

Handwritten text, possibly a name or title, in a light brown ink, appearing as a faint, rounded shape.



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Collaborative artistic partnerships are increasingly common in the visual arts, although usually in terms of artists who work within a shared discipline. Gilbert & George in London, like Walker & Walker in Dublin, sing from the same hymn sheet. The work in this exhibition grew out of a different kind of collaboration, a cross-disciplinary collaboration, one that had to do with each artist finding echoes and correspondences in what the other was making. The aim was not to produce a hybrid, but to create something that is informed by and mindful of the other's practice. There is a close, respectful regard between these bodies of work. To draw a musical analogy: it is not so much a case of composer and lyricist, more a couple of jazz musicians who have worked together for many years. They are alert to each other, recognise aspects of themselves in each other, and are tactful enough to allow each other breathing space: the best kind of collaboration. To say that Maria Simonds-Gooding is an artist whose subject is landscape is merely to state the obvious. But she is not a landscape painter in the obvious sense of the term. For one thing, she is not simply a painter. She is also a printmaker and a sculptor, and all these qualities come into play in what she does. For another thing, her work is more often than not defined by what is left out rather than by what is put in. Most of the conventional trappings of landscape are dispensed with, including the things that link it to leisure, amenity, indulgence. She doesn't make images of pastoral idylls.

In keeping with the nature of her subject matter, her artistic language is suitably pared down as well, pruned of lush colour and pretty much any hint of luxuriance. Often the plaster or paper reliefs, the etchings or carborundum prints she makes are monochromatic, even starkly monochromatic. Yet through some magical process it is as if they are infused with colour and light. Colour seems to come through in the soft, rich tonality of printing inks, and in the subtle inflections of whites, creams, pale ochres and greys in the paper works. These latter sometimes recall the glare of sunlight on rock, the preciousness of water and irrigation in parched terrain, as opposed to, elsewhere, the shifting atmospherics of Atlantic rain-clouds.

Cathal, a lyric poet, doesn't do idylls either. While much of his work is steeped in a sense of landscape, it is never sentimentalised. There is an abiding awareness of the precariousness and limitations of human tenure on the land, of the histories of human potential contained and perhaps unrealised in the traces that remain and fade. Yet for all the feelings unexpressed, the paths not taken, the promise of a nutritive sensuality is always there, reflected in the colours and textures of a familiar if sometimes unrecognised world. Cathal writes in long-hand, not mechanically on the depthless space of a computer screen, and there is a feeling that the physicality of the act is important, as definite and real as cutting into the soil, as the marks evoked in Maria's sculptural images.

The world she describes is scoured by the weather, eroded by the waves, worn by the endless, incremental passing of time. Shaped, in other words, by harsh forces, indifferent to our imperatives. It is a recognisable world, in the sense that we can identify places, including her native Kerry, its sea cliffs, the Blasket Islands. But it is also recognisable in a wider sense, in relation to the whole Western Seaboard, and indeed much further afield, to the Mediterranean, to

India, to wherever people struggle to maintain a hold on the land. Similarly, while Cathal's poetry is infused and fired with the chromatic intensity of his immediate landscape, and would never deny the centrality of that landscape, it does not articulate nationalistic difference and singularity but, literally, common ground. The physical patterns of Maria's work, patterns of habitation and husbandry written into the grain of the ground, record not an exotic otherness but the basic grammar of shared experience and mutuality. Such physical patterns are equivalent to the social patterns, patterns of kinship and empathy, that bespeak exactly the same mutuality in Cathal's poetry.

Maria's interest is usually in signs of human habitation in the landscape in a very specific sense. That is, she is fascinated by the relationship between people and landscape at its most essential, elemental level. Time and again in her extraordinary images, there are intimations of the way human beings have inscribed traces of their tenuous though remarkably stubborn presence into the earth. Much of urban, technological society might as well be designed to suppress memories and knowledge of this fundamental realm.

Depending on your point of view, her works describe a world of frightening containment or extraordinary freedom. There is no question but that, for Cathal, an awareness of - or the rediscovery of - the underlying, elemental connection with the land and with the place is a liberating factor. Rather than being curtailed by a sense of the past, rather than, you might even say, rejecting that past on the basis of practical limitations that operated within it, his work offers a close re-reading of apparent harshness. It could be that here he picks up on and elaborates on the inherent sensuality of Maria's images. Often in her compositions she manages to convey a sense of the physical environment as a huge, living presence. In 'Down by the Lake' the vast mass and vertiginous fall of the mountainside have an absolute, overwhelming intensity. We are offered no refuge between the slope and the forbidding, horizontal accent of the water, which is still and cold and deep. Yet there is a field marked out on the flank of the mountain. We are left to wonder at the way someone, someone like you or me, set out to wrest vitality from this magnificent but frightening place. For Cathal, the answer to this puzzle is that somehow, despite everything, the landscape has been and is construed as a responsive other. It seems to frame and answer our presence in ways that confound and captivate us. It offers us nurture, wins us over and claims our love. Such responsiveness comes at a cost, of time, energy, even of life itself. We like to forget that relationships, while vitalises us, also use us up and discard us but, Cathal implies, that is partly the point. People surrender themselves reluctantly to the land and find reciprocation, find that they belong there. In a way that is the mystery at the heart of Maria's images: how we might after all be at home in a world that seems on the face of it malignly inhospitable, the staggering beauty of which could well pass us by. Because, after all, that beauty is not particularly for us in any comfortingly providential, teleological sense. The drenched sheep huddled into a fold in the hill-side against the wind and the rain stand in for us. We may pity them but, as Maria and Cathal alike gently remind us, they reflect our own condition.

Aidan Dunne, November 2003