

Colm Tóibín in conversation
with Maria Simonds-Gooding

Colm Tóibín: I want to ask you first, some questions about materials. If we could start with plaster, could you describe how you firstly began to use it?

Maria Simonds-Gooding: It really started accidentally – I was in the last year of my studies at Bath Academy Corsham, and I was what was called an ‘Independent Student’. I lived in-situ in the academy, in Adrian Heath’s cottage, my painting tutor. He was there two days a week otherwise he lived in London. I had lots of space and I erected an easel in my bedroom. I started a large work, and for the first time I used plaster. Somehow it came out of one of the classes that Adrian Heath gave, working from the model, the life-class – he asked us to take a line through the model in any direction. He didn’t want any representational form of the model, but he wanted to have a sense of where the line started and ended. I suppose, without spelling it out, he wanted us to tune into the importance of the power of line. For the majority of the students in the class this wasn’t particularly interesting. For me opening my mind into something as relevant and free as a line without having the distraction or the burden of representation, when that was only for its own sake, changed everything. It gave me wings and let me out of a trap door. I wanted to work with my ideas and that was the start of plaster.

CT: Can you describe the plaster technically, how it is mixed...

MS-G: The plaster I use comes under the trade name Tetrion. I buy it directly from the distributors while it is absolutely fresh and easier to work with. If the work is well handled and stored under the right conditions there are no problems. In 1975 I was invited to show two works in the Union Carbide Building New York; these were large plaster works. They were flown over by Aer Lingus. I had a good friend in Aer Lingus, Tom Kennedy, and he introduced my work to Maria del Rio who organised a biannual exhibition representing about sixty-five countries. On my previous visit to New York I had visited the Betty Parsons gallery on the suggestion of Alexander Leberman who was editing an article from Charles Merrill, founder of ‘Arts in Ireland’ magazine. On this visit I met Betty Parsons and she came to see the show. She was extremely enthusiastic about my two works and told me she was coming to Ireland later that year – for Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland’s exhibition in the David Hendriks Gallery Dublin. Before the opening, she came over to my studio in Sandycove. At the time my work was going through a transition. The work I had just finished was still sitting on the floor, propped up against the wall. It was simply drawing into plaster.

CT: Can you describe it?

MS-G: It was a drawing, a linear boundary on plaster with a strong presence of a field from the Greek island of Siros, a beautiful sight. This lone field was, almost hanging on the side of an inhospitable cliff and yet it was so caringly cultivated. When I met Betty at the Hendrik’s Gallery opening the following day she said the piece of work on the floor was what she really liked, and it was going in the right direction. The drawing for this work came from a series of drawings that I had made in the early 1970’s, after meeting Sarah Miles when she was here starring in David Lean’s film, *Ryan’s Daughter*. Her brother

Martin Miles came over to visit and when he saw my work suggested that I should visit the Greek Islands and Lanzarote. That was an intuitive observation. Both places were hugely relevant and have had a significant input in my work. While I was there I made a great many drawings. After Betty had visited me I looked at these drawings again. I pulled them out and I thought 'that's it.' The next hurdle was Lanzarote's black volcanic landscape. Colour was not necessarily relevant but its absence was – it was in the Greek landscape that I discovered this. Their cultivation of the land gave me a wider universal objective that related to my preoccupation with the survival and innovation of those who live off the land in the harshest conditions. The following year Betty came back to have her own exhibition in the Hendricks Gallery Dublin – she visited my studio again. I had about seven large plaster works for her to look at. She made an immediate decision and she offered me a show in her New York gallery to take place a year and a half later.

CT: What year was that?

MS-G: That was 1978.

CT: Now, is the plaster wet when you use it?

MS-G: Yes the plaster is mixed with water and the first layer of plaster goes on thinly mixed with added adhesive and well scored to give extra grip and strength. The next thicker final layer of plaster will be spread so that it's neither too thin nor too thick. While the work is in progress there must be no interruptions there is only a limited time before the plaster starts to dry and becomes too difficult or too set to spread.

CT: Are you getting texture in the plaster?

MS-G: A limited amount.

CT: You want absolute, how would you put it, blankness?

MS-G: Yes.

CT: But, nonetheless, it has to be even.

MS-G: Yes it has to be even without losing the intrinsic beauty of plaster, but even enough for your eye to move over it uninterrupted. When this top layer of plaster is partially dry within forty hours approximately I'll get a pallet knife and remove protruding lumps or mounds. When that's done and the plaster is eventually completely dry it forms a light tough transparent skin. This has to be removed carefully to bring back the chalky composition of the plaster.

CT: So this work then, it's deliberate; as you're working on the plaster you're working from a drawing.

MS-G: Yes.

CT: But obviously what you're getting with the plaster, and with the mark you can make with the plaster, is a texture that you can't get in the drawing.

MS-G: That's quite true. The drawings are always drawn in the very place they come from, no matter where...it can be quite inaccessible, but my materials are simple and easy to carry.

CT: When you make the drawing at the beginning, are you alert to the fact that this will later appear in a very different medium.

MS-G: No, I don't think of that, although the drawing will dictate what follows. I am only concerned with the immediate presence and impact of the place, I don't think about anything that's going to follow at that time.

CT: So you have the plaster ready to work from, the drawing there, and then?

MS-G: It starts with choosing the drawing and the scale to work from, having decided this I have an excellent carpenter to construct a wooden frame and board with several specifications required. When I have completed working with the different applications of plaster I put the work up on an easel and work from this position, referring to the drawing at the early stage. Once I asked a plasterer, from up the road to come and help me but it was a total disaster! Even though he was a skilled plasterer he went about it in such a different way, this would not have worked... there was no escape other than to do it myself!

CT: I notice that you don't mention 'feeling' or 'emotion' in this; you're talking very much about the material issues of the plaster, the medium the drawing...

MS-G: Your question was about my materials.

CT: Let's come back to that. Let me ask you about printmaking.

MS-G: Lastly I would like to mention that while I was in Greece I looked into slaked lime as used in fresco painting as an alternative to plaster. I had a barrel of it sent over – it had an extremely runny consistency and wasn't suitable, but in the pursuit of all that I found an art shop in Athens that stocked a unique and beautiful range of natural fresco pigments and these are integral to my works on plaster which is also a natural material.

Yes, let's go to printmaking... With a bunch of drawings I got a notion to go to the Graphic Studio in Upper Mount Street Dublin that was in 1974. As a beginner I attended two etching classes a week before I was given a key to the studio, a drawer for my prints and the option of working whatever hours I wished. John Kelly was the director and my teacher he was encouraging and open in his approach. He gave me a good start and there was no turning back I was bitten by the bug! Mary Farl Powers and I worked in the studio most days and late into the evening. We became good friends and she was very generous with her time. She helped me to widen my range of techniques and I explored a more minimal approach. Considering the cramped basement space we worked in it didn't stop our output. We did have most of the necessary equipment, basic as it was.

Mary became the organiser and managed to set a high standard. This was the very centre of creative activity. When the studio moved to Hanover Quay I found it hard to work in this huge warehouse space. It did not have the cohesion of the Upper Mount St. studio. On extended visits while I was exhibiting in New York I spent time in a couple of printing studios. They were overcrowded, and technique seemed to take priority. From New York I was invited to the Burston Graphic Centre Jerusalem that was in 1983. It was superbly run by Nehama Hillman, with excellent printers. I worked with silkscreen, lithography and etching and I had the opportunity of making drawings from the arid and beautiful surrounding countryside. Before returning to Hanover Quay, Dublin I continued over the next few years to work a few months at a time in Amsterdam in the Graphic Anjeliersstraat. This was a good studio to work in and there were no restrictions on working times. The Dutch had a very different laid back approach to print making. There was far less technique and detail involved and more of a dependency on their mastery of hand wiping the plate. For some time I had been looking into the possibility of working with carborundum. It is a different technique to etching. No acid is used for this. I knew little about it so when James O’Nolan invited me to make a series of carborundum prints in Hanover Quay where he was the director, I regarded this invitation as the ultimate opportunity I could wish for and I knew how lucky I would be to work with James’ skills as both print maker and collaborator.

CT: When was that?

MS-G: That was in 1998 after my show in the Taylor Galleries Dublin. The carborundum prints related to my works on plaster. To start with we couldn’t find paper that aesthetically could do this until we found a spectacular heavy almost sculptural like handmade Indian paper. It was exactly the right paper for my work. Nothing else would have got the results we were looking for. It was extremely difficult to print with. It was unpredictable and had printing inconsistencies that caused many problems. With great credit to James in both his initiative and print making skills the problems were eliminated one by one. The results were great and more than I had hoped for or thought were possible. Later in 2006 I worked again with James O’Nolan, this time in his Stoney Road Press. James’ extensive experience of printmaking and his dedicated approach in reaching the goal and aspirations of the artist makes this one of the finest studios to work in.

CT: Can you describe the metals?

MS-G: When I had my Graphic Studio Gallery show of carborundum prints in Dublin 2000, there were two very large prints that each required two even larger aluminium plates to print with. The four plates were included in the exhibition, only to show the process the prints went through. These metal plates were a challenge that I could not ignore. I wanted to find a way to incorporate metal into my work outside printmaking. I started to work on steel and crushed clay, the two materials integrated very naturally with each other and this work was shown in the exhibition ‘Three’ in IMMA 2007/8.

Eventually I turned to aluminium being a softer material it was more sympathetic to work with. My concern now was with light, light that I could create through the handling of the surface of the metal itself. After searching around I found a high tech German owned factory in Killorglin, Kerry for my metal materials. Now came the time to look at my drawings of the fields with their bright cultivation deep in a valley of the Himalayan mountains of Bhutan. I drew and scored into the first sheet of metal lying flat on the table before putting it up on my easel. I was not expecting such a dramatic result. Light defined the work as it fell and reflected on the scored metal. Here was the beauty of light.

CT: Do you mean marking?

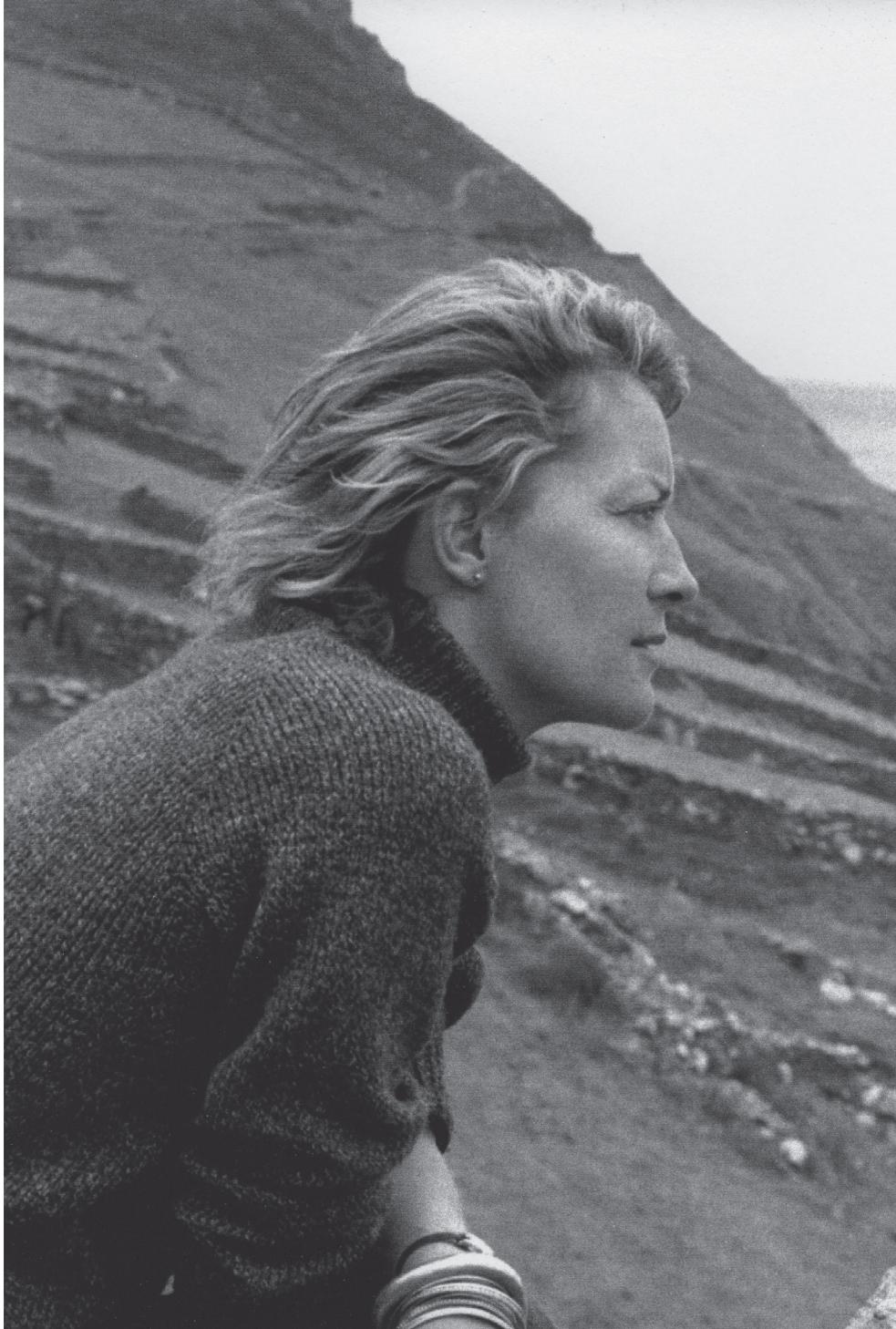
MS-G: Yes, rubbing with scoring implements.

CT: Could you go into a bit more detail about that?

MS-G: Yes. What I mean is... I must show you the scoring materials – they're made out of a very hard plastic. Let's just say, I cut lots of these scoring pads to different sizes and shapes ready to use. While they look innocuous, they're extremely strong, and effective, unlike many other scoring implements. After extended use the strength wears down, this then can be useful in the same way that a worn down paintbrush can be useful to work with. I have different grades of worn-down, and not so worn-down, sometimes I need the toughest strongest, or the most worn-down one, but that too can gather up the dust of the aluminium and will create a mark I don't want. For protection against the aluminium dust it is necessary to be totally covered from head to foot including a complete head mask.

CT: And the textiles?

MS-G: It came unexpectedly. Tapestry opened up a whole new perspective of textile materials and scale. In 2002 the architect David Crowley commissioned me, and nine artists to each design a tapestry with muted colours and tones for the Ice Bar of the Four Seasons Hotel Dublin. On this occasion the method was tufting rather than weaving. The installation was impressive. This was the start and I was not going to stop here. I looked for a weaver and I found Terry Dunne the weaver from Wexford. His invaluable knowledge on where to source different yarns and textures, such as silks, cottons, wools, linen and many other combinations, set us off searching and experimenting. He then successfully wove my first tapestry. I was none the less still curious to see different approaches to weaving. I got to the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, but it was Aubusson, France that I decided on. It attracted me with its long and rich tradition in weaving. I had the assistance of my friend Rose Mary Craig as technical interpreter. When I met the weaver Bernard Battu he explained the importance that had been passed down to him in observing the artist's work and giving it the appropriate interpretation. We had a good rapport and understanding of each other's aims with excellent results. He was an outstanding master weaver. Unfortunately he has recently retired, but I am glad to say he has been honoured with 'Chevalier de ordre des Arts et des Lettres' by the French government for his



Maria Simonds-Gooding, 1976. Location, Cominéol, The Dingle Peninsula. Photograph by Marcus Harrison

contribution and promotion of the tradition of tapestry making in Aubusson. The tradition is rapidly becoming a dying art. They do still have the essential facilities of dying the yarns on the spot and their looms are designed for large scale weaving but this requires an experienced weaver such as Bernard Battu to maintain the correct tensions on the loom throughout the weaving. Suppliers run out of one's chosen yarns. Mine mostly came from the UK and I have kept some of these rare and beautiful yarns for further tapestries I hope to have woven.

CT: Can we go and look at some things now?

MS-G: Yes, certainly.

[End of recording 1]

CT: I want to ask you, just very factually, about coming to Kerry.

MS-G: Before getting to Kerry I would like to tell you about India where I was born and where my father was in the Indian army. Our Ayah took care of us three children, as was the custom in those days. The eldest being my big brother Anthony, then myself followed by my younger sister Patricia. I adored our Ayah. She introduced me to her way of life. She lived in a mud hut, filled with strange and interesting smells. She ate betel nut on a leaf. Before I could barley walk she carried me to a dazzlingly beautiful cornfield on the side of a mountain track. The constant travelling around India in the scorching plains, or up in the high mountains was all part of my childhood there. When I was seven we all moved to Ireland, the birthplace of my mother Dorothy Reilly, to live in Dooks, Co. Kerry in a lovely old derelict farmhouse with twelve acres. My mother had it all restored before we could move in. The front of the house looked out onto a marshy creek and beyond to the Mac Gillycuddy Reeks. Herons flew in and out to their nest with raucous excitement! My father took up writing, Liberal politics, and his favourite pastime climbing the mountains. Kerry felt much the same as India, except now we had a permanent home. Everything moved at the same slow pace. We had no electricity, no phone no car. We depended on rainwater and we seldom ran out of it! We had a frisky horse and trap, turf fires and gaslights. There was no school for Patricia and myself till we reached twelve, except what our mother taught us. This was the life of bliss until the day came to go to school. I took the journey by train from Dooks Halt, a small platform by the side of the road where the train stopped briefly and from there I arrived at what was then a boarding school, The Holy Child Convent Killiney, Co. Dublin. It came as a great shock, bells endlessly ringing for Latin, French, Maths, Choir Practise, on and on it was as rock bottom as could be. All freedom gone!

It was not until 1963 that I first came to the Dingle Peninsula to visit Dún Chaoin. Its remoteness set it apart. I was immediately captivated by its people, the Blasket Islanders, the islands themselves and the life there, the Irish language the traditions, music and the whole way of life. The starkness of the landscape was moving and inspiring. After finishing my art studies at Bath Academy in 1968, I came back to Dún Chaoin to visit the Islands and, on the following visit shortly afterwards this cottage was auctioned in the

Phoenix Cinema in Dingle. It reached £810, more than what was expected. I had a lot of good will behind me, and in addition to this my aunt put up the money. It fell into my lap, for which I am forever grateful. It became my home.

CT: The cottage is unusual in that it looks very sunken from the front, as though it's hidden. When you go out beyond it, to what you've added, you've actually found a way of opening it right up to the full extent of the seascape.

MS-G: A Blasket Island man brought his roof over with him, and built this cottage to fit his roof, when he came over from the Island in 1948 – 20 years before I got here and before it was compulsory for them to leave the island in 1953.

CT: And he brought this roof with him?

MS-G: Yes, he brought his roof, his windows, his settle bed, and his holy pictures with him. He lived here for 20 years with his sister before they both moved into Dingle which he told me was the nearest place to heaven, and I told him his cottage was my nearest place to heaven! Everything is much the same as I found it, except I opened it up into one room. The roof on the inside is exactly the same. On the outside I covered it with slates. Originally it was a tarred canvas roof. I had to tar it every year, a very messy job that had to be done on a fine day, but not a sunny day or the tar would melt before it dried.

CT: Could you describe how close you are to the Islands?

MS-G: Yes – when I look out my bedroom window in the morning they're three miles away. And I can judge pretty well the weather for the day by the visibility in those three miles to the Blasket Islands. One gets a great sense of what's going to happen for a day, maybe even two.

CT: The strangeness of the Islands is how close they are to the mainland.

MS-G: You mean they seem close on the mainland?

CT: They seem close, compared to Tory Island, or the Aran Islands. When you see the distance it's quite short.

MS-G: The Blasket sound is what is misleading about the closeness of the island to the mainland. It has strong currents and it can be very dangerous. However physically near the island looks, in bad weather you can be cut off for days, even weeks, or months at a time in the winter.

CT: When did you go to the Island first?

MS-G: My first visit to the Great Blasket was in 1964 it was a day visit, after that I spent as much time as possible there.

CT: What were conditions like after that?

MS-G: Well, in those days the islanders used to stay over on the island for a week or two

to shear their sheep. There were quite a few of the cottages that still had their roofs, bits of furniture, chairs, a table, and even a few mugs and plates. Any time I took a tent it got blown down. The islanders have always made it possible for me to stay in one of their cottages. The weather often changed. In the bad weather there was no way of drying out one's clothes. There was no wood to make a fire. The Island had – and still has – a magic that draws people to it. I do not think that will ever change.

CT: So that's the big Island?

MS-G: Yes, that's the Great Blasket. I always used to stay in Krugers Guest House. It was July 1968 the same year that I later purchased my cottage. It was a very hot summer; there wasn't a drop of rain for weeks on end. I could see the Blasket Island had a lot of tents on it and when I met skin divers in Kruger's pub that evening who were diving for the Santa Maria de la Rosa, which sank off the Blasket in 1588, they said that if we were down at the Cuaisín, a small sheltered cove, at 3 pm the next day they'd take us to any Island I wished. I was with my cousin and we packed a sack with tea and potatoes and essential provisions with one luxury, a bottle of Kruger's port. It was on promotion! We were at the Cuaisín at 3 pm the next day. Dom Tucker and two other skin divers arrived in their dinghy. I told them it was the Inis I wanted to go to. I chose this island although none of us knew anything about it, except it looked far enough out to find the solitude I was hoping for.

CT: The Inis being?

MS-G: Inis Mhic Uibhleáin. I call it the Inis, or Inisicileáin.

CT: And locally that's called the Inis?

MS-G: Yes that's right it often is. Well when we got right up close by the Inis we edged all along its rugged east facing cliffs looking for somewhere we could pull in and land. We couldn't see any possibility. It was looking so hopeless that I thought we were going to have to abandon it. We backtracked all along by the cliffs until we arrived at an unexpected sight we knew nothing about. On the side of the cliff about two hundred feet above sea level was the untarnished metal of what was left of a crashed plane and above it was a narrow sheep track winding its way steeply to the top of the cliff. We pulled in here and with the wind in our favour we managed to unload our provisions. The divers tied a rope to our sack and hoisted it up, but before it got to the top of the cliff it slipped. That was the end of our Kruger's port. It soaked through every thing, even our tealeaves! After stepping over what was left of the plane we continued to the top of the cliff. From up here the island stretched out into a grassy plateau of sea pinks and spongy grass. The sea was far down below us and with the Atlantic enclosing us the isolation was equal to nothing I had ever experienced before. It was an exhilarating inspiring experience and it gave me a heightened awareness of everything around me, in every step, every sight and in every sound it was the same. No telephonic communications out here, we were completely cut off. The odd fishing boat passed through the sound. When night

came we could see the Tiaracht lighthouse cast its westerly light out to sea. I looked down the island and in the distance I thought I was looking at a pool of shimmering water but as I got closer it turned out to be the sun reflecting on the freshly tarred roof of Tig na hInise. This tiny stone dwelling was built low into the ground taking shelter from the hillock beside it. When we arrived outside the door there was no sign of anybody around. The islanders must have recently been over to tar their roof and care for their sheep. No gale could disturb this intimate little dwelling and close beside it where we put up our little tent was a field with a stone built wall running around its boundary for the safety of one blind sheep. There could be no greater beauty than this place, and somehow it went beyond the boundaries of the visible.

Some time later I discovered it was a German BV138 Flying boat that had crashed landed off the Inis in November 1940. I was on Micheál's ferry when he collected me off the Gt. Blasket and then continued to the Inis where he collected three Germans who had been staying there. It was not until the journey back that I discovered these were the Germans that had crashed landed off the Inis in 1940 – We called into Krugers pub for a drink, and as we were leaving Tom na hInise former islander of Inisicileáin recognised the pilot after all these forty two years, pointing his finger at him said 'I saved that man's life'. What a moving and extraordinary meeting it was. One thing led to the next, and I invited them back to my cottage to show them one of the propellor blades of their BV138 that I took back with me after my first visit to the Inis in 1968. I have given it on loan to the Irish Air Corps Museum in Baldonnel. There is nothing else left of the plane now. It all got washed out to sea.

CT: And you spent time alone there?

MS-G: Yes, I have spent weeks alone there. The first time when I went out with my cousin Marie Claire, she came on the condition that she'd stay one week. I was very lucky when the skin divers came back to collect us as planned they agreed to come back for me later. The Tiaracht lighthouse lies to the north west of the Inis, and during the week my cousin was with me we got out there on a passing boat but when we got near to the Tiaracht there was a big swell. Luck was with us all the way an Irish Lightship turned up bringing provisions to the lighthouse keepers just as we were about to turn back and they got us onto the island. The lighthouse keepers showed us around their spotless lighthouse and we entered our names in their visitor's book. When I told them I was planning to stay on alone on the Inis they said they would cast a light out to the Inis at 11pm each night, and if I was in trouble I was to light a fire and in thirty seconds they would have a message to Valentia radio station. Each night they cast their light out to the Inis. It was also the arrival time each night of thousands of Storm Petrels, Shearwaters and all the other sea birds flying back as far as forty miles from out to sea to feed their chicks nesting in the island. Their eerie high-pitched shrills echoed everywhere. As usual feeding time caused raucous excitement! On the third night a black calf made his unexpected presence known to me. He had what felt like a driving force behind him. It was a terrifying

experience but he never reappeared again. He must have made his peace. I can assure you it was not my imagination running wild on me this calf had haunted the island in the past. My neighbour whose people were from the Inis told me this during the winter that followed when I settled in Dún Chaoin, but it is seldom spoken about.

CT: And what material did you bring with you?

MS-G: I took my gouache and acrylic paints with me. The advantage is they dry reasonably quickly, even in those damp conditions. I also took watercolour paper and one or two sketch books. The materials had to be practical to work with and to carry.

CT: And did you work every day?

MS-G: Yes I'd work every day. There were days on end of storm and rain when I got stuck inside, except to collect my daily bucket half filled with water from the slow steady drip that fell from under a rock, or to pick limpets and periwinkles when the tide was out down at the bottom of the cliff. On those wet days I made drawings inside the cottage.

CT: Do you feel that being alone there changed you?

MS-G: I think it brought out what's in me, rather than changing me. Sometimes I take on challenge to discover what is really out there.

CT: How to phrase this question. I mean, your visual life, the life of looking here, what does that mean, can you describe it? I noticed, for example, that there's nothing entirely bare or stark, there's always a line, a pathway, or a fencing using stone...

MS-G: These marks and lines are the very spirit of the landscape, the last traces of survival. In an etching from the 80's my reference to the stone walls around a group of enclosures have now all gone, but the markings are clearly left behind. Even fields that go back to the famine are still visible. They will never disappear. Making a living out of this rough stony land became increasingly difficult but when the filming of *Ryan's Daughter* arrived in the late 60's it gave a significant and much needed financial boost to the peninsula in a way unimagined before. Things started to change and everyone benefited. Then came a young orphaned wild dolphin Fungi, named after a fisherman. He quietly arrived from out there in the Atlantic thirty-one years ago and never left Dingle bay. He has become a legend delighting inspiring or giving solace to all from near and far. Back west, out here, there is the question of the Great Blasket Island and what is going to happen to it? There was a plan to build a new landing place and extend some of the original buildings of the islanders. That would have changed everything forever. This did not happen the government ran out of funds and 'The Celtic Tiger' passed before it could take over the Blasket Island. The future will bring its changes, but there is still a chance it will keep its integrity with its past.

[End of recording 2]

CT: We were talking about the way in which the original cottage, which is a one-room cottage now, is almost buried, and then when you walk out behind it, the extensions you've built open out to the island, the sky and the landscape.

MS-G: Yes my cottage is built low into the ground to get shelter same as the cottages on the Blasket Island, and like them my door faces east. After installing water and electricity a year later I added a room to work and sleep in. It had a window facing south with lots of sunshine coming in which made it very difficult to work and I had to frequently draw my curtains to keep the sunlight out. My neighbours thought I was still in bed! Eventually years later the studio I had always dreamed and hoped for was built by Alec O'Connor who had great initiative and marked out on the ground a larger and a much better plan than the original plan on paper. He built a wonderful studio and even on the darkest of days it is filled with a northern light and opens out to the Blaskets and the Skellig Rock.

CT: Can I ask you about colour? We looked at some work that is painted...

MS-G: During the mid eighties, for a couple of years I was completely absorbed by the bogs. These earthy shapes cut directly out of the wet marches were a powerful sight. Families turned out to cut, foot and stack the turf in all weather conditions. It was hard tough work, but ask anyone who has worked in the bogs and they will tell you 'cutting the bog on a fine day was a piece of heaven!' I wanted to capture some of this magnificence. I decided to use oil paints directly from the tube thinned out to an almost watercolour consistency and spreading them onto pre-sized paper right there in the bog. Not something I took back to my studio to continue working on. Day after day I went out hail rain or shine!

CT: What years were they?

MS-G: 1985 and '86.

CT: And when you say the bog, the bog where?

MS-G: One of the bogs, not far from here was in Cam an Lochaigh hidden in a valley at the foot of Mount Brandon. Many families cut their bogs here. This place was very wild with waterfalls gushing down the mountain in wet weather. It was my favourite bog. Another great bog was Luachair on the north side of Annascaul. Then I took myself off to Connemara where there was a large scattering of bogs.

CT: I'd like to ask you about travel, because when you were talking about being very isolated here and working alone with this landscape, and then the question of working with other artists making prints in various Graphic Studios – in New York, Amsterdam, or Dublin – the third thing that seems to nourish you are trips, the whole business of foreign places. So if you could maybe take people through some of those places.

MS-G: Travel is a part of my life that started very early when I was just a toddler in India. We were living high up in the mountains. I took off with my cousin Michael – we were almost the same age. Without any trouble we got a lift in a rickshaw that was passing by



Maria Simonds-Gooding, 1989. Location, Amsterdam. Photograph by Marian Van de Veen

coming down the steep mountain road. I must have had great expectations of discovering whatever world was out there after making such a good start! We were sitting in the rickshaw facing each other as we descended down the mountain road but not for very long before we were recognised by two women on horseback riding up the mountain road and we were returned home. My mother did not harangue me! She gave me great freedom and I was able to enjoy this freedom throughout my childhood.

Every so often I go travelling. It can be to anywhere but it will be in search of places where people and communities make their existence off the land.

CT: Yes, so India?

MS-G: On one of my earlier return visits to India I joined friends who were living in the Biligirirangan Hills of southern India. We planned to make the long trek through the jungle to visit the Sholaga Tribe who were semi nomadic. Every step of the way we had to make noises in advance not to surprise any bears that might be on our route. They were our biggest threat. When we got to the Sholaga encampment we exchanged warm greetings. I gave some of the children pencils and paper to draw with. They were not quite sure what to do with them they had never held a pencil in their hand before. They drew the other way up to our way of seeing but if you turned the drawing around first came the roots of the tree then came the tree. Not to be outdone one of the elder tribesmen found a lump of wet clay and made a squatty elephant type of creature to shrieks of delight. While I was still in southern India I also visited the Toda Tribe the most ancient of the remote Nilgri plateau. They lived a pastoral life with large buffalo herds and make their livelihood from dairy products. The fine tall women have long dark ringlets and make beautiful embroidery. I asked one of these women to draw a buffalo in its ritual setting (the buffalo is their sacred animal) she drew a magnificent buffalo in its ritual setting then embroidered it on a small piece of cloth. We exchanged gifts with each other and she gave me this beautiful piece of embroidery. These tribes live a harmonious life with their environment, but there is the constant threat of the government encroaching on their territory. In other parts of India they grow crops both in summer and again in winter. Suddenly fields pop up from nothing. I was there when this happened and I made several drawings for my 'Sprung-Up Fields' series in plaster. Whole families and neighbours turn out to dig up the ground to build their mud walls enclosing their fields. The dykes that remain after the digging prevent the cattle from breaking through. Nearby there is the essential large water hole from which they carry the water back and forth to their crops in clay pots early in the beautiful fresh sunrise and again in the evening as the sun goes down. With all this care and watering their crops shoot up almost over night.

CT: And Lanzarote?

MS-G: On my first visit to Lanzarote in the early 70's my drawings were concerned with their irrigation and wells. On later visits I spent my time in an area called La Geria, it is an extraordinary example of how the farmer overcomes the excesses of wind and sun, and

partial draught. Here they grow vine plants and to shelter them from the trade winds, and excessive sun they dig down into the ground to make a spacious hole, above it they build horseshoe shaped dry stonewalls casting extra shadow and wind protection. The different patterns of the various clusters of horseshoe walls all facing the same direction makes a most interesting landscape to work from. It may not rain for months and months at a time but the farmers collect the black volcanic ash from different parts of the island and spread it around the vine. It retains sufficient moisture from the dew overnight for the vines to thrive in this strange lunar like landscape.

CT: Mali?

MS-G: Mali West Africa was a tough place to travel in with its intense heat, the dreaded mosquito, unpredictable accommodation and transport. It all required pretty smart survival skills! It took several attempts before I got there but I had made up my mind to go to the Dogon this was the part of Mali that particularly interested me. The people practise an Animist religion and ritual. It is an integral part of their life and it reflects the spirit and harmony of the Dogon people with nature. Travelling had its surprises all along the way but eventually I got there! This was not where I was expecting to find little fields dotted around the edge of this scorched out desert. They were the brightest green onion fields. The onion fields depended on the water twenty or thirty feet below in sunken water holes. How did these people manage this? It was the women that dug out these water holes and brought up the water in pots to irrigate their crops each day and often with an infant strapped onto their backs. What an achievement. What a feat! I felt I wanted to bow down to them! From these fields I made my drawings and I had time before transport became available. In this part of the world you do not have much choice. This time I was lucky.

CT: If you take a line you draw and it's not representational, and it's actually filled with, let's say emotion, or the spiritual essence of something... Even drawings, prints or works on plaster that may seem minimalist don't have a minimal effect on the eye. How do you do that - I know this is probably the most difficult thing to describe... what state of mind do you have to be in to make something using the minimal of means to achieve the maximum effect?

MS-G: I find that a very interesting question and I do understand what you are saying. The nonrepresentational line you speak of that is filled with emotion, or the spiritual essence of something is there because that's what the artist brings to it. Line for me is singularly expressive. During my first show with Betty Parsons in New York in 1978, one day I came into the gallery to find quite a large number of people sitting on the floor in complete silence looking at my work. The central space of the gallery was beautiful in its starkness. It felt as though one was entering an inner chamber and the work looked equally stark, one to each wall. These were my plaster works, drawings on or into large flat areas of plaster. I was astonished I couldn't think what they were doing. They told me they thought my work was so spiritual. At the time I had no idea what they meant, yet the places that inspired this work were the very proof of that. I do not separate spirituality

from life, though its presence can be more strongly felt in certain places or situations, and not at all in others.

CT: What comes out of you when you've made one of those pieces, I mean what sort of energy are you using?

MS-G: I think the way to answer your question is this. If the spirit and the energy of the places I'm drawn to come through in my work it reinforces and affirms my own energy.

CT: Yes but does it not also take the viewer, or the eye, to a place that is 'you'?

MS-G: Well, I suppose the viewer or the eye does come back to me because I am the interpreter of what I see. I am deeply moved by nature and in the people who take care of it and survive from it. I need to express this in my work.

CT: I wonder if it would be possible to misread the work – around the walls here [points to walls] we have a lot of naïve art. I'd like you to comment on that idea; that even though on the other end of the spectrum from naïve art, your work may have something to do with it, but only because it's gone right through to the other end of a spectrum, rather than being close to it.

MS-G: Whichever end of the spectrum I am coming from, naïve artists are more likely to observe their world first from within and at the same time from above disregarding any idea of perspective. Some of this we have in common. The naïve paintings on the walls here in my cottage are An File's imaginative observations of life as he experienced it on the Blasket islands, a life of extreme hardship and its survival depended on a small community pulling together.

CT: Could you explain to me who he is?

MS-G: An File, Mícheál Ó Gaoithín was a poet. He was the son of Peig Sayers. When I came to live here in 1968, Peig had already died and the Blasket Islanders had moved to the mainland. While work was being done to this cottage I was lent a caravan that was at the back of a field behind An File's house. To get there I had to cross over stepping-stones in a river. An File was often around or standing outside his door. I didn't know him and when I stopped to wave to him he told me to come down to his house – I had a painting under my arm and he asked to look at it. It didn't mean much to him as it had nothing to do with the Blaskets ... amazingly, although he had shown no interest in painting himself, I came back to him a couple of days later with paper and paints and I said 'Here you are Micheál fire ahead!' and that was exactly what he did. He never stopped painting for the next six years till his death in 1974. When I put his paintings up on the wall in my cottage, no one took any notice of them, and dismissed them as childish. He spent the last years of his life in the Dingle hospital. A few days before he died I met him on Easter Sunday 1974, at Scoil Dhún Chaoin, on the big occasion of the first art exhibition on the Dingle Peninsula. Adults and the children from the national schools were all included. I put several of An File's paintings in the exhibition, and people started to take notice

of his work. He gave an impassioned speech at the opening explaining that they (the local people) were not only writers but they were also artists. He told me his locker was filled with his paintings and asked me to come and collect them from him. He gave me his paintings and drawings as he made them. Sadly he died of heart failure a few days later before I got to see him. When I got to the Dingle hospital to collect the paintings they could not be found, they must have been accidentally thrown out. He also gave me that wooden crane [refers to object] hanging over my fireplace. One day he went up to his loft to fetch it down and gave it to me. It belonged to Peig Sayers, his mother, and hung over her fireplace. I was very honoured and I hung it over my fireplace. He used to visit me and sit by my fire. When he saw I had not changed the colour of the crane, he was very disappointed. I had instead changed the colour of my fireplace to match the crane, a soft mixture of green emulsion paint. May be he didn't like that colour. I never thought of asking him.

CT: What does the term Minimalism in art history mean to you?

MS-G: For me, the term Minimalism in art history excludes personal expression and is non-referential. Its reality is confined to its constituents – material, form, and colour. Some of this we may share in common, but my path takes me centrally to my point of reference.

CT: In literature and music also, the big impulse of the 20th century was to move away from representational clutter, surrounding detail, efforts to convince the reader or the viewer of something, an attempt at something much purer and truthful. You can find it in Beckett, in poetry, in Classical music.

MS-G: I immediately think of your short story 'The Long Winter'.

CT: Yes, I was using an idea of line, and to simply move the line truthfully, where everything is contained in the line. It has been a big impulse hasn't it, in the entire century?

MS-G: I think it's a pity that there isn't more of it.

CT: I wonder if you agree that there's not more of it because it's the hardest thing to do.

MS-G: yes, because it means so much more. Beckett was a great example of this.

CT: In making those lines, I'm wondering if it's an utterly nerve-wracking and exhausting process for you?

MS-G: The lines you speak of express so much of what I see I don't separate them from the essential. Once I start a new work my focus is completely centre on it and my energy is sustained throughout. Exhaustion might set in at the finish! There are nerve-racking intervals they can't be avoided, but usually I work my way through them.

CT: When I looked at the drawings they seem to me much more preparatory, to be almost plans rather than drawings.

MS-G: Yes at the time of these drawings in the 70's they were described somewhere as '... planning applications from the Flintstone era!' They are my original points of reference on whatever paper or sketchbook I have with me and are essential to the work that follows and the materials I use.

CT: The very early work you did was surrealist. Just thinking about the work of someone like Miro who began as a surrealist and ended... I mean he simply does what Patrick Collins suggests and draws a line. Those very late canvasses are extraordinarily spare. I'm thinking of surrealism's realistic impulse and I just wonder if you could connect it to what you do more easily than it might seem. It seems very far because surrealism has to denote something and be a statement about life, all those dreamy, nightmarish references. The spare work you do seems very far away but I wonder if it is?

MS-G: The surreal work came very early as you say, while I was still an art student. In the early 60's I spent one year at the National College of Art Dublin, then in Kildare Street, only to find out what a waste of time this all was. With the exception of 'Big' John Kelly art was neither taught nor learnt as I experienced it. I continued my studies in Brussels under Monsieur Hebron at Le Centre de Peinture for the following year. He liked to flamboyantly demonstrate the technique of painting using my oil paints and generously applying them onto my canvas. While in Brussels I was surrounded by the surrealist art of, Magritte, Delvaux, Ernst, and many others. I was learning absolutely nothing about painting, but absorbing the dream world and excitement of surrealism. That is how it all started, and it abruptly ended when I got to Bath Academy. At last I found a place where I could study art, and start all over again.

CT: There's one area that you haven't worked in that seems to be crying out for you, and it's ceramics. Why haven't you worked in ceramic?

MS-G: You mean clay etc.?

CT: Yes, I mean to some extent you have. Could you just describe some of the things that are in the studio, like the clay from Mali.

MS-G: Oh yes it's got the technical name of Grog, it is a crushed burnt fire clay. It is a natural product from the ground and comes in all those beautiful earthy colours I was showing you in my studio. It has a gritty texture and adheres extremely well to plaster and other surfaces. In the early '90's although I did not know anybody in the Dublin foundry I made a phone call to them and the person who answered said that he knew my plasterwork very well. I told him I wanted to add some texture to my work did he have any ideas. He said that he did and that I should use something called Grog. He told me that if I got in touch with Dineen Refractories in Athy Co. Kildare - I could get it there. He gave me all the details. Imagine it all happened just like that over the phone! So I got in touch with Dineen Refractories and I went there. They were most helpful and they had frequent



Maria Simonds-Gooding, 2008. Location, Dún Chaoin studio. Photograph by Pádraig Ó Foghlú

deliveries of several different grades and colours to choose from. Eventually I found the most beautiful combination of texture and colours that related to my work, crushed from the old virgin firebricks. After a few years I noticed that I couldn't get the same results. When I checked it all out with Dineen Refractories and different suppliers here and in the UK they explained that the grog was now coming from synthetic firebricks. They all had the same explanation and told me I would have to go to India to find the original natural product. I asked if they could order it for me. They told me that was only possible in vast quantities. I certainly didn't want a big truckload turning up from India! Instead I decided to go to Mali. That was when I found those onion fields in the Dogon. Before getting to the Dogon, I went to Djenné, not too far from Timbuktu. It was worth taking the journey to get there. Through my guide Mikael Djiguiba we found a woman with many ancient clay pots. I picked out a few of the broken up pots that had the relevant mixture of tones and colours. She crushed them for me with a thick wooden club until it was fine enough to go through the sieve I had carried with me. When it all got through the sieve it was extremely heavy. Mikael and I went to the market where we found a strong plastic yellow container. The helpful postmaster opened up his post office for us. I filled in pages of documentation. A month later it arrived safely at the Ballyferriter Post office. It was the most beautiful of all the grogs.

I have often thought about working with clay itself, I even have a large sack of it in my shed. Like so many things, you just don't get round to it. You need somebody who works with you, the energy of two or more people...