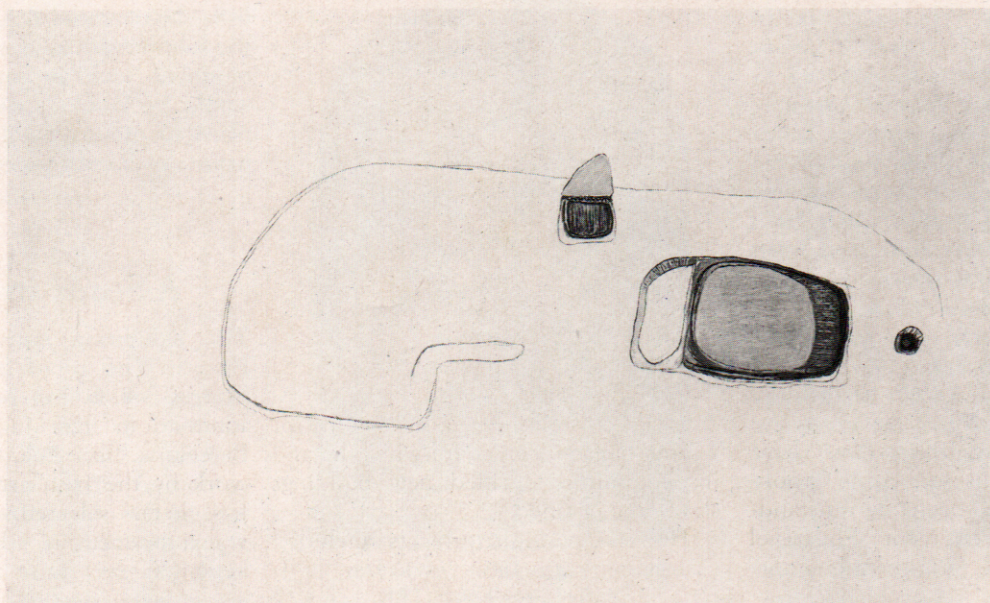


EXHIBITIONS



*Maria Simonds-Gooding, Store Place. 42½" × 59½". Fresco pigment on plaster.
Arts Council Collection.*

Maria Simonds-Gooding

This mid-term retrospective exhibition at the Crawford Art Gallery, in Cork, from May 30 to June 28, began in the nature of an experiment, the first major exhibition of this kind mounted by the gallery itself since the new curator, Peter Murray, took office. The catalogue is a house production, printed and bound at the Crawford Gallery. Rather than a glossy booklet, it is workmanlike and informative, in pamphlet form, with xeroxed photographs, and includes a scrapbook of the artist's career, with reviews over the decade and a half during which she has been working.

"The initial inspiration", Peter Murray writes in his introduction, "sprang from the concept of showing a good number of her distinctive, gesso low-relief paintings in the great white spaces of the two sculpture galleries at the Crawford Art Gallery. These gesso reliefs are almost purely white, with small additions of fresco pigment, and they depend largely for their effect on the conditions of light and shadow where they are hung."

Gloriously successful the experiment was. The sculpture galleries do not accept paintings gladly, partly because of their lighting, partly because of the huge wall area and the dominant tessellated floor. But Maria Simonds-Gooding's paintings, at all stages, have a sculptural

quality about them, minimal or otherwise, that accords well with the tall white expanses. The recent white paintings might be sections of wall themselves. They have the uneven surface of a whitewashed cave, or a primitive house, as part of their integral character.

Some were hung on screens, which broke up the floor area; the etchings received individual attention on a zig-zag screen at the end of the gallery. In the matter of hanging, I thought an opportunity had been missed in not placing the working proof of 'Going into the island' facing the final version. They are both so different, and yet examples of the artist working on a single idea, at two distinct stages.

A few of the early plaster works were shown – aerial views of clochan and man-worked ridge, where the artist was searching for an individual expression of the Kerry landscape, which has continually obsessed her. They are dark, with much moulding, and inset gesso shapes. Then, in the mid-seventies, came a break through, to cool landscapes, such as 'Cultivated Fields' and 'Piece of Vegetation', where the plaster recedes and gold or green shapes are scraped out of the picture's surface. These are outstanding. The most recent paintings are either white, with a pencilled track suggesting the foundation of some habitation or enclosure (they recall the way in which William

Scott, much earlier, reduced still life themes to abstraction), or smaller oils painted in rich green. These strike a level between figuration and metaphor. Turf stacks become gestural, provocative shapes, in 'Baile an Lochaigh Bog': or sheep wander on the hillside nearly invisible from the artist's aerial view, yet safe and self-propelled within their own pale vesica of pigment.

There is more detail in these late paintings; the artist seems to veer away from the lofty detachment where inspiration becomes contemplation, and, like Scott, she images invisibly the unseen.

It is interesting to note that, at every stage, either in graphics or gouache, Maria Simonds-Gooding has kept a representational eye parallel with her abstract approach. Some strong and lovely views of Dingle, in stormy conditions, date from only a few years ago. Her approach in etching is always representational and textural, moving from direct images to a wider statement in latter years. And her graphic gift seems to enjoy itself in these small works, inducing redolent effects of landscape, or recreating the movements of Kerry's *An t-Oileánach*, in her illustrations to that book. The exhibition gave a fine, compact account of her visual growth, in every sense of the word.

Hilary Pyle.