Humanity's Fragile Alliance with the Landscape

John Yau

Maria Simonds-Gooding's primary subject is an inhospitable landscape where humans struggle to survive. With sensitivity and sympathy, but without nostalgia for the archaic and primitive, she registers the traces humans have made as a foothold in an otherwise unwelcoming domain. Her subjects include rugged places in India, the Sahara, the canyons of New Mexico, Mali, and the Himalayan Mountains, along with the windswept hills of Lanzarote (one of the Canary Islands), and the abandoned Blasket Islands just off the Dingle Peninsula – where, since 1968, she has lived in a fisherman's cottage in the village of Dún Chaoin. Undeterred neither by their remoteness nor the harshness of their environment, Simonds-Gooding has travelled to these and other places, where she has become intimate with the particular relationship communities have negotiated with a ruthless topography.

In a recent interview with Colm Tóibín, which is included in this catalogue, Simonds-Gooding states: "[My] preoccupation [is] with the survival and innovation of those who live off the land in the harshest conditions." The innovations the artist alludes to are the ingenious adaptations they have made to ensure their survival in a challenging terrain, some of these having persisted into the present. In essence, such revisions of the landscape are simple and necessary – a path, stone wall, watering hole or well, tilled field and boundary line. Historically speaking, they are archetypal indications of mankind's transition from hunting and gathering to farming and the beginnings of civilization. Focusing on specific locations, Simonds-Gooding honors the quintessential marks humans have made to survive. These are also uncongenial places where industrialization has never established itself, which would subsume the evidence of these early improvements.

Since the late 1960's, working across a wide range of mediums, including plaster, aluminium, oil on paper, drawing, prints, and tapestry, Simonds-Gooding has created a unique oeuvre both within Ireland and across the international art scene. Simply put: no one else is making work like this. Part of its uniqueness has to do with her choice of materials, particularly plaster and aluminium. Despite the diversity of her mediums, what is common to them – and here I am thinking particularly of the plaster pieces, the aluminium pieces, the tapestries and prints – is the amount of research the artist will undertake to ensure the nuanced results she desires. In her interview with Tóibín, Simonds-Gooding recounts that while considering slaked lime as an option to plaster, something that finally did not work out, she found a store in Athens, Greece, which "stocked a unique and beautiful range of natural fresco pigments and these are integral to [her] works on plaster which is also a natural material." By mixing the fresco pigments into the plaster, she is able to get the muted colours she wants.

Based on drawings, which she always does on site, often from an elevated vantage point, her plain but sensual works share a cartographic impulse, evoking sparse topographical views, a kind of bird's eye view of the landscape. In her works in plaster and aluminium,

both the harshness of the landscape and the intense light of the locale are features inherent to the medium. In addition to her preoccupation with the marks mankind has made in the landscape, it seems to me that the artist is also interested in the pervasive light found in many of these places.

Simonds-Gooding steadfastly believes that she can communicate both the unsympathetic reality and elemental beauty of her landscapes through the deployment of lines and abstract shapes – indications of boundaries, paths, irrigation ditches and stone walls, signs of human presence that strike, at best, a fragile alliance with nature. Working within this highly circumscribed vocabulary, she pays homage to ingenuity, adaptability and necessity.

Simonds-Gooding's self-sufficient streak, as well as her preoccupation with survival under difficult conditions, seems to have their origins in both the artist's biography and Irish history, particularly the Great Famine in the mid-19th century.

She was born in India, where her ayah or nurse largely raised 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.[1]

Shortly after World War II ended, Simonds-Gooding's family returned to Ireland and settled in Dooks, County Kerry. She was seven. When she was in her late 20's she moved to Dún Chaoin in the Dingle Peninsula, not far from where her family lived. Between these two major events, Simonds-Gooding studied at the National College of Art in Dublin (1962-63), Le Centre de Peinture in Brussels (1963-64) and the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham, England (1966-68). It was while she was at Bath that she learned of the work of William Scott, who had once taught there. According to the former Head of Collections at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Catherine Marshall:

> [H]is 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-1970's she began to realize 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 labor.[2]

By focusing on plaster as the "medium of expression," rather than a surface upon which to apply paint, as has been done since the Italian Renaissance, Simonds-Gooding moved into a territory all her own, in which, as Marshall points out, she regarded the landscape as her "teacher."

While Simonds-Gooding's work stood apart from much of what was going in the mid-1970's, including conceptual art, performance art, land art and post-minimalist sculpture, she does share something with two American artists from different generations, Robert Smithson, who was her contemporary, and the photographer, Thomas Joshua Cooper, who is not quite a decade younger. Both Simonds-Gooding and Smithson derive their subject matter from human interventions in, as well as appropriations of, the landscape. The difference is that Simonds-Gooding ponders pre-industrial, largely agrarian traces made by communities whose survival depended on inventive adaptations to the elements, while Smithson concentrated on the postindustrial abuses and neglect that resulted in manufactured deformities of the land.

Although scrutinizing two very different moments in human history, both artists are motivated by a deep sense of urgency and a belief that something can be learned from the scars made by mankind. At the same time, in their preoccupation with civilization's relationship to the land, both Simonds-Gooding and Smithson reinvent our understanding of landscape art, challenging us to see our rapport with it in a different light.

What Simonds-Gooding and Cooper have in common is that they are solo sojourners who travel to hard-to-reach, often unreceptive places in service of their subject matter. As previously mentioned, Simonds-Gooding has journeyed to isolated communities nestled on remote islands, in mountainous regions and the desert. Cooper, who wants to "chart" the Atlantic Basin from the Arctic to the Antarctic, picks out points of land from a map that he believes will afford him a view of the meeting of water (sea, rivers) and land. Their common concern is with heritage. In Simonds-Gooding's case, it is the alteration to the landscape that humans are impelled to make, while Cooper bases his images on the belief that "[by] encircling the extreme edges of the entire Atlantic Basin, a physical acknowledgement of [the] sources and extent of Western cultural heritage occurs."[3]

In her plaster works, Simonds-Gooding tends to use titles that give only as much information as she feels necessary. Like her subject matter, nothing the viewer encounters

is extraneous. I am thinking of *Inside Boundary* (1977), *Cliff Dwelling I* (1984), or twenty years later, *Connecting Boundary Line* (2004). What the titles suggest is a concern with habitat, a basic need that transcends national identity. It is this understanding of the landscape that the artist brings to bear in her spare, evocative work. Focusing on the particulars found in the local, she extracts from it what is commonly taken for granted in our technology-obsessed society: the means of simple survival.

The plaster works are pristine tablets consisting of a few incised lines (paths, boundaries, walls) and built-up, clearly demarcated rough areas (fields). Working into the plaster, which she has carefully covered with two preliminary layers, she starts off referring to a drawing made on-site. The plaster is thick enough that she is able to erase marks as well change the work. This way the work evolves and isn't a copy of the drawing. Although changes can be made, Simonds-Gooding has to work more-or-less uninterrupted, completing everything within a limited amount of time. Although this was most likely not her intention when she started, her practice evokes the conditions that we are apt to associate with her subject matter. Like those working the severe land to survive, Simonds-Gooding's task is at the mercy of time. It is not something she can put down and come back to.

Here I want to reiterate Simonds-Gooding's commitment to self-sufficiency as well as advance that her work is an implicit critique of the origins of modernist painting, by which I mean the Impressionists, who came to prominence during the rise of industrialization and utopian dreams. It is the Impressionists, particularly Claude Monet and Pierre Renoir, who focused on leisure as a worthwhile subject. If Impressionism is about fugitive light and modernity, Simonds-Gooding focuses on cyclical time, unforgiving light and the struggle for sustainability. In her vision of reality, leisure takes a back seat. The plaster works are not anecdotal and there is no indication of the vegetation or the weather. Like the subjects they try to honour, the plaster works are stripped down to what is essential. Their smooth white surfaces evoke the arid and semi-arid landscapes where the artist has found many of her subjects, the scorching light, and rocky soil.

What I find remarkable about these sublime works is that for all their quiet urgency – which is certainly heightened by the dire warnings scientists have made about the likely effects of climate change – they do not strike me as calamitous messages about the fate of mankind. In fact, I find them to be testaments to human resourcefulness, simultaneously austere and sensual, resistant and inviting. They are stripped down to a few incised lines, abstract shapes and muted colour because they have to be, if the artist is to remain true to both her materials and subject matter. Not only does Simonds-Gooding's work come across as pressing, but they also strike me as a reminder that there are alternative ways to establish our relationship with our environment. In this, one detects the artist's sense of hope.

Simonds-Gooding's truth to materials extends to her oils on paper, in which she introduces color, mostly greens, browns and grays. Based on the hilly terrain of the Dingle Peninsula, its stone walls and rocky fields where sheep graze, these luminous works on paper have an affinity with the bird's eye view found in her plaster works and her subsequent works on aluminium. Compositionally, the artist tilts the landscape up toward the picture plane, squeezing the sky into a narrow curving band running along the top edge. The arc between shore and sky suggests the coastline as well as the curvature of the earth. In other works, where there is no sky, it is as if the hill with its vertically slanting lines is plunging down the paper's surface, like a storm. In all of these works, we feel as if we are perched on a promontory over the landscape, looking both forward and down, which is likely what the artist did in order to get the view: climbed a hill with her paper, brushes and paint.

Using paint that is thin in consistency, Simonds-Gooding works quickly, with everything done on site. There are no signs of revision, or of scraping away. Although, we are looking at a terrain of fields, hills and stone enclosures, everything is stacked on top of each other, hugging the surface of the paper. The works come across as both purposeful and improvisational, which is true to the spirit of the place.

I am reminded of the time I spent on the Dingle Peninsula in July 2013, while visiting the artist in her studio, and seeing sheep standing on an uneven stone wall overlooking the crashing waves below, unconcerned and contently eating. It is a landscape in which changes are made out of necessity. As Catherine Marshall notes:

> Simonds-Gooding's affair with the field …is symbolized by one of the first to catch her attention. On Inis Mhic Uibhleáin 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.[4]

The tension between the landscape's open space and the flat, two-dimensional surface on which it is depicted is conspicuous. One feels that everything is precipitous, that nothing is flat, which, in fact, it isn't. In this regard, Simonds-Gooding's landscapes share something with the topsy-turvy views of Ceret by Chaim Soutine. The difference is that Simonds-Gooding is being faithful to the order of things, while Soutine depicts what I have called elsewhere "an uprooted, tornado-like world in which each brushstroke and element fights to holds its place."[5] Simonds-Gooding's landscapes do not convey the same psychological tension that we find in Soutine's; there is something accepting and even joyful about them. In light of the Great Famine, whose marks are still visible in the terrain, the landscape of the Dingle Peninsula and its inhabitants have not only persevered, but they have also thrived.

In her oils on paper, Simonds-Gooding scrutinizes the jagged landscape in which she settled in 1968 and knows well. As in her plaster works, adversity and pleasure seem inseparable. Flocks of sheep, green fields, bogs and walled and tilled enclosures, signs of a flourishing landscape, fill the composition. At the same time, the black lines the artist makes on the paper indicate the scarred rows where 19th-century farmers, in the belief that the potatoes would survive the blight in a cooler climate, planted them higher on the slopes, but to no avail. The black rows where the potatoes rotted are stark reminders of the famine, when more than one million starved to death or died of related diseases, and another million emigrated, many to America, reducing the country's population by nearly one-quarter. More than one hundred-and-fifty years later Ireland still has not seen its population return to pre-famine levels.

As anyone familiar with Irish history knows, the Dingle Peninsula was particularly hard hit and did not begin to recover economically until the late 1960's, more than hundred years after the famine, when David Lean decided to film *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) there, pumping money into the weak economy. In fact, I don't think a day passed during my stay without at least one person, usually over the age of fifty, mentioning the impact the film had on the peninsula's economy, especially the coastal towns and villages. Significantly, Simonds-Gooding does not call particular attention to this catastrophic period in Irish history. Its mute signs have become an intrinsic part of a landscape where people are currently flourishing, despite the relative harshness of the circumstances. And it is survival, ingenuity and a respect for the landscape that holds her attention, and what she celebrates in her work. In the local she discovers the basic, irreducible signs of what we have in common, which is our faith in the environment and its ability to replenish itself and sustain us.

As with her discovery of plaster as a "medium of expression," Simonds-Gooding became interested in incorporating metal into her work in 1998, when she worked on carborundum prints, which are different from etchings in that they do not require acid. In carborundum prints, the surface of the plate is built up with carborundum or grit on a side that has been painted with glue. As the artist told Colm Tóibín in the interview I have previously cited, she found the inclusion of the metal plates in her show of carborundum prints in Dublin in 2000 to be a "challenge that [she] could not ignore." Initially, she worked on steel and crushed clay, which she felt were integrated with each other, but turned to aluminium, which was "softer" and "more sympathetic to work with." As she told Tóibín: "My concern now was with light, light that I could create through the handling of the surface of the metal itself."

Working once again with a resistant surface, Simonds-Gooding draws into it as well as rubs it with plastic scoring pads, which she cuts to different sizes and shapes. By choosing such a taxing surface to work on, the artist re-enacts the difficulties facing those farming inhospitable land. It seems to me that she wants to honour their labour

without overtly calling attention to her own. The aluminium requires that Simonds-Gooding makes sure that no aluminium dust clings to her scoring pad as that will change the results she is after.

In the aluminium works, marks can be scored out if they are not too deep. Over time, the boundaries will change, as the composition evolves. While every action has an immediate and noticeable impact, all the more so since she makes only a few lines and shapes on each surface, she is able to alter the composition. There is a performative aspect to the work that depends on being restrained and in control of every movement. Simonds-Gooding is the rare artist who works under such extreme conditions and, more importantly, does not make the difficulties she must deal with evident in her work. I think it is because Simonds-Gooding recognizes that whatever she does and however difficult it is to do, it cannot compare with the daily tribulations of those who work under much harsher and more relentless circumstances trying simply to survive.

At times delicate and soft, and at other times sharp and hard, the constantly changing light playing over the scored aluminium surface embodies a stark and what I have come to consider a noble beauty. It is not the depicted light of the Impressionists but real light that she is after. In this regard, she shares something with Robert Ryman, who also uses unlikely materials such as wax paper and Tyvek. Like Ryman, Simonds-Gooding wants her materials to call attention to the light of everyday life, and its ever-changing conditions, rather than relying on the controlled light of a gallery or a museum. The light sensitive surfaces of Simonds-Gooding's aluminium pieces praise the interaction of defiant ground and omnipresent luminosity and, in that sense, elevate this alliance into the domain of the spiritual.

1 Maria Simonds-Gooding, from letter written to Catherine Marshall, Head of Collections, Irish Museum of Modern Art, May, 27, 2004, in *Fields of Vision: Maria Simonds-Gooding* (Dublin: Taylor Galleries, 2004), ex. Cat. Unpaginated.

2 Ibid.

3 Biography page of Thomas Joshua Cooper on the website of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. http://www.gf.org/fellows/16515-thomas-joshua-cooper

4 Catherine Marshall, "The Soul selects her own society then shuts the door.." in *Fields of Vision: Maria Simonds-Gooding* (Dublin: Taylor Galleries, 2004), ex. Cat. Unpaginated.

5 John Yau, review of "The New Landscape/The New Still Life: Soutine and Modern Art" in *The Brooklyn Rail* (September 2006)