



Real Presse

NICOLA GORDON BOWE discovers aspects of the universal and the exotic united in Janet Mullarney's startling sculptures



1 *Domestic Gods II*
1997 wood, plaster,
wallpaper, mixed
media 210 x 80 x
50cm (Courtesy
IMMA)

2 *Aftermath* 1995
plaster, cloth
122 x 214 x 48cm
(Model Arts and
Niland Gallery,
Sligo)
photo Barbara Egan
(Inset) Photo:
Barbara Egan

3 Janet Mullarney
photo Gino Cipriani

4 *Untitled* 1987
painted wood, cloth
119 x 155 x 107cm
(University College
Cork) photo:
Cristina Marra

n c e s



Over the past thirteen years, Janet Mullarney's wonderful, disturbing images have emerged, unabated, to acclaim in exhibitions and dramatic installations all over Ireland. She has applied her finely tuned, skilful craftsmanship to figurative sculpture of considerable emotional intensity, mirroring our deepest fears, inhibitions and aspirations without any trace of sentimentality.

In articulating powerful, poignant and often ambiguous human and animal forms out of a range of richly coloured, elemental materials: notably carved wood, as well as plaster, earth, wire and improvised found objects, she has always demonstrated an exceptional sympathy with her materials. Aidan Dunne recently described her as one of the foremost Irish sculptors with 'outstanding talent'. Critics have noted the 'aura of dignity', 'tender as well as tough', in her uniquely eloquent figures, which focus on how 'the body, the being, celebrates survival' they emanate compassion and forgiveness', while challenging us with unexpected, ironically aphoristic titles which may suggest guilt, hurt, frustration, pain, fear, memories or simply a state of mind. Rough hewn, sensual and private, they 'speak to us one-to-one', 'symbolic presences relating to an exploration of self', thought provoking in their beguilingly original forms, vibrant colours resonant with emotional symbolism, spontaneous surface treatment, and superbly expressive technique.

Her first solo show here, 'Carving Roots', demonstrated her preoccupation with theatrical images of energy, grace, pathos, vulnerability and a timeless, restless beauty, uninhibited and





5 Detail and background
Random Link 2003
ink, acrylic and carbon
60 x 40cm

6 *Red-Handed*
1998 polychrome
wood, wallpaper,
mixed media,
electric motor
215 x 80 x 50cm
(Artist's Collection)

7 *Waiting for
illumination* 1996
wood, plaster,
polychrome
168 x 61 x 50cm
(Limerick City
Gallery of Art)

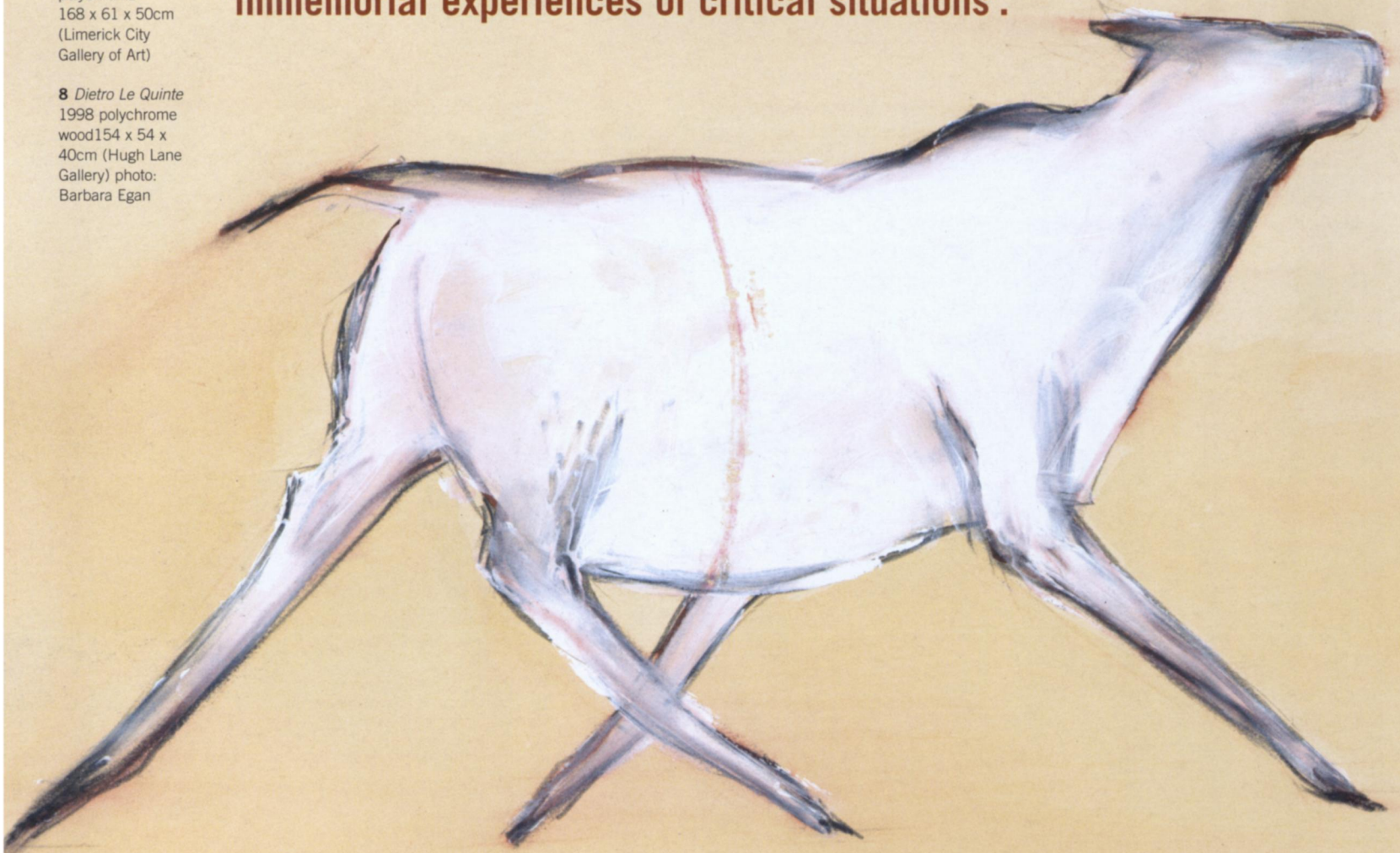
8 *Dietro Le Quinte*
1998 polychrome
wood 154 x 54 x
40cm (Hugh Lane
Gallery) photo:
Barbara Egan

unlocated. It showed her ability to capture a key moment which might escape 'the slow, coarse net of our senses', to articulate forms for 'the shapes of time [which] are the prey we want to capture', and thus confront 'the familiar existential dilemma between meaning and being'.³ Life-sized figures, adorned with face paint and masks, some

naked, some regal in earthy hemp skirts, gestured, soared, recoiled, cowered, defying belief that they were merely carved out of wood. In their ritual poses, they could be interpreted as enacting the eternal predicament of the human condition, seducing the viewer with their sensual, immediate treatment, synthesising memories of primitive, tribal images which lie deep in the subconscious. One such hauntingly graceful dancer (Fig 4) will be the focus of the new art gallery currently being built in University College, Cork (completion summer 2004) by O'Donnell and Tuomey Architects.

Mullarney's forms, and the close associations they evoke, offer us the possibility of transcending the indifferent emotional state of everyday life so that we are reminded of the fundamentally religious, existential crisis which brings into question both the reality of the world and the presence of man in it. Out of a rich treasury of images synthesised from a wide range of sources - Italian, Egyptian, Mexican, Indian - she conjures up powerful images for our time from her own experience, tapping into the collective unconscious, unleashing 'immemorial experiences of critical situations'.⁴ Examples in public collections include her ambiguously connected flying figures, angelic and otherwise, in *The Straight and Narrow* (1991, Irish Museum of Modern Art), her apprehensively swaying sheltered figure, *Waiting for Illumination* (1994, Limerick City Art Gallery), nominated for the 1998 Glen Dimplex Award (Fig 7), the seemingly bandaged, flying figures bearing symbolically laden boats of *Islands in the Sky* carved from sponge (2002, The Ark Cultural Trust for Children) and the sleeping, red-striped pyjama'd figure floating in 'the space between serenity and pain...between sleep and death'⁵ in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast (2002) (Fig

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9). Her studies of the cautious relationship between man and animals include the poignantly harmonised sleeping bull and human in symbolic scarlet and ultramarine of *Aftermath* (1995) Jobst Graeve collection, Niland Gallery, Sligo) (Fig 2), the tentative rapprochement of the self-protecting man and teeth-baring dog in *Alter Ego* (1995, Butler Art Gallery, Kilkenny) and the pacifying figure riding on a fierce but biddable beast, *The Offering* (1996, Office of Public Works). The mediaeval carved wood, swaying madonnas' of her adoptive Italy, like avenging ships' figureheads, have inspired her ambivalently child-munching animal-headed mother in *Dietro le Quinte* 'Behind the Scenes' (1997, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin) (Fig 8), the masked, robed mother clasping the book of knowledge in default of the cringing naked child sidling up to her on a kitchen table in *Domestic God II*, (1997, IMMA) (Fig 1), and the later, similarly enthroned, masked, robed and forbidding mother, mechanically halo'd and *Red-Handed*, distractedly repressing a scarred child (1998) (Fig 6). The blanched, wooden bust of a man, detachedly holding what may well be his own blood-coloured *Thread of Life* unravelling around his shoulders (2001, Cork County Council)

echoes formal Roman and Florentine Renaissance portraits and her earlier, pensive versions of *Just a Distracted*, *Fleeting Thought* (1993). Mullarney dispenses with superfluous details, juxtaposing metamorphosed and symbolic forms, offering us images which may lead us to recognise our own experiences, natures, responses and relationships with others and thus tap into a universally shared meditation through this recollection.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in her installation, *Tutte le Mattine* 'All the Mornings of the World', in the current 'Palazzo delle Libertá' exhibition⁶ at the Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea in Siena (Fig 10). Here, until 14 September, you can descend a small flight of steps leading off the central courtyard where, through an arch leading into one of a series of dark, roughcast tufa cellars, an incandescent beam of light picks out the questing gazes



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9 *Untitled*, 2002
 painted wood,
 119 x 155 x 107cm
 (Royal Victoria
 Hospital, Belfast)

of hundreds of miniature whitewashed terracotta figures. The sparkle of the white Sicilian salt crystal (crystallised tears?) on which they are arranged reflects the light, making it appear revelatory, a dazzling epiphany where the tragedy of life is transformed into the hope of regeneration. Elementally modelled from the clay with a masterfully expressive touch, their earliest versions grew out of the artist's fascination with the unseen hoards inside huge container ships that silently intercepted her light and view when she was artist-in-residence at the Cobh Sirius Project 2000.

In India and in Mexico, where she first exhibited her *Almas y Escaleras* 'Souls and Ladders' in a 2001 solo installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oaxaca, she had seen terracotta devotional figurines literally whitewashed out of existence.⁷ Referring to the ancient Etruscan sarcophagi around her in

Tuscany⁸, where the occupants of each tomb recline, she has assembled a poignant company of souls, each positioned, some watchful, some patiently resigned, on top of the loosely fitting lids of their open tombs, perhaps in the Buddhist state of 'maranasati' (death awareness)⁹. Each diminutive figure differs in size and posture from its neighbour (some are even demarcated in tiny, classifying red-inked numbers), each nurturing a favoured belonging - animals, boats, vessels- while around them lie the simplified shelter/house/temple forms which recur in the artist's work¹⁰. Some reach down, delving into their designated vessel, searching for something they cannot find, something forgotten but vitally necessary for a journey they each know they have to make and for which they have to be prepared. As you go down to look more closely, you are drawn into a pitch-black room

where a single spotlight illuminates one small solo figure, a loosely moulded, raku-fired presence. Here you confront the enigma of human isolation, a figure of being entirely concentrated upon itself.

The artist's forthcoming show, at Dublin's Taylor Galleries opening in October, revolves around cows, revered in three of the places closest to her heart, Italy, Egypt and India. The heroine of the exhibition is a tiny (10cm high) wall-mounted *Sacred Cow*, inspired by the indelible memory of a proud, purposeful creature Mullarney encountered running, pregnant, through the desert in Gujarat. Bronze cast by Jim Flavin at Bronze Art Ltd with creamy coloured patina and a brilliant red Brahmin girdle around her belly, this figure is intended as primordial and also culminative for Mullarney, for whom the cow was exemplary in her determined, essential motivation. Elsewhere, cows of all shapes and sizes hold other cows, feature in linocuts (Figs 5 & 11) or are attached as familiars to ambivalent wall-mounted figures, gargoyles carved and coloured yet headless, perhaps to give a deeper

feeling of their inner presence, to force out their true relationships, or to defy narrative definition. Resting on miniature cushions made from old quilts, hand-sized dog-like animals, loosely but deftly modelled from raku-baked clay, watchfully attend procumbent human forms which are apparently in a state of transformation. These affecting pairs have developed from the *Alme Trovate* 'Found Souls' of last year's Fenton Gallery 'Vaults' exhibition in Cork. Also wall-mounted are 'Angel Gifts', gossamer-thin, child-size muslin straitjackets loosely held by the artist's fingers plaster cast, ongoing expressions of Mullarney's 'From the Cradle to the Grave' series, representing the constricting yet vital impediments which govern each of us in our societal structures. Two glass cases are occupied by tenderly rendered figures made from solidified melted wax. Are these 'treasures' relegated to captive exhibition or talismans created to guide us through life? ■

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The artist wishes to acknowledge the Irish Cultural Relations Committee for their support in facilitating the Siena exhibition.

- 1 Paul M O'Reilly, 'Janet Mullarney - her work put to the question', *The Perfect Family*, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin 1998.
- 2 Aidan Dunne in the *Tribune Magazine*, 2 March 1997, p.35. Franz Boas (*Primitive Art*, New York 1955, pp. 9-12) has discussed the universal craving to produce things that are felt as satisfying through their form, and man's capability to enjoy them as aesthetic experience through the perfection of technical achievement.
- 3 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven and London 1962, pp.18, 32 and 126. Appositely, Kubler writes: 'Every important work of art can be

regarded both as a historical event and as a hard-won solution to some problem'.

- 4 Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality*, London 1968, p.19.
- 5 John Brown, *CIRCA 100*, summer 2002, p.2.
- 6 The ironic title given by the organisers to this group exhibition of installations refers to the present Italian government's promotion of its Fascist image under the title of 'Casa della Libertà'.
- 7 Shri K G Subramanyan believes terracotta has 'a quality that ... folds, fissures, warps, bends like [human] flesh'; see Haku Shah, *Form and Many Forms of Mother Clay*, New Delhi 1985. Indian

tribal people believe the terracotta comes alive at the end of sacrificial rituals.

- 8 Mullarney learnt recently that 100 metres away from these catacombs, small Etruscan sculptures of figures lying in beds with sheets pulled up over them were excavated only two years ago.
- 9 i.e. 'The realization that death is not a single event but is happening in the body all the time at every level' (Nigel Barley, *Dancing on the Grave: Encounters with Death*, London 1997, p.158.)
- 10 Gaston Bachelard has written that 'the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind' *The Poetics of Space*, Boston 1994, p.6.

10 *Tutte le Mattine* 2002/2003 whitewashed clay and salt crystal installation in Siena at Palazzo delle Papesse Centro Arte Contemporanea

11 *Untitled* lino-cut from 'Cow' series 2003 21 x 29.5cm

