture is given a major role the importance of colour is often minimised. As artists put these five elements together in various ways another five elements come into play:

form, pattern, space, structure, and composition; but here too a hierarchical arrangement is the norm with some elements dominant and others, often the majority, held in check. It is rare to find an artist who gives importance to all the elements, who does not relegate some of them to standby roles in design behaviour. It is rare because it is hard to do successfully since it complexifies and thus increases the risks of diffusion, confusion and contradiction. To do so successfully requires a rigour and discipline beyond that employed by artists who deliberately limit the scope of design from the start. Now the world as it happens is full to overflowing with the activity of what we call design elements. Any artist who responds to that profusion of design behaviour by accepting the situation and working with it instead of arbitrarily limiting it has a great potential advantage: the resulting work will tend to have the fullness of life itself.

CONSIDER

Line: line in Mullarney's work is persistently active, alive in contours and at edges where shapes, often the result of changes in material, confront each other and jostle for position; line is also there to be found on its own out in the open as the pencil continues to mark the way for the tools that have ceased carving the wood or plaster.

Shape: fundamentally important since Mullarney's work is after all sculpture. But shapes here become stretched out in unusual ways: from the raw blocks of wood assembled but left unworked, to the partially carved, to the detailed and finished surfaces that receive full transforming treatment.

Tone: set out in highly dramatic contrasts but better, more comprehensively and properly understood as a constituent of colour itself.

Colour: along with tone, sharply struck contrasts of hue, of intensity and of temperature altogether establish a full array of colour behaviour.

Texture: of central importance; every material found or fashioned and every medium used and every tool in leaving its mark openly declares its textural character. Moving from one surface to another, from one part to another, engages perception in a constant active play of textural contrasts.

Form: as it is sculpture form is a central concern but from that centre form, as does shape, goes off in many directions; in the found and fabricated, in the raw and the finished, in the changes in scale within a single work and from one work to another. All these contrasts show form to be abundant.

Pattern: also central in making design decisions; each material and medium establishes its own characteristic pattern; and pattern as in wallpaper can be found directly, candidly, collaged to shape and form.

Space: as with all the best sculpture these works are not set down in a space but rather they themselves make space; they make it palpable by virtue of their commanding material and design presence.

Structure: can best be estimated by how well the inner small scale design decisions relate to the overall outer large scale extent of the work; the way the various parts of a building may or may not be integral with the overall architectural presence of the building. Mullarney often appropriates domestic furniture to emphasise the need for this structural relationship. *Halo* is itself a room in which those who enter become incorporated, embodied, or empowered and complicit in her structural plan.

Composition: I take this design term to mean the measure of how well all the elements have eventually brought them together, made them cohere and work toward being whole. Raising all the design elements to a high degree of active, significant involvement as Mullarney does in her work means that composition itself has a major role to play in how the work succeeds. This is where discipline comes in to rigorously control the profuse activities and abundance of contrasts let loose in the process of making complex design decisions.

None of Mullarney's design work is easy. The ability to tolerate so much complexity, to even encourage it, and revel in it is not a commonly found approach in contemporary art practice. It leads me to consider the third set of questions, ones that try to get closer to the people, including Janet Mullarney herself, by, through and for whom these works of art are made.

THE AUDIENCE

The Question: Since works of art are only made by people for people it is necessary, if a comprehensive understanding of her work is to be gained, that the question be asked: *who constitutes the audience for Janet Mullarney's work?*

The answer leads to much complexity. The first audience is Janet Mullarney herself. The artist is always the first audience for her/his work of art; the first to listen, the first to respond to what happens as a work of art is made. So who then is Janet Mullarney? What does her work say about her? Evidence can be found in the work

itself and also gleaned from biographical details such as those included in this catalogue. People who know her well will of course answer the question differently than people who have yet to meet her or listen to her work. But the answer to this question deals in further complexities. Janet Mullarney is not alone, all by herself, as the first listener; she is not single but a multitude. She carries within her, as do we all, the presence of people we have known or met: family, friends, teachers, mentors, lovers, colleagues, critics, acquaintances, strangers even enemies. Their presence impinges on us, on her, influencing decisions, making suggestions, giving warnings through the memory of the examples they set us, the things they did and said and left undone, unsaid. Artists, all of us really, always have these presences with us when dreaming and when wide awake.

The question here then is what does her work have to say about Janet Mullarney and her presences?

Her work is concerned with family matters; her family and ours too by extension in the way the older generation influences often unknowingly, insensitively, the younger generation, the child, and how the mistakes and resulting hurts handicap life and turn it into a struggle, sometimes life long, for personal survival.

In the sense I have of her concern I do not find any emphasis on exposing guilt and demanding punishment and compensation but rather, the attempt to get clear just what has happened so that self-healing can take place with some chance of success. So her work contains perhaps elements of exorcism and therapy. What in her life is private to her she assumes, rightly I think, to be in one way or another something we all have a stake in; we all have to get such things as happened to us as clear as we can for the sake of our own survival or else we remain prone to suppress the memory of these experiences and then go on to repeat the very examples set for us that caused us so much pain.

Mullarney is also concerned with religion; its formative often negative influence embedded in the examples our elders have set us; and its widespread presence often positive, overt or hidden, in the ordinary ways people live day by day. The experience of having spent most of her maturity in Italy has given her a tolerance and empathy for the latter manifestations of religion which for her overlay the resentments built up over religious practices she was subjected to in her formative years in Ireland. Her work exudes a reverence for life that cannot be accounted for by secular, consumerist values. As her work clarifies her past and ours perhaps if we choose to listen, it will, I think, increase in her the fruits of

reverence. She of course knows of these possibilities; or else why would she build for us the *Halo*?

She may well continue and eventually eclipse the example set by Oisín Kelly in this matter of reverence, an example he set that still finds very few followers in contemporary art practice. The hurt and pain dealt with in Mullarney's work also extends significantly to her recent experiences in fighting and surviving a life threatening disease. Her current work witnesses the faith that maintains her in the teeth of such adversity.

Finally there is the noteworthy matter of how Mullarney's work, so deeply centered on the figure of the human being, handles the sexuality of those figures. Certainly the sense of the erotic as amusement and entertainment is not found in the work nor is its counterpart a sense of guilt or shame that is either deplored or enjoyed. Yet sexuality seems fully expressed in the gestures her figures make as they move with grace and make room for us in their sense of space. In this regard as well her work has the vitality that also gave Oisín Kelly's work the same sense of the fullness of being.

Janet Mullarney no doubt holds opinions on matters of politics and issues of social justice and human rights. They are brought to bear on her behaviour as a human being, as is normal and so their presence may be felt in her work but as far as I can tell she does not place her work in the service of such concerns. No propaganda, no polemic, no special pleading, no judgemental position is taken on such issues in her work. And as far as I can tell there is no attempt to pander, to seduce, amuse, or entertain the audience.

Very many contemporary artists do place their work in the public arena in ways they calculate will arouse emotion that will support such issues, such ends. They work away at their art with an eye cast over their shoulder in constant estimation of the effects their working decisions have on their audiences reactions; the public state of awareness of what they do and say is of prime importance; the measure of the success they seek takes account of this.

Mullarney, too, works away with her back to the audience but so fully concentrated on what is to hand and heart that she seems oblivious to the audience behind her; she certainly does not base her decisions on ongoing calculations of the effects she wants to arouse in her audience.

Mullarney's work simply concentrates on the making of art, the activity of consciously expressing herself – feelings, emotions,

thoughts – through materials, media and design in the doing of which she meets herself (surprise) and discovers who she is, once again made new. This is the process described in psalms as the singing of a new song.

So the audience standing there looking over Mullarney's shoulder must be content to be ignored by her until such time as she has done all she can to ready her work for exhibition. Then they might find themselves (surprise) already in her work if they take advantage of her initiative, her song, and recreate in themselves the process of singing it.

A last question: who can be said to constitute the other audiences for Mullarney's work?

Attempting a full answer would involve endless complexity. Of all the concerns that must be dealt with in building a comprehensive sense of a work of art, the area of the audience is by far the most complex. It is also the area most often taken for granted by artists and writers on art. I as one member of her audience have tried in the above to emphasise the role of Mullarney herself as her own first audience; those present to from the past, the presences as I referred to them, are part of her but also in ways part of another audience: she is in constant discourse with them, their presence is embedded in the work. What of some of the other, outsider audiences? Who might they be? Who do I imagine would like her work, feel drawn to; who do I imagine would dislike it, hold it of little account?

In the latter case I would place those people who expect contemporary art to be committed to public issues of a political or social nature or conversely those who prefer that contemporary art provide a relief, and antidote, to the oppressive weight of all those public issues by providing some form of distracting amusement. I imagine too that people would shy away from Mullarney if they were put off by work that is so consciously and positively body centered. After all, the consumerism that surrounds us centers its hard and soft sell on depictions of the body; not at all in the way Mullarney does of course, but still there are hostile attitudes toward the body's presence in contemporary art practice that shun its presence unless the body is somehow shown degraded, demeaned, perverted or humiliated. Consumerism in its blatant hedonistic exploitation of the human body provokes this perverse hatred of it. Then too, anyone who expected art to provide clear cut emphasis on some form of literal/visual representation, on linear, sequential and connected narrative displays would be frustrated and put off by

Mullarney's mosaic-like juxtapositions of material, media, design and literal/visual reference.

Those clear but oblique references her work make to matters religious, to Madonnas, saints, haloes etc. are enough to stop some people from listening any further to what ever else her work might say about the human spirit. Enough about those who will not listen, what about those who will? Who might constitute an accepting, interested and supportive audience for Mullarney's work? They are people who know intuitively or otherwise that art, whatever ends it may be made to serve has nothing to do with the arousing of emotions either for practical value in living as in propaganda, polemics, instruction and argument or for immediate consumption as in amusement or entertainment.* Rather, art properly understood is a search for and discovery of who we are as persons, a conscious activity in which we express ourselves and in so doing find our who we are.

Everyone of us is engaged in this activity each in her/his own way. Mullarney's work is her way. And she does it well enough to set us an example. What she expresses, and in so doing finds, is larger than herself; there is room for this other audience: they will find it and themselves in it by a creative collaboration with Mullarney herself through her work.

The body, in all its fullness, the human being embodied is obviously central to this activity of expressing ourselves and in so doing finding out who we are. The listening audience for Mullarney's work will recognise how fitting and proper it is to have work so directly devoted to how the body, the being, celebrates survival. The listening audience necessary for Mullarney's work has to have full regard for the distinctive ways both the left and right brain behave. An exclusive bias for the left brain will disadvantage the right and close the door to Mullarney's work.

And finally, the listening audience best able to support the work of Mullarney will have to realise somehow intuitively or otherwise that religion, clearly understood today to be a major contributor to the large and small human tragedies of remote and recent times, will never disappear just because it's bid. Nor should it. Like sex. The more it is denied, repressed, suppressed, ignored, trivialised the more it is with us in ways that subvert its opponent's original intentions.

Works of art devoted to people, to find human being, to the body have to find room for the presence of religion, to tolerate it if not

provide it welcome. Mullarney's work in this as in so much else provides in its full acceptance of living just such a welcome.

I join with this listening audience in saying: *God bless the work!*

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*R.G.Collingwood, the Principles of Art, Oxford University Press, 1938