

Syncretics and Spirituality

Irish Art Practice and the Art of the Possible

by Suzanne O Shea

Deux femmes artistes de l'Irlande d'aujourd'hui tentent de transcender leurs expériences et particularismes

Both Alice Maher and Rita Duffy grew up surrounded by a strict moral code of social and sexual behaviour. The message both girls received was one of resistance to difference and tenacity in terms of the way everyday life was lived.

irlandais et de créer un art à la portée universelle.

There are many well-documented political differences between Northern and Southern Ireland, but the similarities between two Catholic girlhoods at opposite ends of the Island of Ireland are remarkable. Both Alice Maher and Rita Duffy grew up surrounded by a strict moral code of social and sexual behaviour. The mores of the strong Catholic tenant farmer of the nineteenth century constituted the identities of their parents and grandparents (see Foster) and the message both girls received was one of resistance to difference and tenacity in terms of the way everyday life was lived.

Duffy's childhood was haunted by the legacy of the partition of the Island of Ireland and by the civil and religious strife that has ensued to this day. Hers was a childhood of Orange banners and stonings, of silence and secrecy. Hers was a politics of positioning long before she could understand the term and her earlier work was consequently fiercely reactionary, earning her the title of "Troubles Artist"—a phrase widely used by the media to describe the political referents in the work of Northern Ireland artists.

Maheer's positionings were no less political, but more personally so, particularly in terms of her constituted sexual identity. Early paintings show her driving the cattle home, surrounded by Marian iconography, struggling to reconcile the casual intimacies and mean secrets of a rural farmland with the pristine Virgin Mary, Mother of Sorrows, Tower of Ivory. Similarly, Duffy's helicoptered Virgins, her

strange-faced "Marys" seek to explain this impossible ideal of her girlhood, this perfect, unendurable presence. Both artists attempt to sexualize the Virgin in an effort to approach her, to humanize her. The impoverishment of their spiritual communication with the symbols of their faith preoccupies both artists, never more so than in Duffy's haunting painting of herself, anoraked, hooded, crouching before the altar of the Virgin, seeking restitution for some childish misdemeanor. Blind faith.

In a recent triptych, entitled "Awakening" (1997), Duffy images her mother, crouched beneath the stairs of their modest home, wearily contemplating the pre-pubescent Duffy as she in turn, crouches from the strange sensations rocking her newly hormonally-active body. Duffy remembers feeling unclean, ashamed of her own body and its' awakening sexuality.

Maheer, in her wonderful 1990 drawings from "The Thicket," explores similar territory but in a more abstract way. Her images are of girl-children, splayed on that "shelf of sensation" constituting a state of being, "between states." Maheer's girls are unselfconscious in their contemplation of the vast space inside their own heads, in their desire for the lost

part of themselves, a part that has not been socially constructed. They are more fearless than Duffy's self-portraits, more disposed to rely on inner strengths, more cerebral and complex. Emotion is distanced for Maheer, perhaps, of necessity.

Duffy finds it more difficult to hide her anger, to temper her lively subversions. In "Dancer" (1995) an adolescent Duffy dances frenziedly, ringed round by a highly polished dining room table, while helicoptered statues of the Virgin whirl bizzarely around her head. The tragi-comic, confrontational keynote of Duffy's work has not really changed with the years. For Maheer, the narratives are more subdued, more blurred around the edges, yet no less tragic. Both artists are seeking an enunciative position within parallel discourses.

Both use the language that comes most easily and as they come from different sides of the political divide, albeit similar traditions, their distinctive modes of practice are instructive.

Maheer tends towards installation and mixed media work. Her surfaces are often very thickly layered, intricately worked. She sees her work as labour intensive, a hacking through to an elusive essence that may be joyous, celebratory: "I consciously allow the unconscious to inform my work."¹

Her recent work concentrates on the cerebral feminine, the space inside her head which has not altered greatly since girlhood. It is only within this space, unseen from outside, that Maheer feels truly visible, truly able to enunciate her way of being as a woman artist in Ireland at the close of a century of perhaps greater change than man has ever known. She has watched the commodification of her culture, the demystification of her myths, the revisions of her history. Such changes were unthinkable in the early decades of her life and very often, it is as a child of the '50s and

'60s that she inhabits the spaces on her broad canvas—a child who believed in fairy tales, in the shape-changing magic of her oral heritage, and a child who spoke English with a Gaelic syntax and inherited her forefather's republican traditions. It bothers her that Irish linen adorned the homes of the British Empire, so she uses flax often in her installation work, underlying the immense possibilities of material in its raw state, a cryptic comment on colonialism. In some recent work, paintings and material objects are juxtaposed, pointing up the artificial divisions between cultures, places, things. The immense possibilities of the everyday is her theme, possibilities inherent in each

one of us, if only we can be truly present to ourselves, aware of the communicative powers of the self.

Similarly, Duffy emphasizes cross-cultural communication, but her work is less abstract in terms of a willingness to admit personal complexities. Emphasis is placed on the confessional, the immediate. Ruminations take second place to action, to a possible solution. This is Duffy's heritage—prompt action in a state of siege; interventions in an old story that seems to have no end.² Her "Mother Ulster" (see page 33) and "Mother Ireland" (see page 32) as well as her "Judith Ward series" tended towards the more immediately topical, and it is only recently, that she has tended to

look inwards, to a more transcendental, universal space where the terrain might not be reducible, where the language may have to be learned or even invented. In "Becoming" (see page 57) a young mother bends over a colander, straining not a vegetable, but a tiny bloodied baby. There is new emphasis on labour, the labour of creativity, of motherhood. Unlike Maher, Duffy is a mother of two sons and has struggled to continue working while raising them. She is terribly concerned to give them a less politically fraught, more joyous childhood than her own, and though her paintings and drawings record her own life for them, there is a wistfulness in more recent work, towards remembered ideals and lost youth. Her surfaces are more worked: particularly striking is a textured image of an aran jumper, the knit lovingly detailed. There is also a striking charcoal drawing of lilies, remembered from a farm where she spent some childhood holidays. She seems to be shoring up resources against a less certain future. Her work is stronger for it.

Maher has always documented taste and texture. Her work has an affinity with the natural world and can be very sensual. Her flaxen plaited hair; swirling medieval tents, and recent "Bee Dress" are all powerful objects in their own right, talismans if you like. She describes the process of making "Bee Dress": "I imagined a mantle made of living creatures. All my familiars in the world." This magical aspect is distinctive in that such created objects admit no barriers of race, creed, or colour. They seem to spring, fully-formed from some hitherto unremembered space, perhaps within racial consciousness, but not bounded by it. "Bee Dress," a dress made of honey bees, has an amazing presence. It is both mythical and contemporary, strange yet wholly familiar. "It contains noise, the labour of the bee."



Rita Duffy, "Dancing," oil on gesso canvas, 122 x 122 cm, 1995.

It is like Alice Walker's vulva-shaped African mud huts, complete in themselves, in their imaginative possibilities. It is like the pull of race memory—indestructible. It makes nonsense of imperialism, of all artificially imposed divisions. It makes the turn towards "syncretism" possible and necessary. How can we understand the pull of the other within ourselves, if we base our lives on dis-

lives. It tells us that where we are most visible to others, we are most powerless within ourselves. It tells us, to use Jean Fisher's phrase, "that where we are most visible, we cannot speak."

Duffy has a dream of converting the now abandoned watchtowers of the border into positive images of the peace process; of commissioning artists, north and south, to work together to create something good to

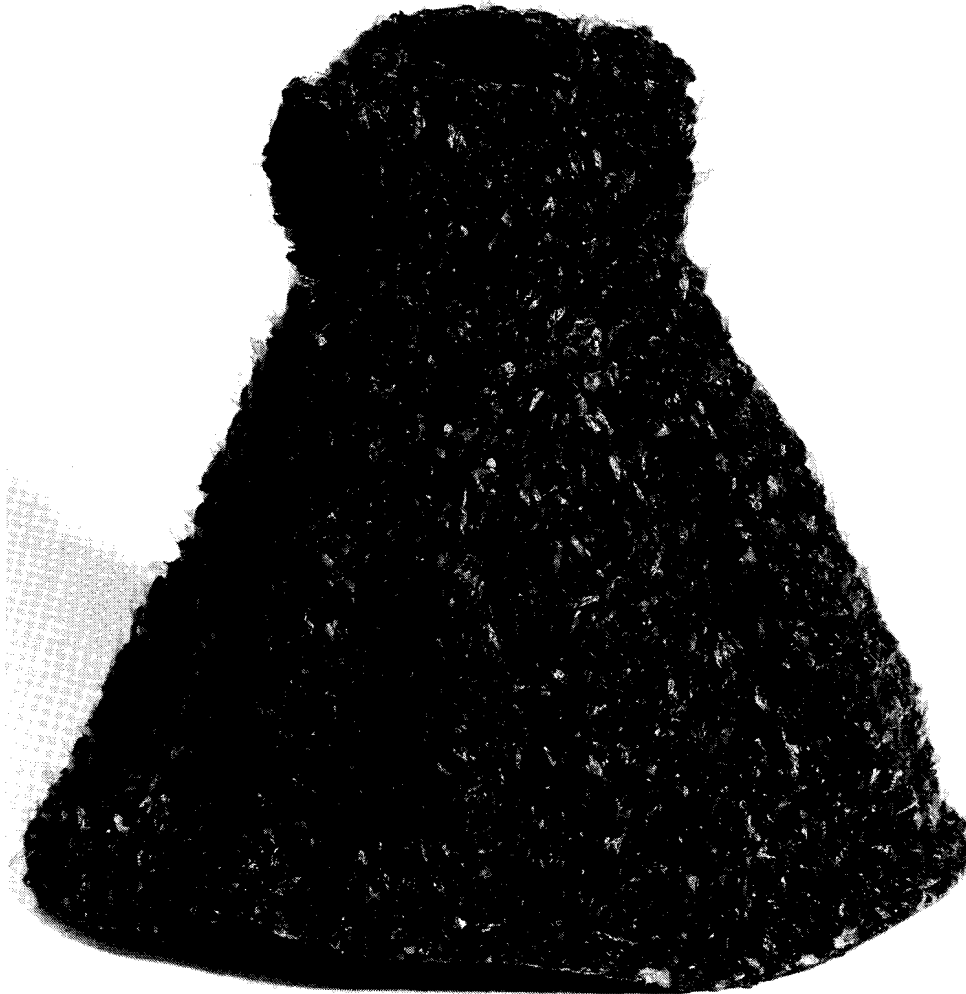
too. Like Maher, she has learned certain mechanisms of survival, personal and political, and she will not surrender them easily.

Maher however, is more European in outlook, and of course, she has had the luxury of time; of not having lived in a state of siege all her life. Her recent contribution to "Imaginaire Irlandaise" underlines her increasingly international stature. Like Cathy Prendergast's, her images have a haunting, universalist resonance. French feminist philosophers Kristeva and Irigaray speak great sense to her, particularly in terms of the concept of "jouissance," or "play." She is not interested in the idea of "woman as muse" though, and is tired of radical and essentialist feminism. "I reject didacticism."

Because Maher has moved very definitely away from the subversions of her earlier work, it is tempting to see her now as a mature artist, but she hates the idea of that: "I'm learning, always learning. I have only been making art for ten years and I have to build up the vocabulary" (Maher).

It's true that these two women are still learning to come to terms with their ways of being in the world, with their distinctive creative interpretations of that world. They are also very good friends, "pals," and sparring partners. Maher affectionately calls Duffy's clan, the "Riverdance Family," a joking reference to the recent transatlantic dancing phenomenon. The iconography of Irish nationalism preoccupies them still; the way Ireland is perceived abroad; the importance of entering the world marketplace, of being less insular.

Duffy recently took some of Maher's paintings to China where they rested easily with the work of artists from both north and south of the border. Maher has exhibited at the Sao Paulo and Venice Biennales and this year, Duffy will exhibit in San Francisco. More and more, the picture presented by these and other Irish artists is of a distinct tradition which has universal significance. Maher has much in common with Irish language poet, Nuala Ni Domh-



Alice Maher, "Bee Dress," honey bees and cotton wire, 13 x 26 x 27 cm, 1994.
Photo courtesy of the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College.

harmony and exclusion? How can we embrace the other, "partially present within ourselves" (Fisher) if we reject the very possibility of the other?

"Bee Dress" tells us another story about the human condition. It tells us of a place beyond difference, that we have lost, but not forgotten. It tells us the story of "the lines of infinite variation" (Fisher) which comprise our emotional and spiritual

look at; something not so bare and utilitarian. She is willing to hack that love out of the partisan bedrock, if needs be. Her energy and enthusiasm have made her arts spokesperson for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. She has travelled the world as an Ambassador for the Arts in Northern Ireland and she is not afraid to effect change. She is tough and can take the consequences. But she is vulnerable

naill and Duffy finds heartsease in the work of her fellow Northener, Seamus Heaney. Toni Morrison has said that "death exists only in the minds of others" and Maher and Duffy with their fellow Irish artists have gone a long way to proving that the same is true of "difference," be it political, cultural, or spiritual. Alice Maher and Rita Duffy celebrate the infinite possibilities of lives lived creatively, beyond difference.

Suzanne O Shea has recently completed her doctorate on Irish visual and literary poetics at the University of Ulster, Belfast. She has published poetry, art critical essays, reviews, and interviews. She is currently documenting the Integrated Artworks Project at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children, as well as preparing a bilingual collection of her poetry for publication.

¹Quotes from personal interviews in this article are available in full in my doctoral thesis (O Shea).

²In the past three years for example, sectarian conflict has escalated once more. Orange marches continue to inflame the Catholic nationalist population of the province each summer.

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DEIRDRE ATHAIDE

Dance of the Soul

The cement walls greet me as I walk down the stair,
The mirrors grimace as I begin to prepare,
The clock haunts me as I put on my shoes,
As if to say I have nothing to choose.

My body warms as I begin to sweat,
The wood beneath me is my latest fret.
I pound and pound until the knockout,
Finally, I have won the bout.

My feet grow wings, I become a bird,
I soar and glide to music rarely heard.
A love has sprouted deep within me,
Here is a world where I can be free.

Some people sew and some people knit,
I choose to dance and I will never quit.

Deirdre Athaide is the 16-year-old daughter of an Irish immigrant. This past summer she danced in the Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne, the World Championships of Irish Dancing, held in Galway, Ireland. This is her first published poem.



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