

# "CARRY ME TO THE CORNFIELD"

## The Landscape Art of Maria Simonds-Gooding

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*The Soul selects her own society then shuts the door..<sup>1</sup>*

Maria Simonds Gooding's art practice is unique in Ireland. That is strange in view of the fact that it is entirely concerned with landscape - the genre above all others most associated with Irish art. Ever since Susanna Drury won the first art award from the newly established Dublin Society Schools in 1739 for a painting of the Giant's Causeway, Irish artists from George Barrett and Nathaniel Hone through to Paul Henry and Tony O'Malley have looked to the natural environment for confirmation of their identity as Irish and as artists.

So how is it possible to claim uniqueness for a practice that continues that much-worked tradition? Every artist starts from a given context. The Irish landscape context has been very closely bound up with identity, with nationalism and with territory. Since Grace and Paul Henry first went to Achill on the chance prompting of their friend Robert Lind, piled blue mountains with turf stacks and thatched cottages have become synonymous with Irishness for many, while barely hidden symbolism in landscapes from Sean Keating through to Robert Ballagh reminds us constantly that the land of Ireland was contested for most of its history. Maria Simonds-Gooding is not interested in anything as superficial or as recent as national identity or a thousand years of colonisation. What drives her is the interaction between man and the land, the ongoing relationship between them that shapes them both and that is relatively unchanged from prehistory to the present day.

Maybe it was her early childhood in India, where she was born, that enables her to see beyond the narrower visions of Irish experience to a more universal view. Certainly her interest in the landscape stems from her time there. The artist recalls begging her ayah in India to carry her to the nearby cornfield when she cannot have been more than two or three years old. The family's almost incessant movement from one part of India to another also affected her. *"The constant moving around India did not worry me", she says, "I loved it. The extreme contrast of the mountains, the plains...* Her ayah or nurse was hugely important to her, missing, as she did, the time and attention her busy mother could not give her.

*I adored my ayah, as she did me, and it was through her that I got to know about the more earthy things of life as lived by her. Her mud home and all the spicy smells, her betel-nut which she would apply on a green leaf and the red dye left on her lips and mouth after chewing. I felt at home with her life style. It was through my ayah that I became very curious and my independence started at this early age. Often I ran away only because I wanted to see what was beyond the jungle and the trees, or down the mountain road. I was not scared in the slightest but rife with expectations and excitement about what lay outside my home and beyond ".<sup>2</sup>*

The independence and curiosity she developed during her early travels combined with a deep love of nature and the earthy things of life which she got from her ayah, certainly prepared her for Dún Chaoin, which was not an easy environment for a young, single woman from outside the community in the 1960s.

*"My roots came quite by accident here in Dún Chaoin. I love the place so I stayed."*

At an unconscious level her travels in early childhood may have something to do with her need to root herself in one particular place while continually travelling the world to find its counterparts. Her family returned to Ireland and settled in Dooks near Killorglin in Co. Kerry when Maria Simonds-Gooding was seven years old. Despite her familiarity with that place and her keen awareness of its beauty, it was

only when she visited the Dingle Peninsula, and more especially the Blasket islands, in the 1960s that she knew what it was she wanted to work with, and then it was not the heady mix of sea, rocks and land but the isolation of it all that excited her. In that isolated place she read the primordial struggle between the individual and the environment for basic survival and was hooked.

From the outset the physicality of the landscape drove her to replicate it in sculptural surfaces made of painted plaster, the three dimensional form vying with earthy colour for expression. When she returned to Kerry from two years studying at Bath Academy she noted wryly that even in the life drawing class in Bath she kept seeing the model as the landscape, seeing spaces where others see flesh.

Although her work sold well after she left the National College of Art in Dublin and the studio of M. Herbrant in Brussels, she rebelled against the vacuous work she was taught to produce. Realising that her mind had not been touched by that experience and determined to find something better she walked into the Hendriks Gallery on Stephen's Green and asked for advice. David Hendriks and his cousin Vivette suggested she should talk to Cecil King, and in one of the series of coincidences that marked her life, she met him on the stairs on her way out. Cecil King recommended that she try for an independent studentship at the Bath Academy at Corsham. It was difficult to get into, but with its open and questioning approach it was the right place for what she wanted. During her two years (1966-68) as an independent student there, her tutor Adrian Heath showed her the expressive potential of line. From being her weakest skill, her drawing became her strongest asset. Heath told her to take a line from the model and let him see where it started and ended just by the feel of the line. Simonds-Gooding extended that line through space and began to think of taking it through plaster.

The work of William Scott, a former teacher at Bath, but known to Simonds-Gooding through his mural at Altnagelvin Hospital, must have confirmed her own developing sense of simplicity and bold composition. Scott's regard for the blank spaces in the composition is echoed in her work but it was the landscape itself that was her most important teacher. For the first decade she painted almost sculptural plaster surfaces but by the mid 1970s she began to realise that the plaster was itself a very powerful medium of expression, that to free it from pigment would allow it to reveal its own properties and that the resulting minimal lines and marks she made on that pure ground would serve as her most effective metaphor for the lines left in the landscape over centuries by agricultural labour. The semi deserted area of Dún Chaoin and, above all, the recently abandoned Blasket Islands were the catalyst that unlocked the direction her art was to take, but visits to the Greek Islands, to New Mexico and to more remote places in India and the Sahara confirmed the importance of that discovery. For the next three decades journeys to isolated rural communities from Lanzarote to Russia clarified what was universal and timeless about the markings in the landscape that first electrified her in Kerry. Where others go abroad in search of the exotic, as a relief from the tedium of normal existence, Maria Simonds-Gooding travels to find common ground. It is what that common ground reveals to her that is sublime. The struggle to exist on the land is the same the world over. Farmers sweat to make fields, enclosing them with stone in Dingle, volcanic stone and moisture-retaining black ash in Lanzarote or with water and mud in Rajasthan. Their labour shapes the land and they, in turn are shaped by that ongoing activity. What these fields, or the occasional habitations or shepherds clochans that also feature in her plasterworks and prints speak of is the moment when man the hunter becomes man the farmer. When early man separates himself from the rest of nature and imposes himself on his environment Homo Sapiens has arrived, not yet identifiable as Irish, Mexican or Indian just human. To represent such a moment it is essential to remove distracting ephemera, such as weather or vegetation. Their omission means that time itself in all its grandeur becomes an unspoken participant along with the civilization that implies. The outlines of the fields appear new yet they have always been there.

If Maria Simonds-Gooding needed confirmation that her chosen direction was a worthwhile one she got that very quickly. In the course of her solo exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York in 1978 she travelled to Washington where she was advised by Lochlann Philip of the Philip's Collection to look at the art of Navajo artist Jaune Quick-to-See. He was intrigued by the similarities in their work, especially in relation to perspective. By the strangest coincidence Quick-to-See was at that same time visiting Simonds-Gooding's exhibition in New York. The two artists met and with Quick-to-See's support Simonds-Gooding was given an exhibition in the Hoshour gallery in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The gallery was a stylish Modernist place and the clean lines of her plasterworks looked perfectly at home there. What gave her the greatest delight, however, was that her bird's eye perspective was mistaken for Navajo work by Native Americans who saw it there. One of her plaster works is now in the Museum of Modern Art of New Mexico. In view of their austerity and the artist's respect for her materials is tempting to think of Maria Simonds-Gooding's plasterworks as Minimalist but that would

not be correct. The commitment to the subject in these works is total, essentialist rather than minimalist.

Having found her niche Maria Simonds-Gooding turned away from other distractions. The obsession with the struggle for survival on the land proved more powerful than early recognition by such Modernist establishment figures as Roland Penrose, who awarded her the Carroll's prize for the best artist under forty at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art in 1970 or the promise of fame that collection by career makers such as Charles Saatchi seemed to offer. It is difficult to understand, now, the struggle it was for young artists to find outlets for their work in the Ireland of the 1960s and 70s and how head turning such recognition could be. True the Rosc exhibitions, the first truly international contemporary art exhibitions in Ireland ran at approximately four yearly intervals from 1967 to 1988, but it is important to remember that it was not until 1977 that the first Irish artists were selected for inclusion in Rosc. Even then, only two, achieved that particular accolade, significantly two (James Coleman and Patrick Ireland) who had established reputations internationally rather than at home. Prompted by Charles Merrill and Mme Zalstem Zalessky, together with Alexander Liberman, their Editor-in-chief at Vogue in New York, Simonds-Gooding sought an interview with the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. Parsons, who had made her name by showing emerging artists in the 50s such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman and Saul Steinberg, had a reputation to maintain. Her manager Jock Truman told Maria Simonds- Gooding that unless her work was five years ahead of the most avant garde work in New York she was wasting her time. A year later Betty Parsons, herself came to Ireland. A single visit to the artist's studio led her to offer her a show in the gallery on 57th Street. The success of this show and the others which followed it might have lead to a sense of complacency in a less focused artist. Instead, having proved she could do it, Maria Simonds-Gooding pulled back from public exhibition to concentrate on making work and to seek out those parts of the world that gave her a similar sense of mankind's kinship with the land. From making plaster works she went on to make etchings and carborundums, learning the process in graphic studios in Dublin, New York, Jerusalem and Amsterdam.. Recently she has begun to experiment with a new medium - tapestry. Characteristically she is obsessive about researching every nuance of expression the medium can attain, travelling around Ireland, to Scotland or to Aubusson in France to learn about the techniques involved and to see how different effects can be achieved by different weavers.

Over the years Simonds-Gooding cemented her relationship with Dún Chaoin and the Blasket islands and began to analyse her own compulsion to replicate the fields and enclosures she found there. She recently told Carrie Crowley in a radio interview that she realised that her love of the Great Blasket was in direct relationship to her fear of the Blasket Sound. <sup>3</sup> The island itself became an enclosure, protecting and containing rather than imprisoning. In Irish culture the field is generally seen as a unit of property. One only has to think of John B. Keane's epic drama in which the Bull McCabe is willing to commit murder to guarantee his claim to one. Simonds-Gooding's affair with fields is very different and is symbolized by one of the first to catch her attention. On Inis Mhic Uibleáin she saw a small field laboriously fenced by a stone wall, the only purpose of which was to protect a blind sheep from falling over the cliffs. If the place offered her a safe enclosure the life of the community there thrilled her. She settled in Dún Chaoin in 1968, developing a relationship with the community that has sustained her ever since, and is instantly obvious to visitors.



Micheál O Gaoithín (An File)  
Self Portrait with Maria Simonds-Gooding  
ca 1970, pencil and crayon on paper,  
28 x 36cm

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She bought the cottage she lives in from Mike Sé 'faight', a Blasket islander who moved in to the mainland two years ahead of the official evacuation of the island. Mike Sé 'faight' bought his cottage, (where the artist now lives) then little more than a heap of stones for £26 pounds, taking the roof, windows and door of his island home with him for the restoration of his new house on the mainland. Maria Simonds-Gooding cherishes these direct links with the life of the island as if it had been her ancestral home. Another valued possession, gifted to her by An File, Michael O'Gaoithín, son of the

legendary Peig Sayers, is the crane for hanging saucepans and kettles over the open fire from Peig's own house.<sup>4</sup> The holy pictures on the wall were there when she bought the cottage. Although it is her home it is a museum to the lifestyle she found in Dún Chaoin in 1968. As she describes it it becomes clear that the Blaskets reawakened her early years in India, for her. The Basket Islanders absolute respect for the natural order, leading her to describe a sheep shearing she witnessed as an art event in its own right, mirrors her own early accord with nature. Like her ayah, it is associated with a very good period in the artist's life. If the area revived positive feelings the friendship of An File, was also important. Encouraged by her he painted details of his Basket Island life, representing the everyday narrative, where she painted the structure that supported it. His drawings and paintings parallel the writing of Thomas O'Críothán whose *An tOileánach* was illustrated by Maria Simonds-Gooding in 1972. While O'Gaothín and O'Críothán describe the hardships and pleasures of daily existence she sought to record what O'Críothán omitted - the landscape.

It is sometimes said that Maria Simonds-Goodings' plasterworks, prints and tapestries are like maps. Inevitably this invites comparison with Kathy Prendergast whose interest in mapping as a way of representing the landscape is well known. They are both highly focused and successful women artists and both are more concerned with line than with colour, but there the similarities end. Kathy Prendergast's engagement with the landscape is political in the widest sense of that word, calling to mind the colonisation and exploitation of the land and the equation of woman with nature, or minutely replicating the organic growth of capital cities all over the world, in a format that imposes a democratic superstructure on a world that is power-hungry and controlling. Maria Simonds-Gooding's plasterworks, prints and tapestries celebrate the moment when man ceases to be a hunter and becomes a farmer, ceases to be a nomad and decides to settle, the moment where nature and culture meet in the landscape. That moment pre-cedes territorial claims and power play over neighbours or between the sexes and offers instead a glimpse into the most primitive statement about settlement. It transcends the local and reminds us all of the universal heritage we share and our common dependence on an environment that is never static but constantly requires a new level of interaction. As we head into a new millennium there is a real threat that mankind will neglect that moment of cultivation, that respect for nature born out of endless struggle/negotiation, that we will destroy the environments that have sustained us in the past and become new kinds of predators and destroyers. That is why Maria Simonds-Gooding's works continue to be relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Soul Selects Her Own Society*, No 303 of Emily Dickinson, *Collected Poems*, Edited by Thomas Johnson, Faber and

Faber, London and Boston, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Simonds-Gooding, letter to the author, 27 May 2004

<sup>3</sup> Carrie Crowley, *Snapshots*, Radio 1, 6 August 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Peig .i. *A Scéal Féin le Peig Sayers*, Clólucht an Talbóidigh, Báile Átha Cliath, 1936