

Maria Simonds-Gooding

Solomon Gallery

The boggy, magical landscape of Ireland is Maria Simonds-Gooding's subject matter. She transforms it into a poet's magical inscape — the bogs, mountains, sheep, water of the mind's eye. This is more than fashionable, mock-Seamus Heaney territory: authentic impulses to make landscape richly ambiguous and symbolic of all sorts of internal states of mind are here in lovely profusion.

Titled with typical directness, *Sheep Going Into the Bog* (see colour illustration) gives a first impression of forceful abstract shapes painted with powerful gesture. My second reaction was that here was a still-life of a watermelon (with pips). In fact the rust-red is surely earth, and the 'pips', those curt black brushstrokes, trees. The road or path, or wall perhaps, that comes down sheer vertical on the far right to the very water's edge has the naively expressive perspective we associate with an Alfred Wallis painting or a work by Cecil Collins. Five sheep 'going into the bog' are the antithesis of its boggy blackness. Outlined in black crayon, their pure bodies are the white of the paper showing through. All sorts of different, almost contradictory senses of perspective are adjoined, without any self-consciousness, with no faux naïvete. Thinly, unhesitatingly applying oil paint onto white paper, Simonds-Gooding combines the watercolour freshness of a lyrical nature poet with an almost Expressionist intensity of feeling. Bleak scenes are evoked through bold, vibrant colour, and the very bleakness paradoxically both felt and leavened through a delightfully quirky sense of humour (revealed especially through all those big, white, pathetically struggling sheep).

To a prejudiced eye, her range may appear limited, bogged-down. This is far from being the case. The inscape has its own times of day and night, its moods of quiet and extroversion, austere vistas and crowded ones. This is reflected in a wide variety of compositional and colour arrangements. *The Field on the Clasach* has a unique colour range — a subtle scale of greens, heightened with a just perceptible underlayer of red. The composition has marvellous simplicity. In those natural 'abstractions' — the grey-walled hillside fields — an eerie human presence is introduced by four white sheep on green. They appear like the eyes, nose and mouth of a human face, a rather ancient one. This is not conscious or unconscious Surrealism, but subtle poetry that can be most variously interpreted and felt.

A general fluidity of shape and paint gives these landscapes their own almost marine or shifting quality. *The Bog by the River* shows bogs surrounded by sheep, having the appearance of battleships. *The Potato Field*, with its long sea waves of blue and grey, has something of the billowing emotionalism of the kind we see in Munch, but as always with Simonds-Gooding,

amused affection is inseparable from menace.

Maria Simonds-Gooding was born in 1939 in India. She has lived in County Kerry since 1947. She has an authentic talent which makes nature appear forbidding and intimate, lyrical and bleak at once, and can make the dingiest bog seem sentient. (to Oct 24. See colour illustration) PHILIP VANN



Maria Simonds-Gooding's *Sheep going into the Bog* at the Solomon Gallery. See review