

The Art of Reduction

CATHERINE MARSHALL looks at the evolving artistic expression of Maria Simonds-Gooding and her recent experimentation with tapestry design

1 Maria Simonds-Gooding in front of *Habitation* part of the IMMA Collection

2 *Rising and Descending Fields* 217 x 516cm (Aubusson tapestry, woven by Atelier Bernard Battu, 2004) photo © Richard Johnston



Returning to Dun Chaoin on the Dingle Peninsula after an appearance on Gay Byrne's *Late Late Show* in 1987 Maria Simonds-Gooding met John Joe Sheehy from Dingle. 'Marie Goodings', he said to her, 'They won't forget you. A woman from the West who can get her dog to sing and a painting with nothing in it!' In many ways John Joe Sheehy's comment sums up Simonds-Gooding's career better than that of any art critic. She will be remembered as a woman from the West (the Kerry Gaeltacht, although she is not native and struggles with Irish), for her total commitment to nature (getting her dog to sing) and for the extraordinary reductiveness of her austere paintings, plasterworks and prints.

At the moment of writing, two beautiful plasterwork landscapes hang in the artist's studio. There is nothing unusual in that. She has been making paintings and plasterworks for nearly forty years and her subject matter has always related to the landscape (Fig 1). What is different now is that they are separated by a large tapestry, in, for her, an untypical vertical format. It is the most recent of three tapestries, a new departure in her practice. While other Irish artists such as Patrick Scott and Louis le Brocquy move between tapestry and painting when they want to do something different, Simonds-Gooding has discovered that tapestry offers her a perfect extension to her earlier practice, evolving out of the plasterworks just as they, in their turn emerged from her paintings in the 1960s.

Ever since she began to paint in the 1960s Maria Simonds-Gooding has been totally absorbed by man's struggle for survival in the physical environment. This may reflect her early childhood in India, but it derived its greatest energy from her discovery of the Dingle peninsula in the early 1960s. Forty years later, despite journeys to several continents in search of remote and primitive lifestyles, to such places as Bhutan, Georgia, Syria and New Mexico, it is still the Dingle peninsula that sustains her best, finding there, on her own doorstep as it were, the same age-old evidence of what we are forced to do to carve a living out of the most inhospitable of basic elements.

The beginning of her fascination with Dingle coincided with the realisation that she needed to find a new mode of artistic expression and a new approach to art education. She has always had the gift of recognising those who can best advise her at key moments of her life. At that point it was Cecil King who pointed her towards Bath

Academy, at Corsham in England and, there it was Adrian Heath who gave her the encouragement to draw in a tactile way. The immediate result was painting with a strongly sculptural feel, in which the figure or object is built up in plaster on the canvas and then painted. Recognition soon followed when Roland Penrose selected her for a P J Carroll award at the 'Irish Exhibition of Living Art' in 1970 (Fig 4). By 1978 her tenta-



3 *Fields on the Mountain II*
51 x 38 photo
©Gillian Buckley

4 *Habitation* 1970
plaster, collage and oil 106.68 x147.32cm.
Heritage Gift P J Carroll & Co. Ltd. IMMA Collection

2 MARIA SIMONDS-GOODING *Fields on the Mountain VII*
51 x 38 photo
©Gillian Buckley



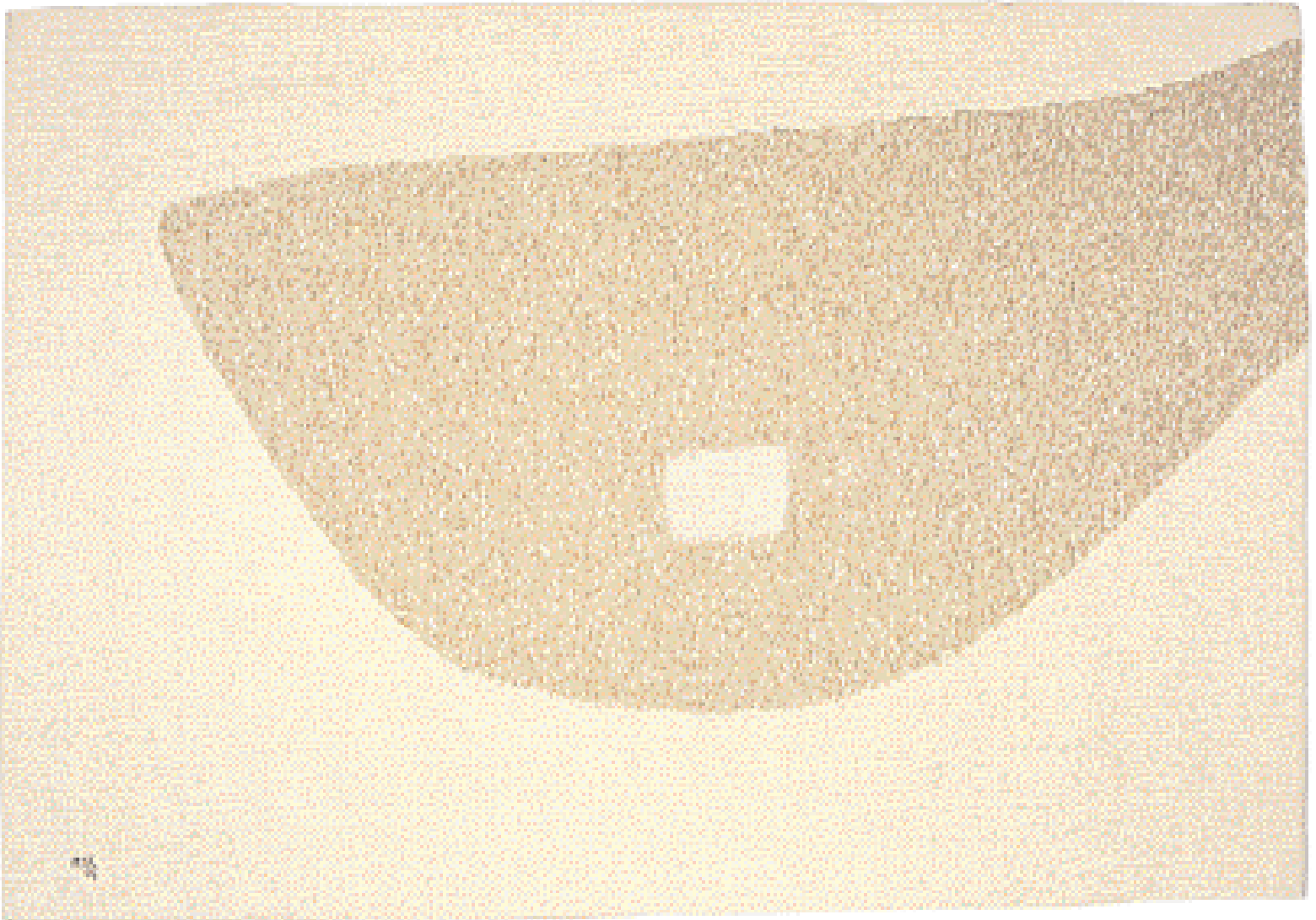
tive experiments with pure plasterwork were spotted by Betty Parsons, (better known for her similar encouragement to the emerging Jackson Pollock and other household names such as Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin and Barnett Newman) who offered her a number of exhibitions in her New York Gallery between 1978 and 1982.

The plasterworks took off but it is fair to say that like many serious artists, success seemed to drive her underground. Simonds-Gooding turned away from the limelight to concentrate on her work for the next decade or so. For a time it seemed as if the general public was more interested in her solitary existence in one of the most picturesque but isolated parts of the Dingle Gaeltacht, her habit of staying on the de-populated Great Blasket Island and her treks into the world's most isolated and difficult places, than in her art. Since the mid-1990s shows at the Taylor Galleries, acquisition by the Irish Museum of Modern Art and participation in a number of important print exhibitions proved that she had certainly not disappeared.

In 2002 she was approached by the architect David Crowley and asked if she would design a tapestry for the Ice Bar in Dublin's Four Seasons Hotel, along with other painters such as Louis le Brocquy, Felim Egan, Sean McSweeney and Gwen O'Dowd. It was her first adventure with this new medium and another, equally energising aspect of the commission was the requirement that the tapestry be vertical in format. After years of working to a horizontal orientation the pull of the perpendicular was liberating, but the making of the tapestry required close collaboration with a tapestry maker, relinquishing control of the fabrication that is difficult for any artist, but agonising for one whose practise is to work in absolute isolation. Simonds-Gooding acknowledges a debt to each of the people she had been privileged to work with in this new process.

To say that the artist is excited by her new medium is putting it mildly. The first tapestry, tufted and made in collaboration with Marie Hennessy, planted a seed that grew rapidly. She decided to pursue the experiment. She made another tapestry, this time a woven one and returned to a landscape format. Wexford based tapestry weaver, Terry Dunne opened her eyes to the endless variety achievable through using different combinations of silk, linen, cotton and woollen fibres. Together they made *Cliff Dwelling*, shown at the Taylor Galleries in 2004, Dunne working from a full-size paper cartoon supplied by the artist (Fig 6).

Still attracted by, but also uncertain about her new medium, the artist plunged into a period of extensive research into the different opportunities afforded by such established weavers and weaving outlets as the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh and different ateliers in the celebrated Aubusson tapestry region in France. A number of distinguished Irish artists had already trodden this path. Louis le Brocquy was given his first tapestry commission by Dovecot Studios in 1948, but really committed to tapestry after his encounter with the re-vitalised Aubusson workshops, following the new systematic working practises of Jean Lurçat and the Tabard brothers. An introduction from a fellow artist in Kerry, Pauline Bewick, led Simonds-Gooding to the atelier of Bernard



Battu and his wife Joelle. Accompanied by Rosemary Craig who acted as her interpreter, she spent three days with Battu, selecting yarns, choosing a combination of fine cotton warp and a tight weft of mixed fibres that allowed for a high degree of fine detail and finish. This is difficult and expensive to achieve but easily accommodated by Battu, whose ascetic lifestyle gave him a ready understanding of the artist. Battu did not require a full-size cartoon and wove *Rising and Descending Fields* (Fig 2) on the length, using yarns dyed locally in the village of Aubusson.

tapestry is all softness or, to paraphrase, Jean Lurçat it gives something fleshy to the wall.

In January 2006 Maria Simonds-Gooding went on another of her solitary treks to distant places, this time to Mali, accompanied only by a native guide she found on the internet. Apart from memories and drawings her most important souvenirs of the place are buckets of differently coloured sand and clay for making plaster. Her current love affair with tapestry does not mean an end to her earlier practice. The sand from Mali has already been

6 *Cliff Dwelling*
149 x 217cm
tapestry (woven by
Terry Dunne,
Wexford, 2004)
photo ©Richard
Johnston

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Looking at this tapestry as it hangs between two of the more familiar plasterworks, it is immediately obvious why the artist is so happy with the result. Tapestry allows her to achieve an aesthetic similar to that of the plasterworks but on a much greater scale. The contrast between figure and ground, such a defining feature with the plasterworks is possible here too, yet while the plasterworks express a hard, almost masculine principle, the

put to good use in plasterworks of the Dingle landscape which were shown at the RHA this summer (Figs 3&5). She is working on her Mali drawings now and may execute them in plaster, tapestry, or, now that she is in an experimental mode, in light reflecting metal, the latest material to attract her attention. ■

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