

Through a **glass** darkly

Janet Mullarney's sculptures perform as metaphors, not portraits, writes
Clíodhna Shaffrey ahead of the artist's dual exhibitions this winter



Janet Mullarney's dual exhibitions this November at the Taylor and RHA galleries, Dublin, present an occasion to view this artist's exceptional work. The exhibitions contains both older and new work and, while substantial in ambition, it is not conceived as a retrospective, rather as a means in which to bring together a comprehensive and singular body of work, where the artist is recycling and revisiting a small number of older pieces and presenting these alongside the new. Her desire is to reveal the close relationships that exist between her different works and an underlying concern that has remained at the heart of her work; namely an interest in the human condition and the frailty that lies within its dark and more malevolent sides. This is a complex subject, which Mullarney has always treated with a degree of contradiction and ambiguity. There is distance and there is humour, but there is also compassion and a feeling for vulnerability achieved through her dexterous use and understanding of a wide range of materials and forms and the obvious pleasure she takes in making.

She has chosen figurative sculpture and more recently video as her form. She speaks of figurative sculpture's sensuality and the '3D sculptures' she sought all over Europe and beyond when she left Ireland in the 1970s. A lineage of art historical references from Gothic carvings and Romanesque sculpture, the Chola art of South Indian temples, Egyptian art, the International Gothic style and the Trecento masters of medieval Europe, whose works are praised for their graceful rhythmic flow of lines are some of her sources. To these we might add the Surrealist's strategy of



the assisted ready-made, the strands within Modernism fascinated by primitive art and postmodernism's penchant for recycling, fragmentation and hybridity. Religious iconography, masked and anthropomorphized figures are used repeatedly suggesting a mysterious or ceremonial function that hint at a mythological event or operate on uncertain borders between aesthetic special objects and ritualized performances.

Her sculptures carry within these strange and timeless presences of animal with human forms, a connection to archaic roots, and primal forces, which seem lodged deep in evolutionary genes and the blueprint of our DNA. They perform as metaphors, not portraits, not subjects, always anonymous so as to operate as allegorical devices of symbolic representation. On perches, trestle tables, found tables, steps, hand-stitched mattresses and pillows, they sit and stand and lie; beasts and mothers,

1 Janet Mullarney with work-in-progress on *HAND ON THE BULL* 2010
Photo L Franchi

2 JANET MULLARNEY b.1952
GLASS MASKS 2006 hand-blown glass 17x21x22cm each
Photo T Perissi

3 *AFTERMATH* 1995 detail plaster, cloth 130x44x108cm
Photo C Marra Collection: Graeve Collection



infant children and lovers, dogs and horses and bulls – sullied and violated, or violating. Their striving for a higher state of consciousness is unhinged as they are anchored to a mortal domain. They appear as fallible, fragile and self-obsessed, but also dominating and powerful. And power, when unbalanced, has its implications; the let downs and disappointments, the not being listened to or the lack of essential protection from those in whom we place our trust, perpetuating a psychology of inadequacy, a vulnerability that plays out again and again. For example, in *Domestic God II* (see *Irish Arts Review* Autumn 2003, p 68) a masked Madonna figure stands close to her child on top of a small table with open drawer; she has purity and grace of form and her dress is richly decorated. The small child, naked and vulnerable, leans against her for protection, but the mother seems absorbed elsewhere, with one hand she points to herself, and in the other she holds a book. She offers no reassurance to her child, no warmth of an embrace. In *Dietro Le Quinte*

(*Behind the Scenes*), the statuesque body with large beast head stands saintly on a perch with two hands clasped as if in prayer, gobbling up tiny legs spilling and struggling out of the beast's clenched mouth. Cannibalism. We might easily think of Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son*, one of his famous Black paintings painted directly onto the walls of his house where Saturn, fearing that his children would overthrow him, ate each one upon their birth. If Mullarney's sculptures are conceived within a fiction – it is a fiction close to reality, and her artworks might address the viewer like self-analysis. Power's

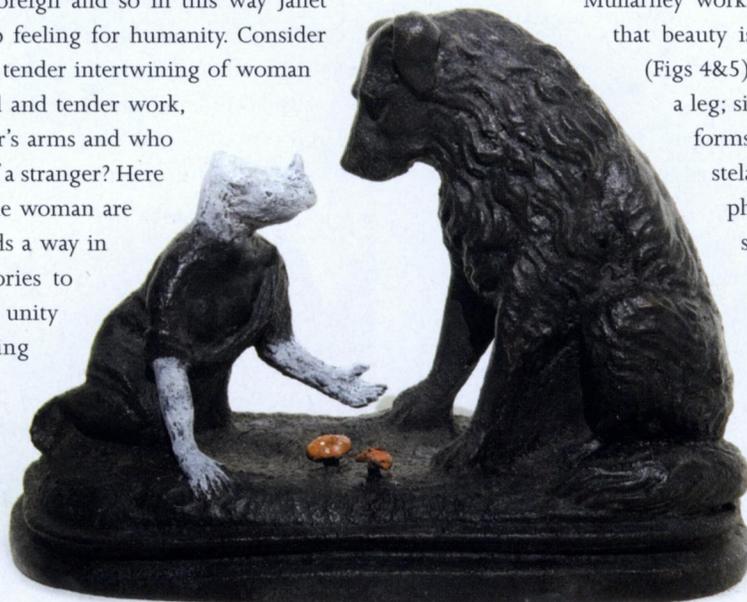


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unbalanced relations are omnipresent and everywhere devouring – religion, motherhood, home-life, struggles between the sexes. Our identities are constructed mostly in relation to some notion of alterity – a separation of self from other. But Mullarney’s works complicate this and don’t apportion blame; they are more ambiguous and paradoxical because they seem to contain the Other, who is us, and as such, she comes close to what Julia Kristeva has so poignantly suggested that ‘we are strangers to ourselves’.¹ If we understand this then perhaps we might also accept that there is no means of knowing another as we cannot know ourselves. The anthropomorphic figures and masked faces hide their identities like Zorro, validate this sense of strangeness in self, make the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign and so in this way Janet Mullarney’s works possess a deep feeling for humanity. Consider her work *Aftermath* – a poignantly tender intertwining of woman and bull (Fig 3). In this powerful and tender work, the lovers are asleep in each other’s arms and who would sleep so easy in the arms of a stranger? Here the red of the bull and blue of the woman are equally strong and Mullarney finds a way in which to cross into these territories to express the possibility of a closer unity within ourselves; something resolved and beautiful is found in an equal peace with the *Other* – animal, human, male and female. Janet Mullarney in her Dark-Ages-craft-adjusted tone reminds me of the New Zealand artist Francis Upritchard



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whose objects and creatures perform in the definition of otherness.

The new works are tender and retain an intimacy. The dogs, used repeatedly throughout her work to describe something elemental, base and dirty, scratching, scrawny and smelly and pretty useless (Fig 6), now have a kinder role. In *Se Fosse Così* (If it was like this) a work that she will make twice, once in bronze for the RHA, and then in wood for the Taylor, is a trilogy with the male dog listening attentively to his companion who is a small and odd hybrid of deer and human. With their noses almost touching their unfolding story belongs in a small world of its own, contained and protected and safe. The dog has matured and is seen caring for another, a different side is revealed, the good side of humanity (Figs 7&8).

Two works show just single body parts: *Hand on the Bull* (the title comes from a particular gesture in Chola sculpture) is a pair of large, smooth aluminum shoulders, quite magnificent and unexpectedly intimate, sensual and oddly complete in the purity of their form (Fig 1). The shoulders, we think, are best when strong for they carry the burden.

4&5 *RECLINING NUDE* 2009
aluminium
170x46x30cm
Photo ©T Perissi

6 *UBIQUITOUS UNDESIRE*
FRIEND 2007 63x35x48cm
sponge/cloth. Photo M Verdi

7 & 8 *SE FOSSE COSÌ / IF IT WAS LIKE THIS* 2007 bronze
9x17x13 / glass 21x13x16 each
Photo T Perissi



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Mullarney works always on the edge of beauty and that beauty is never straightforward. *Reclining Nude* (Figs 4&5) is a standing sculpture in the form of a leg; simplified and essential like the earliest forms of sculpture, an up-right stone or stela. But, of course, it is also a nod to the phallic and a witty twist on the submissive female pose, found in the canon of paintings and sculptures from the 15th century on. And it might too be understood, as she has suggested herself, as an ex-voto to a saint or divinity given in gratitude or devotion. These objects represent the human as fragments of body parts that have the simplicity of the elemental yet somehow seem whole. A shift in tone comes again

in Mullarney's new video works, which are of real people doing extraordinary things. *Cortocircuito* (Short Circuit) captures the men of Italy who sing like birds – chirping, whistling, singing, cooing, tweeting, caw-cawing, their abilities perfected to a tee through years of imitation. These men give long performances of birdsong and are capable of singing falling notes from one side of their mouth and rising notes from the other. So good are they at what they do that we might imagine they have developed a syrinx, the double instrument that sits deep in a bird's chest. Vibrating sounds come from deep inside made through pursing mouths and fast-moving mouths and quivering lips. The intensity with which the men perform is winning. They have a look of birds, these middle-aged manly men dressed in suits for their special occasion to sing like the birds. They are fascinating to watch and Mullarney's film pitches their eccentricity with normality perfectly to portray an image of the men as dignified and oddly ingenious. Men as big as trees transform into birds and there is great tenderness in how she captures their 'metamorphosis' from the self-conscious strength to the fragile openness of these amazing performers.² In a second video work, *Pongal*, Mullarney focuses again on the ingenuity of human creativity and celebrates the pattern maker, whose delicate hand-made patterns are

loss and vulnerability, of uncontrolled urges, self-ruin, repression and humanity, the eccentricities that persist at our base and the survival tactics employed and celebrated, how we hide behind ourselves and are strangers to ourselves, the amalgamation of paradoxes and contradictions residing within, the world of appearances in which we live our lives. Humanity, which is her subject, is cast in many lights – uncanny, Machiavellian, kind, indifferent, base, removed, vulnerable, dark, malevolent, bestial, frightened, odd, and she projects an optimism and expresses hope. In Javier Marías' *What Does and Doesn't Happen*,³ an excerpt from which Mullarney sent me to read, Marías writes about what we overlook, what we tend to discard or forget or omit when we look back at our lives. It is all of these things, the small and inexplicable that might have knocked us off course, or shifted our path, what we did not become as much as what we overcame; it is all these parts of being human that Janet Mullarney wants to express.

In the RHA gallery there will be eight large figure sculptures filling the main space and positioned with plenty of room to walk around and view from all sides. There will be no pictures on the wall: it will be clean and classic. And in Taylor Galleries, nearby on Kildare Street, a different atmosphere is created with sculptures and videos throughout the



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inscribed in a swift circular interlacing ritual scored onto hard ground – a moment of magic invention in this skilful gesture represents for the artist the survival tactics of millions of people around the world, who make much out of little.

In the selection of works that Janet Mullarney has chosen to assemble for her dual exhibition, one imagines that collectively they may allow for many different insights and shifts in mood, energy charges and psychal marks and allow us to think of the fluidity in which we move between different states of being; of feeling whole and fragmented, of

different gallery spaces. Some of these sculptures are remakes or doubles of pieces in the RHA – thus, in some cases, the same work is made twice using different materials or to a different scale but while they resemble each other, they are distinctive, setting the two shows in conversation with each other. ■

Janet Mullarney 'things made' RHA, Dublin 19 November – 19 December 2010; 'things done' Taylor Galleries, Dublin 20 November – 11 December 2010.

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Clíodhna Shaffrey is co-editor with Sarah Searson on a new public art website www.publicart.ie commissioned by the Arts Council and the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism.

1 In Julia Kristeva's *Estrangers à nous-meme* – she argues for a radical examination of self and suggests that the stranger or 'foreigner' is within us. She proposes a solution of essential uncanniness of our existence, predicated on the split between our conscious and unconscious, and seems to involve opting for irony and humour over

fear and terror. See also Richard Kearney, *Strangers Gods and Monsters*, pp. 72-73, Routledge, 2003.

2 Note from the artist 'the first time I came across these amazing performers was in Terranuova Braccioloni, Arezzo, Italy in 1988. Over the years they crystalized in my mind, bringing into focus a

new significance, waiting to be videoed in 2005 at the same fair. This was the 391st year of this competing of *Chioccolatori*.'

3 Javier Marías from a lecture 'What does and doesn't happen', 1995, quoted in 'Lingering and Loitering' by Benjamin Kunkel in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 31 No 23, 3 December 2009 pp. 18-21.