

*Sheep Crossing Over (oil on paper) by Maria Simonds-Gooding*

## Art

### ■ Places

The smallest of the three multiples in Maria Simonds-Gooding's show at the Taylor Gallery, a tiny rectangle of plaster inscribed with her distinctive spare line, measuring a mere three inches by five, is called, simply, "A Place". The same title could be applied to every work in the gallery. Whether using fresco pigment on plaster, oil paint on paper, or making etchings or lithographs, she is invariably concerned with land and people's relationship to it.

Apart from one self-portrait, there are no images of people in her work, but marks of their presence are everywhere. Like Patrick Collins, she focuses on gestures

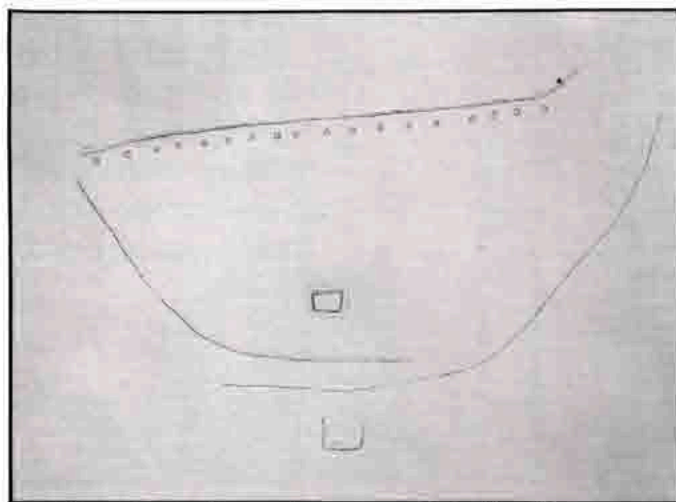
of appropriation and the traces that remain, almost incidentally, as evidence of human presence. The central image is of a field marked out in a void, an enclosure that gives an intimidating environ-

ment a reassuring, human shape. In pictorial terms these tenuous but doggedly determined lines articulate the space.

While Collins has tended to concentrate on a specifi-

cally Celtic notion of place, Simonds-Gooding is a traveler. Born in India, she seems to incline towards arid terrain. The plaster paintings invite associations with the sun-blasted, white-painted buildings of the Mediterranean, and equally with the bare rock of the region. They have the stuttering, speculative quality of excavated archaeological sites, tracing and reconstructing the lines of dwellings and territorial boundaries. The stubborn assertiveness of the marks contrasts ironically, even poignantly, with their fragility: mere scratches on the skin of the earth that will, in time, heal and disappear. These subtle indications of lost civilisation and simple, pastoral lifestyle are delivered with a kind of primitive elegance, fraught with a desire not to clutter things up.

The oils on paper are



*Cliff Dwelling II (fresco pigment on plaster) by Maria Simonds-Gooding*

saturated with a very Irish greenness, a rich, rain-soaked greenness. But the concerns are the same. Masses of land press and enclose fields and tracts of cut bog. Haystacks and grazing sheep have a square-cut, immutable quality, as if they are part of the land, hewn from rock. In a way, these pictures are easier to enjoy than the white plaster compositions. They have a juiciness, a lushness of colour that is immediately attractive. But, oddly, viewed in relation to the white works they begin to seem almost too easy. Stark and spare in their way, they are, comparatively speaking, feasts of colour. Not too difficult, one begins to feel, to make solid, attractive pictures given such a wealth of material, the real challenge lies in the calm, ascetic white paintings, which are all about packing the maximum range of associations into the most minimal of statements.

The Blasket Island etchings occupy a middle ground. They are black-and-white, but they employ a host of textural effects. Forests of marks fill out the dark, looming mass of the island. These works are the closest Simonds-Gooding comes to straight naturalism. Fields, houses, boats are picked out against land and sea. The aerial viewpoint she favours is used to override perspective, in the manner of the best Tory Island primitives. The images have an impressive, brooding power.

The backbone of Simonds-Gooding's art is her perceptiveness in tracing common patterns of human habitation — in the widest sense of reaching an accommodation with nature and ensuring survival — from place to place and culture to culture. Implicit in her work is an appeal for the achievement of a sane, balanced arrangement that will benefit both people and earth. In a world where such modest aspirations and natural resources are both under attack, it is an urgent message.

*Aidan Dunne*

*Maria Simonds-Gooding's exhibition continues at the Taylor Gallery, Dawson Street until May 25.*