

The RHA is giving a wider vision of Maria Simonds-Gooding. By **Cristín Leach Hughes**

Maria Simonds-Gooding is a landscape artist in the truest sense of the word. For almost half a century, this India-born Irish woman has travelled to remote, abandoned and sparsely populated places to engage in a visual interrogation of the earth beneath her feet. As a general rule no sky, and therefore no weather, are depicted directly in her work. Yet both are present as they hover above and beyond each patch of land captured within the frame of her starkly abstracted compositions.

A strong retrospective at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) covers five decades of her work, beginning in 1969. It's a feast of textures, from the hand-carved plaster surfaces of early, large, wall-mounted compositions to her recent aluminium works that are scratched, etched and burnished to a shimmering silvery polish.

Something of Simonds-Gooding's skill lies in her ability to present two things at once without contradiction. Take *Cultivation II*, a plaster work from 1971. It features a single eyehole like a skull socket, and a circle like a chimney pot — blackened and hollow. The inside of the socket is rimmed with a finger-smear of lapis lazuli blue. The bank above this deep hollow is frowning like an eyebrow. The whole has the texture of ancient bone. Look again and the eye becomes a lake, the brow a hill, and the entire composition a contoured map of terrain that appears to belong to a different era, a landscape well-worn.

These skull forms in her early, archaeological-looking compositions could be read as sinister, but ultimately have an unthreatening quality. Her work is never

anxious. Though full of passion, it is also calm, focused and grounded — aspects of her art that have led viewers to find a spiritual element in it.

Throughout her career Simonds-Gooding has worked predominantly in plaster, using it as a tool and a medium to produce wall-mounted works of consistently large scale with varying degrees of three-dimensionality and texture. *Habitation I* from 1970 is 142cm wide and contains the most striking skull shape in the show. A curved, compacted skeleton body embraces its own hollow-eyed head.

There are hints at legs and limbs, the hollow of a groin, a smiley-faced rim. The skull is delicate, but looks immovable, ancient. Peer inside its turf-brown interior and you'll find two nails holding its fragile surface up.

For those more familiar with her work from the 1980s and 1990s, the depth of colour in these early pieces offers a pleasant, earthy surprise. *Early Dwellings* (1973) is a brown and mossy-green raised landscape of boundaries and fields, with a circle of remnants at its core: evidence of humans long gone. This ring-fort is also

like an ovum, glowing yellow at its core and covered in scratches and marks. There are beginnings as well as endings here.

This exhibition is part of the RHA's long-running series of retrospectives focusing on senior artist members. It began in 1999 with Melanie le Brocq, followed by Camille Souter, Imogen Stuart and Barbara Warren. In the past decade Barrie Cooke, Robert Ballagh, Martin Gale, Edward Delaney, Stephen McKenna and Carey Clarke have all been honoured. Simonds-Gooding is a less high-profile choice, being a full RHA member only

since 2012, but the spotlight is deserved. This is a serious and significant show. Born in India in 1939, she came to Ireland with her family when she was seven, to Kerry where her mother was born. She studied art in Dublin, Brussels and Bath in the 1960s before settling on the Dingle peninsula in 1968.

Although locations are not always made explicit in the titles, all of her compositions are based on on-site drawings in India, the Sahara desert, New Mexico, Mali, the Greek Islands, Lanzarote and the uninhabited Blasket Islands that lie three

miles over the water from her bedroom window. What she draws is evidence of human intervention in difficult terrain: paths, wells, walls, man-made boundaries. Direct archaeological references are made explicit in some of the early titles, including *Enclosed Ringfort* (1970) and *Double Chambered Clocháin I and II* (1969), but it's not all ancient history. The horseshoe-shaped drystone walls used by farmers in Lanzarote to shelter vines are a key motif in her work.

Although a prolific printmaker — the only place sky and weather have appeared



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Head strong
Habitation I is the most striking skull shape in the show

consistently in her work — and a painter in oil on paper during the 1980s, Simonds-Gooding is best known for plaster works. She plasters the surface herself, onto wooden-framed boards each more than a metre tall. In the late 1960s she began mixing fresco pigment into the plaster to add colour, and in the 1990s she added texture with grog, a powder of crushed clay made from old firebricks.

This unique use of materials and her cartographic, bird's-eye approach to perspective are what place Simonds-Gooding's work apart. Plaster harks back to the long tradition of fresco painting, while her mark-making owes a debt to modernist minimalism.

In the 1970s, the marks she made on the plaster surface became more drawing-related than sculptural. *Inner Boundary III*, from 1976, contains barely any colour, just scratched lines to delineate the land. *Place of Habitation III* (1985) and *Three Temples* (1981) feature primal, pared-down mark-making of a kind that demonstrates faith in the power of the gesture, the cut, the scratch.

Adding grog to the plaster resulted in compositions such as *Resting Place and Field* (1995) and *Harvest Within* (2001), featuring smooth surfaces with flat, raised areas the texture of rough stone or cast concrete. These cool compositions suited the minimalist interiors of the 1990s and early 2000s, with their pale greys, muted browns and off-white surfaces and their clean, sparse lines. But it is what she did next that has proven her ongoing significance as a contemporary artist.

Inspired by the metal plates used to make carborundum prints, she began to use aluminium as her drawing surface.

Open Shelters I (2001) is more than a metre wide with familiar motifs of blocky field-like forms with rocks or stones arranged within. She rubs the aluminium surfaces with plastic scouring pads, burnishing and polishing to create contrasting areas that are scratched, etched and worn away, resulting in a gorgeous silver-grey metal surface that shimmers.

Nine of these new works hang in the stairwell lobby at the RHA. Based on drawings made in a Himalayan valley in Bhutan, three from 2009 have marks like old-Irish Ogham writing or a primitive counting record, abstracted stitches, grasses or sticks. The most abstract are a trio of smaller works: *The Brightfield I, II and III* from 2011. The first resembles a slim female waist; the second an oddly shaped field; the third is like a split rock or an upright cliff face split by a stream of water, a thin crack down the middle.

There is something of the hermit in the impulse behind Simonds-Gooding's work, and she has spent weeks alone on Inis Mhic Uibleain. That she has shifted in the past five years to exploring and pioneering a new medium, that this work is as persuasive as anything she made in the late 1960s, says everything viewers need to know about her oeuvre and her approach. These aluminium works do not photograph well — they have to be seen in person really to be seen. In an age of second-hand viewing via social media, how refreshing to find an artist in her seventies making vibrant new work that insists we come back into the gallery to view it. **■**

Maria Simonds-Gooding: A Retrospective is at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, until Oct 26