

# From Janet Mullarney's fairy tale realm to Paul Seawright's living nightmare

Mullarney sets memorable characters loose on stage; while Seawright shows us malevolent landscapes

## **My Mind's I – *Janet Mullarney***

Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda

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There's a fleet-footed, magic realist character to Janet Mullarney's sculptures. They're playful, but with a sharp, dark edge. **Patrick T Murphy** accurately likened them to Angela Carter's writing. As with Carter, enter Mullarney's world and you fall through an imaginative trapdoor into another realm of fables and fairy tales, where animal characters stand in for humans and meaning is cut loose from the bounds of convention. Her acrobats and performers evoke the heady, heightened space of the circus ring.

For *My Mind's I*, she has assembled a large cast of sculptural characters – young and old, human and animal – and set them loose on a huge stage. It is composed of four adjoining, spacious lightboxes, forming an extensive arena or piazza, a brilliantly illuminated public space we can move around at will and, godlike, observe their triumphs and tragedies, their nobility and silliness, dreams and delusions.

Each of the figures is doll-sized. This from a naturally gifted

sculptor and an adept carver, who has made larger-than-life figures with apparent ease. “I wanted to get rid of Sculpture with a capital S,” she comments. She is recoiling from the monumental, which she feels tends towards grand formality. And sure enough, there’s great fluency and freedom to the way she marshalls her ensemble.

She doesn’t over-elaborate anything or make a fetish of finish. Some carvings are briskly approximate, concluded with a few dabs of paint or drawn lines. Likewise with modelled figures: they can be meticulously detailed or broadly sketched. She’ll use paper cutouts and pieces of cardboard packaging, shaped and stapled into place. Fabric might be carefully tailored, or just a piece of cloth used like collage.

Everything is beautifully elegant and precisely observed. Every pose is exactly expressive. Once she captures the essence, she doesn’t keep going. The challenge is to nail it, then leave it be. The result is exhilarating, liberating and generous. She doesn’t try to disguise the nuts and bolts of how it’s all put together. It is completely demystified and approachable.

Her anthropomorphic animals are just that. “I found that I could use an animal to express human feelings, or traits, or character, more effectively than trying to represent someone being timid, say, or mean. Then you’re into describing an individual human personality, which is not what I want to do.” Arranged on the lightboxes, her characters form numerous tableaux. Dramas are played out, but never pinned down. She is not telling stories per se. “In that sense, I don’t quite know what’s going on,” she explains. “And I don’t want to know.” *Until April 11th, [highlanes.ie](http://highlanes.ie)*