

# My Minds |



**William Gallagher**  
tracks Janet  
Mullarney's  
installation from its  
debut at the Highlanes  
Gallery to its current  
setting in the Butler  
Gallery, Kilkenny

A stage show. An idea rich in possibility of meaning: theatre; revelation; performance; spectacle; risk; delight. Janet Mullarney's new exhibition is, and explores, all these and more – its innovative, dramatic installation reinventing sculptural presentation within her art, and its staging open to transformation as it moves to the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny from its launch earlier this year at the Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda.

As a church converted to a gallery, the Highlanes made a charged setting for Mullarney's work, long-engaged with themes of power, authority and freedom. Centre-stage in the darkened interior stood a large lightbox, illuminating a troupe of twenty-four figures or objects that evoked a stream of diverse associations: a stage; a catwalk; a circus; puppets; toys (Fig 3). In the low glow, as viewers we became conscious of our scale and theirs, of relationships between adult and child, God and human, the player and played-with. What might be mistaken for (indeed even flirted with) whimsicality was in fact the reverse, a conscious inversion, even transgression, of the 'serious', a carnivalesque misbehaviour with boundaries, in art, in family order, in power relations. Mullarney has repeatedly battled constraints ranged against the imagination – church, family, fashions in art – and it has forged her authority as a voice. From sculptures to setting, this exhibition magically unmoors our given sense of scale, of hierarchies, of ourselves. Big becomes small, the fragile grows powerful. Our perspective veers from adult to child, knowing to not knowing.

Mullarney has proved her prowess with large sculpture and traditional (even classical) form. Her last big exhibition, at the RHA in 2010<sup>1</sup>, successfully negotiated its cavernous main gallery, with pieces ranging across domestic to grand scale. She describes now, however, her wish to take the big S out of sculpture, to move away from 'masculine' connotations of monumental form, even while respecting its masters, like Serra.<sup>2</sup> Instead, this work takes its authority from her own artistic beginnings as a child, making small, dressed puppets, among a family of 'makers' – a grandmother creating stuffed toys, her father's workshop, her mother's skill in sewing. Her child's play now has the perspective of adult experience, memory, insight, but the same unabashed desire to make spontaneous, wondrous creations, to revel in virtuosity, to be unbound. She wants sculptures to have the expressive freedom of drawings. In the RHA the viewer moved physically among the works; space here is as much psychological. The doll-sized figures have a fierce self-possession, like children, a



**1** Janet Mullarney  
Photo Brian Meade

**2** *LOST TRIBE 2* 2014  
cardboard, wood & acrylic  
paint 49x19x15cm.  
*UNDIGESTED* 2014  
23x16x23cm  
Photo Torquato Perissi

**3** Installation view at the  
Highlanes Gallery  
Photo Ros Kavanagh

**4** *A TRIPTYCH, SELF-  
PORTRAIT PICASSO'S  
DAUGHTER* 2014 wood and  
ink 27x22x18cm  
Photo Torquato Perissi

strength in smallness. As galleries grow bigger with gigantist artworks to fill them, Mullarney's grow smaller, suggesting the greatest space is that of the imagination. There is a compelling quality of leadership in this emphasis on the complexity within the little and intimate, on the power of fragility, on the need for lightness and wit. Her title itself, 'My Minds I', communicates an interweaving of visual and conceptual, seeing and expressing, ego and self, of playful inversion and multiple meaning, as well as continuity.<sup>3</sup>

Many themes are compressed here: family (again); fatherhood; mothering; nurture and threat. A dialogue of light and shadow informs both figures and installation. The light of revelation and insight against shades of pain, mortality and power – only occasionally named (one is *Absolutely Untitled*). Picasso – the god-like power who overshadowed rivals and nature – appears as just one of the many interconnected streams of ideas. In *Picasso's Daughter I* Janet reinvents the titan's portrait of his son, assuming the pose and harlequin garb (Fig 4), as she sits poignantly awaiting acceptance, and attention (a key theme in her art). She sees beyond the commanding forms of the original (a print of which

PLAY AND WORK; TOYS AND ART; CHURCH OR GALLERY - MULLARNEY HAS EVOLVED A POWERFUL COMMAND OF BOTH METAMORPHOSIS AND DISSOLVING BOUNDARIES, RECASTING INSIGNIFICANT TOYS AS TOOLS FOR ADULT MEANING

Janet's father had pinned up), describing a child trying to be what his father wants. She returns something of the voice 'appropriated' by Picasso in his devouring of children's art as he created what Breton called his 'tragic toys for adults'.

Play and work; toys and art; church or gallery – Mullarney has evolved a powerful command of both metamorphosis and dissolving boundaries, recasting insignificant toys as tools for adult meaning. Creativity in her work is both transformative and healing (she has placed installations in several hospitals). Her training as a restorer, nurturing the work of others, her travels in India and Mexico and understanding of their artistic traditions, and her long domicile in Italy have often rightly been cited as influences on her work. But this show is just as likely to enrich our reading of other art, like the outsiders of Jack Yeats, the God's-eye viewpoint in Bruegel's *Children's Games*, or the glassy stage of an Avercamp ice scene. ■

Janet Mullarney 'My Minds Eye' Butler Gallery, Kilkenny until 13 December 2015. All images © The Artist.

William Gallagher, lecturer and occasional writer on art, has taught at the Crawford College of Art, UCC and TCD, worked at the RHA and was curator of the Glebe House and Gallery, Donegal.



3



4

1 Outstandingly reviewed in these pages by Clíodhna Shaffrey, 'Through a Glass Darkly', *Irish Arts Review*, Autumn 2010, pp. 80-84.  
2 In conversation with the author.

3 Accompanying the RHA exhibition in 2010, was a short filmed interview ending with her expressed faith that 'what you have in your mind's eye will come out – and it's wonderful'.