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**THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN**

**FINE ART - SCULPTURE**

**FEMININE SEXUALITY AND THE FEMALE BODY IN THE WORK OF  
DOROTHY CROSS.**

**BY**

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**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN AND  
COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
FINE ART - SCULPTURE.**

**1994 .**

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Niamh O'Sullivan for her advice and encouragement throughout this thesis. I am especially grateful to her for her help with the English language which is not my first language.

## **CONTENTS**

<b>Introduction</b>		<b>Page 1</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>'Works by Dorothy Cross and how they relate to theory on feminine sexuality'.</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>'The work of Dorothy Cross and feminine sexuality in Irish society'.</b>	<b>Page 18</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>		<b>Page 29</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>		



## LIST OF PLATES

1. *Double Bed* (1991. Cast iron bed frame, steel wire, glass laboratory instruments).
2. *Dresser* (1991. Wooden cupboard, tools, sandblasted wineglasses).
3. *Erotic Couple* (1988. Painted wood, wallpaper, steel hoop bulb).
4. *Shark Lady in a balldress* (1988. Cast and woven bronze).
5. *Screen, Ladies changing room* (1990-91. Wooden screen and bench, cast bronze hard hats, steel hooks, cord).
6. *Amazon* (1992. Cowhide, tailors dummy).
7. *Mooncage* (1989. Framed photograph, steel wire).
8. *Dishcover and Dishcover baby* (1993. Cowudders, silver dishcovers).
9. *Mr. and Mrs. Holy Joe* (1988. Painted wood, enamel pipe and collar, plaster, holy statue hands, muslin, clamp, hook).
10. *Mother* (1988. Painted wood, aluminium sieves, bronze, large bulb, rope, rusty marine hook).

## Introduction

*"And each stroke of his tongue ripped off  
skin after successive skin, all the skins  
of a life in the world, and left behind a  
nascent patina of shining hairs.  
My earrings turned back to water and trickled  
down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off  
my beautiful fur."*

(Carter, 1979, p.67)

The work of Dorothy Cross has many layers of skin, at times these skins are elusive, at other times crystal clear. Below the layers of skin exists a beautiful body of very interesting work. From the first time I saw the work I felt very attracted to it, the imagery and the different elements incorporated into the work fascinated me, it made me decide to write my thesis on the work of Dorothy Cross.

In this thesis I have focused on work that represents the feminine, feminine sexuality and the female body. This can be either work that has a clear resemblance to the female gender or work that has elements that are generally associated with the feminine or even works that have a gendered title. ('Screen, Ladies changing room' for example).

I have been looking at work in Dorothy Cross's most recent individual shows, these are:

Ebb, Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 1988

Powerhouse, ICA, Philadelphia, USA, 1991- Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 1993

and the group show:

Bad Girls<sup>1</sup>, ICA, London, 1993.

In order to explain the different images of the feminine and of feminine sexuality, I have looked at psycho-analytic theory on feminine sexuality. The origins of sexuality and on how the difference between feminine and masculine sexuality comes to exist.

In the first chapter I have divided artworks from Ebb, Powerhouse and the Udder series into three groups; to which I have related psycho-analytic theory and other more general ideas on femininity. There is not always a clear distinction between the feminine and masculine in the work - at times the two either interact or contradict - for that reason I have in both chapter one and two also written on the masculine element in the work.

In chapter two I have focused on works that relate to the perception of femininity and feminine sexuality in Irish society. In order to do this, I have taken a more general look at women's roles in Ireland because I feel this is important in order to explain some perceptions and notions that exist in Irish society on feminine sexuality.

1. Bad Girls was a group show, with work from different female artists, such as Helen Chadwick, Sue Williams and Nan Golding. The main theme of the exhibition was sexuality and gender, which each artist commented on in a very personal way. The work that Cross had exhibited in the show is normally referred to as the 'Udder Series'.

## **Chapter 1.**

**Works by Dorothy Cross  
and how they relate to  
theory on feminine sexuality**

In this chapter I will be looking at art-works in three different groups. I decided to divide the works into three groups, because the works relate to different elements of feminine sexuality.

The three groups are:

1. *Double bed, Dresser* (both from Powerhouse) and  
*Erotic couple* (Ebb)
2. *Screen, Ladies changing room* (Powerhouse),  
*Shark Lady in a balldress* (Ebb) and  
*Amazon* (Udder series, Bad Girls)
2. *Body gauges, Mooncage, and Lighthouse* (all from Powerhouse).

The works in group 1 and 2 deal with masculinity and femininity while group 3 concentrates on feminine essence. I have chosen to use the words masculine and feminine instead of male and female. Even though masculinity and femininity are often regarded as the characteristics of either the male or female gender, they are not just connected to the one gender in the work of Dorothy Cross. Terms of femininity and masculinity feature in both genders; notions of what is typical of the feminine and masculine are at times twisted around and fundamentally challenged. It is these shifting meanings, these different possibilities and associations that Dorothy Cross plays with in her work.

In June and July 1993 a series of lectures on Powerhouse was given in the Douglas Hyde Gallery. At the end of one of these lectures a discussion started about the work *Logbooks*. The work shows a series of logbooks (from the old powerplant) with a

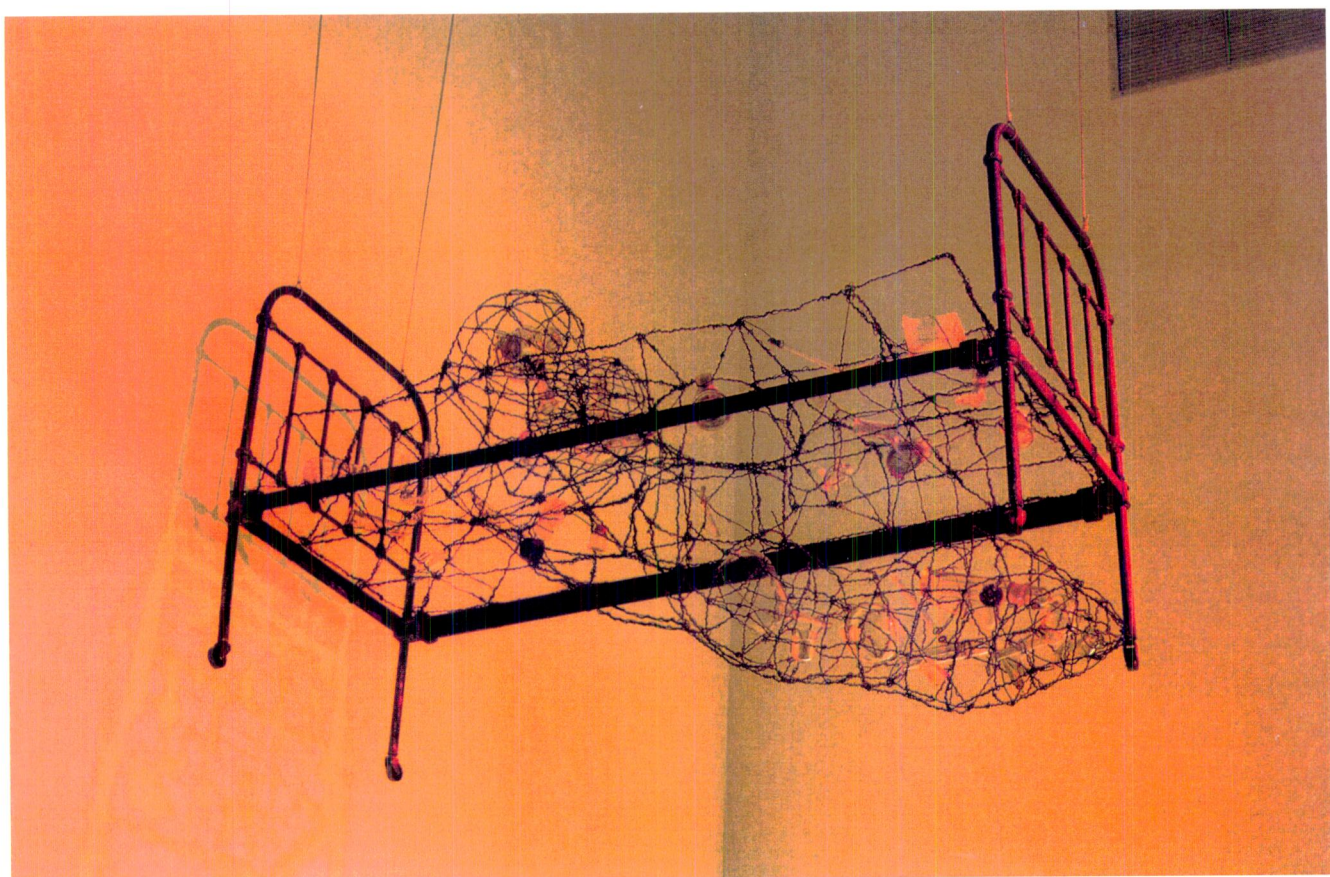


circular space cut out of them, in this space red wax nipples were placed. The discussion centred around the meaning and gender of these nipples. When the artist was questioned about this, to the great surprise of everyone (who had assumed them to be female), she stated that they were male. This incident shows clearly that some of our perceptions and notions about sexuality, often without our realising it, are quite fixed. The work of Dorothy Cross attempts to question these fixed meanings.

In Powerhouse and Ebb and to a lesser extent Bad Girls, there is a blend of different elements. The individual works may have characteristics that can be defined as male or female but the associations emanating from them are not as clearly defined. A piece might show female body parts but still comes across as rather aggressive and masculine.

In the work the possession of the phallus is an important element. The phallus is mostly associated with the male gender, it refers to images that are penis-like or relate to the penis but it also refers to power; to possess the phallus is to possess power. Freud saw the possession of the phallus as an important element in the creation of sexual difference.

In Powerhouse this struggle for the possession of the phallus can be clearly seen, not just between different works but also within individual works. Power is what we identify with the masculine, industrial world. House however is the private space, the domestic space, associated with the feminine. The actual powerhouse is the old electrical plant in Dublin Port, the plant that provided Dublin with electricity for many years. The electrical plant was occupied by men, a male work force that left behind their mark. The works in the Powerhouse show combine found objects with pieces made by Cross.



**Double Bed**



*Double bed* shows a bed hanging from the wall in suspension. In this bed a knitted metal structure can be seen. Out of the structure, facing down, comes a penis shaped form, at the top two breasts can be seen. In the metal structure old, often broken, laboratory utensils are placed. The bed is the place where lovers meet - where the feminine and masculine unite - where sexuality, passion, desire and demands are played out. In *Double bed*, which is actually a single bed, a very fragile meeting place of the feminine and masculine can be seen, one wonders where the passion and desire went. The masculine and feminine elements seem to be trapped in their knitted structure, although one wonders if they are trying or have tried to move away from each other. The single bed suggests perhaps that this piece is not about two people but about two elements within the one person.

Throughout her work Cross has shown an interest in Jungian theory (especially dream theory). Jung wrote in great length about the unconscious; he felt that the content of the unconscious could never really be known but certain elements of it could be identified. Jung divided the unconscious into two areas: the individual unconscious and the collective one. The collective unconscious is common to everyone and one of its contents is the archetypes (original models). We can never really see these archetypes but do see, in our dreams and wake-life, images and symbols that represent these archetypes. Two of the main archetypes are the anima and animus. These are the male image in the woman and the female image in the man. The anima and animus offer the possibility to the individual to find a harmony or balance between the masculine and feminine within oneself. The bed is shown in suspension, this gives the idea of movement, motion. Yet the only movement is perhaps the fact that by suspending the bed it becomes removed from the other works.

In *Dresser* a feminine and masculine element can be seen too. When the two doors of the dresser are closed we can see a male and female figure on each door. (The kind of gendered figures that can be seen on toilet signs). When the dresser is opened a





**Dresser**

collection of glasses (each with a similar image of a male or female figure, as can be seen on the doors ) is grouped with a collection of big rusty nuts and bolts. The fragile glasses are associated with the domestic and the feminine; the big bolts and nuts however have a clear industrial and masculine message. There is a paradoxical harmony in the dresser, the different elements are side by side but not really together.

In both *Double bed* and *Dresser* the masculine and feminine seem trapped in their constructs. In *Double bed* this is a very clear metal structure, in which the two shapes are knitted together, intertwined. To separate the two would cause the structure to collapse. In *Dresser*, the paradoxical harmony only exists because the two elements are brought together inside the dresser, if one were taken away the other would have an unclear function. Foucault said that sexuality is constructed and these same constructs allow sexuality to be controlled. Difference is constructed too, it does not appear naturally<sup>2</sup>. Both Freud and Lacan have written in great length on female sexuality. According to Lacan:

*"Sexuality belongs in the area of instability, played out in the register of demand and desire, each sex coming to stand, mythically and exclusively for that which could satisfy and complete the other".*

(J.Rose, 1986,p.56).

2. This is taken from a lecture on sexuality given by Elaine Sisson in NCAD April 1993; in which she quoted from Foucault's 'The History of Sexuality' Vol. 1, 1981.



Lacan has also argued that our notion of the masculine and feminine is only in language; in reality there is no such notion as masculine or feminine. Outside of language it does not exist. In this language the meanings of sexuality and difference can shift. Terms of femininity, for instance, are constructed within language and understood within this language. What is perceived as a certain, particular aspect of femininity now might change its meaning when society changes. In everyday life we can see these shifting meanings and emphasis too. For a long time sexuality was regarded as a way to reproduce in our western society, to have children was the main satisfaction; in the last 30 years we have seen a change in this regard. Women's liberation, and contraception has eventually led to an emphasis on the female orgasm instead of her ability to have children.

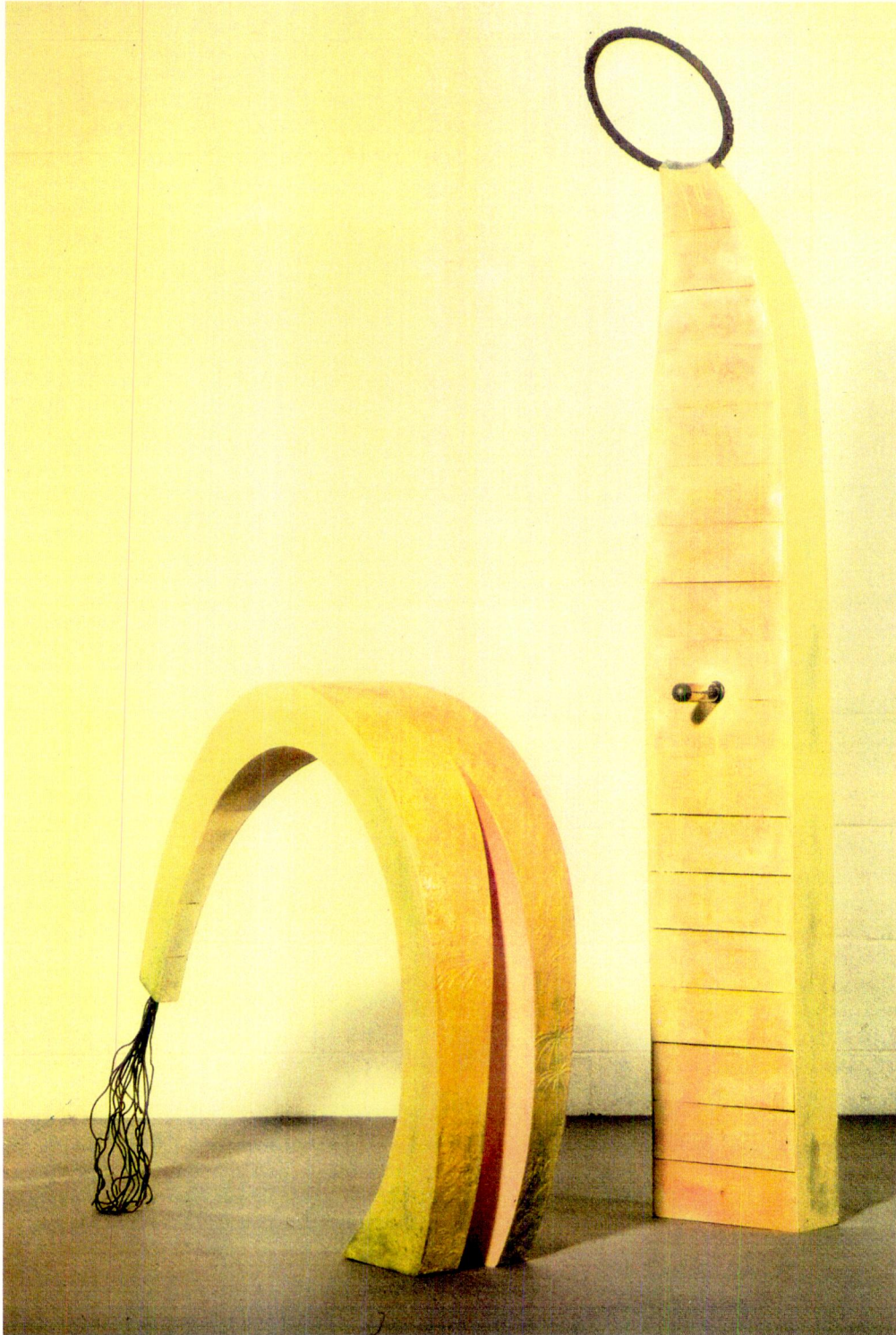
When starting to question sexual norms and sexual difference one has to question also the structures that make meaning possible, these structures are, for example, linguistic and cultural. They produce the conditioning that makes it possible to understand and use meaning. Through these structures we can analyse beliefs and perceptions but also reinforce them. According to Jacqueline Rose:

*"Woman's sexuality is inseparable from representations through which it is produced. Images and symbols for the woman cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the woman; it is the representation of sexuality which conditions how it comes into play."*

(Rose, 1986, p.67)

*Double bed* and *Dresser* both have a feminine and masculine element within the one work; the work *Erotic couple* (Ebb) is made up of two figures: one figure which has clear similarities to the male, the other figure to the female. It is a couple in the literal sense of the word. The feminine figure in *Erotic couple* bends over, her legs are slightly apart, her long copper hairs touch the ground. The masculine figure





**Erotic Couple**



looks down, his head looks like a halo and his penis is a lightbulb. *Erotic couple* shows more clearly some of the norms and constructions of sexuality than *Dresser* and *Double bed*.

Freud said that desire and demand lead to sexual difference; women want to be desired, want to be the object and subject of male desire and fantasy. Women's lack of the phallus, makes them desire the phallus (power and penis in this instance). The feminine figure in *Erotic couple* has taken a pose to please and invite her masculine partner; she is passive and serving but shows no sign of arousal.

Earlier I have written on conditioning and constructs as elements of culture and language. At times these elements reinforce perceptions, beliefs and norms, they represent a certain image or a certain symbolism. Sometimes these images are quite stereotypical. When we look at advertisements, for example, we see images of women that are rather passive (domestic, caring, nurturing or inviting); images of men, however are usually active (suggesting aggression, power and control). In our culture, and through our language, men and women are subjected to these stereotypes that at times even become role models. All this plays a part in our perceptions of what is feminine and masculine and what is expected from us if we are either male or female. The female figure in *Erotic couple* shows all the characteristics one associates with the female gender: she is passive and inviting. The male figure, however, seems to be frozen, he does not act on his partners invitation, he is different from his partner in that he shows some arousal, (the straight lightbulb suggests an erection). Nonetheless, if this is an erotic couple, where is the interaction, where is the eroticism between them?

*Screen*, *Ladies changing room* (Powerhouse), *Shark Lady in a balldress* (Ebb) and *Amazon* (Bad Girls, The Udder series), have been grouped together because they show



***Shark Lady in a balldress***



female body parts, depict feminine character and have female titles. It is in relation to these three works that I will discuss some issues that relate to feminine sexuality.

*Shark Lady in a balldress* can be read either as an independent work or as part of the work *Mother*; both are part of the Ebb show. (I will discuss the work *Mother* in the next chapter). The work shows a figure, the bottom half is covered in a balldress, the upper torso is a shark-like figure, facing up with its fin pointing out. While the balldress is usually associated with the feminine, a closer look reveals a rather masculine figure. The head has a near penis shape and the breasts look strapped on. The image of sharks can be seen throughout Ebb, and also in other works that were not part of Ebb. In Ebb we see not just images of sharks but also of other fish. According to Jung the fish symbol can stand for many things - it can represent good or evil, positive or negative forces. The choice for sharks comes partly from a personal dream (which Cross mentions in the Ebb catalogue but does not explain) and partly from the wider meanings that sharks have (positive and negative forces). Some species of shark are known to attack without provocation, they are solitary fish who go through life on their own. The suggestion is that the human journey through life is also undertaken alone. Throughout the Ebb the images of sharks suggest attraction and terror, the good and the evil. There is also clear reference to the sea:

*"The image or feeling of water is for me the ultimate freedom... it's free, it doesn't connect with anything, it's not trapped in any way...It's like the stranded whale, when the water leaves you, you are suddenly struck with many, many problems and I suppose that is the conscious working on things. Everything flows in the unconscious and they don't in the conscious where there are structures, walls to get over and gates to open and close. It is about the lack of freedom and yet the possibility."*

(Cross, 1991, p.11).

On closer inspection of *Shark Lady* we see a complex figure without one fixed meaning; the figure has feminine and masculine characteristics united within the one.



**Screen, Ladies Changing room**



There is something aggressive about her - her penis shaped head, her fin sticking out - which makes one wary of her intentions; still, the dress attracts, it is almost playful.

In the Ebb catalogue Dorothy Cross says:

*"One thing which is fascinating me at the moment is a dream that has a number of elements and these can reflect back and you can make correspondences. That's why I think these structures whether you are talking about male and female, marriage, nuns, medicinal objects, husband, wife or whatever could be multi-faceted, they could stand for many things."*

(Cross, 1991, p.6).

This multi-facetedness can be seen in all her works that I have discussed so far.

In *Screen, Ladies changing-room* one is first confronted with a screen with small peepholes, on closer examination through the peepholes, two worn benches can be seen, above the benches a row of hard hats hang. The hard hats are breast shaped and a nipple can clearly be seen sticking out. *Screen*, invites the viewer to become voyeuristic which is associated with the active and masculine. However, when one looks through the peepholes one is confronted with something unexpected (breast-shaped hard hats). Breasts are generally associated with nurturing, softness or the erotic, but in *Screen* these hard-hatted breasts are worn as protection. Here rather than being soft, yielding or nurturing they become hard, phallic and protective. In this *Ladies Changing Room*, we can see roles change, the feminine characteristics of the breasts become rather masculine. The hard-hats are there to protect against the dangers of the industrial world and are no longer breasts that nurture in the domestic world.

The work *Amazon* (Udder series) shows an old dressmaker's dummy covered in cow-skin; in the space of the breasts the cow udders are placed (the dummy only shows



Amazon

the top part of the body and has no head). When I saw the work in London the skin had started to dry out, it had lost its pink colour and the nipples had started to shrivel up. (Cross had filled the nipples with muslin so that they would keep their shape as much as possible). I am describing this because I think it is important to know how the piece is received. One responds differently to pink fresh looking skin and big nipples than to dried-out, greyish looking skin.

The meaning of the works therefore, changes as the work ages. *Amazon* is the name of the mythical, strong, athletic and powerful woman warrior. Both Hutchinson (May 1993) and Smith (London, 1993) identified fecundity and masculine power (among other things) as the themes of the Udder series.

Udders, like breasts, are associated with nurturing. When a woman is pregnant her breasts swell up and she produces milk. Udders, also swell up when filled with milk, farmers often regard bigger udders as better milk producers. Cross used a text from the US department of agriculture as an introduction to the Udder series. The text dated to 1947 reads as follows:

*"Too much attention is paid to the external size and appearance of the udder. It has long been a common practice to favour a large udder in the young dairy heifer."*

The bigger the more productive seems to be the message. *Amazon* seems to be a combination of exaggerated fertility and power.

All three of these works attempt to redefine common notions of female sexuality, at times this is done in a playful way, at other times in a more serious way. In Lacan's theory of feminine sexuality, the definition of woman comes from : 'man is not woman'; which makes woman the negative of man: 'the other'. This does not necessarily produce



another essence, but just puts one opposite the other. By defining woman as 'the other' there was a space created for mystification and objectification. Man is juxtaposed with woman, masculine with feminine and it is this that creates difference and division. It is exactly this, woman as other, that Cross explores in the Udder series. Cherry Smith quotes Cross:

*"it is about giving the udders another life  
and of course it is a joke because in the  
south of Ireland we mispronounce "other"  
because we don't have a soft "th". It's an  
overlap of becoming something "udder".*

(Smith, 1996, p.4)

"Other" being mispronounced has become literal in the work.

The works in Ebb deal extensively with the balance between the masculine and the feminine within the one person (Jung has named this process "individuation"), while Powerhouse deals more with masculinity and male authority (the male workforce in the electrical plant) losing its power and the feminine gaining it.

Freud regarded the Oedipus complex as an important element in gender difference. In the Oedipus complex the boy starts to desire his mother, the father becomes the rival. The boy is afraid of his father's retaliation (castration) and gives up his desire for his mother. The boy then identifies with his father and masculine power. Girls however, according to Freud, realise they do not have a penis, they envy this penis (they regard themselves as castrated). The girls then start to desire the father (the desire for the phallus) and see the mother as the rival (because she has access to the phallus). The possession or absence of the phallus creates the difference. According to Freud (and Lacan used it as a starting point for his theory too) the castration complex is the child's arrival into the world of distinction between male and female. Lacan called this arrival into language. Others, such as Chodorow and Kristeva have

questioned and criticised this theory, in so far as, it is very fixed in its heterosexuality; the biology and psyche are intertwined.

According to Nancy Chodorow:

*"Because of their mothering by women, girls come to experience themselves as less separate than boys. Girls come to define themselves more in relation to others".*

(Chodorow, 1978, p.93).

She goes on to say that girls have a longer attachment to their mothers, because of this they are more likely to define and experience themselves in relation to others; this relational need is also a need to be desired. Chodorow, in contrast to Freud, does not regard biology (the lack or possession of the penis) as the reason for gender differences but sees the way society is constructed (women being the primary caretaker of children, for instance,) as the reason for the difference.

*Screen*, *Shark Lady* and *Amazon* have all feminine characteristics. In our society we see images of women as passive, nurturing, soft and domestic, this seems to be the norm. However, when we come to the work of Cross this norm is challenged. The female gender is supposed to be the physically weaker one, but *Amazon* is the image of a strong female warrior. (The word warrior in itself is seldom associated with the feminine). In *Shark Lady* we are confronted with a frilly feminine dress but the figure is robustly masculine. In *Screen* the breasts, generally associated with softness, become the hard hats worn to work. All three are rather powerful, as if they possess the phallus.

Throughout the work of Dorothy Cross images of the feminine and masculine are sexed by body parts; the body parts become the metaphor for gender. It is inevitable perhaps, that the female gender is identified by breasts, while the masculine gender is

identified by a penis. Nonetheless it is worth asking why there is never a vagina to be seen? The vagina as an entrance is circular in shape, soft and fleshy, while the breast is rather solid, the nipples (especially when enlarged, which they are on different occasions in the work) can be compared to the penis shape, both are protuberant. Because Cross plays with the reversal of gender roles - the masculine made fragile and the feminine made strong - the image of a rather phallic breast and nipple will probably bring her message across better than the image of a vagina.

The last three works to be discussed in this chapter are all from Powerhouse. In *Bodygauges*, *Mooncage* and *Lighthouse* the forces of nature play an important role. *Lighthouse* shows a photograph of a lighthouse in a raging storm, the photograph is covered by a knitted metal wire structure in the shape of two dog muzzles. *Mooncage* shows a photograph of a full moon, the photograph is covered by a knitted metal wire structure in the shape of a penis.

*Bodygauges* shows a group of twelve montaged photographs. Each photograph has as insert a photograph of the artist naked with her hands reaching up. Her body forms a shifting dial on the photographs. These photographs are grouped with a series of photographs of the moon in different stages.

The force of the moon has long been associated with the feminine. The moon cycles are similar to that of women; women and the moon have a similar biological clock. The twelve photographs of *Bodygauges* could either be the twelve months of the year or the twelve hours of the day. Throughout time women have also been associated with nature; like nature they reproduce, carry seed, blossom and bear fruit. The fertility of nature is also seasonal and subject to time; for women a similar biological clock is present.



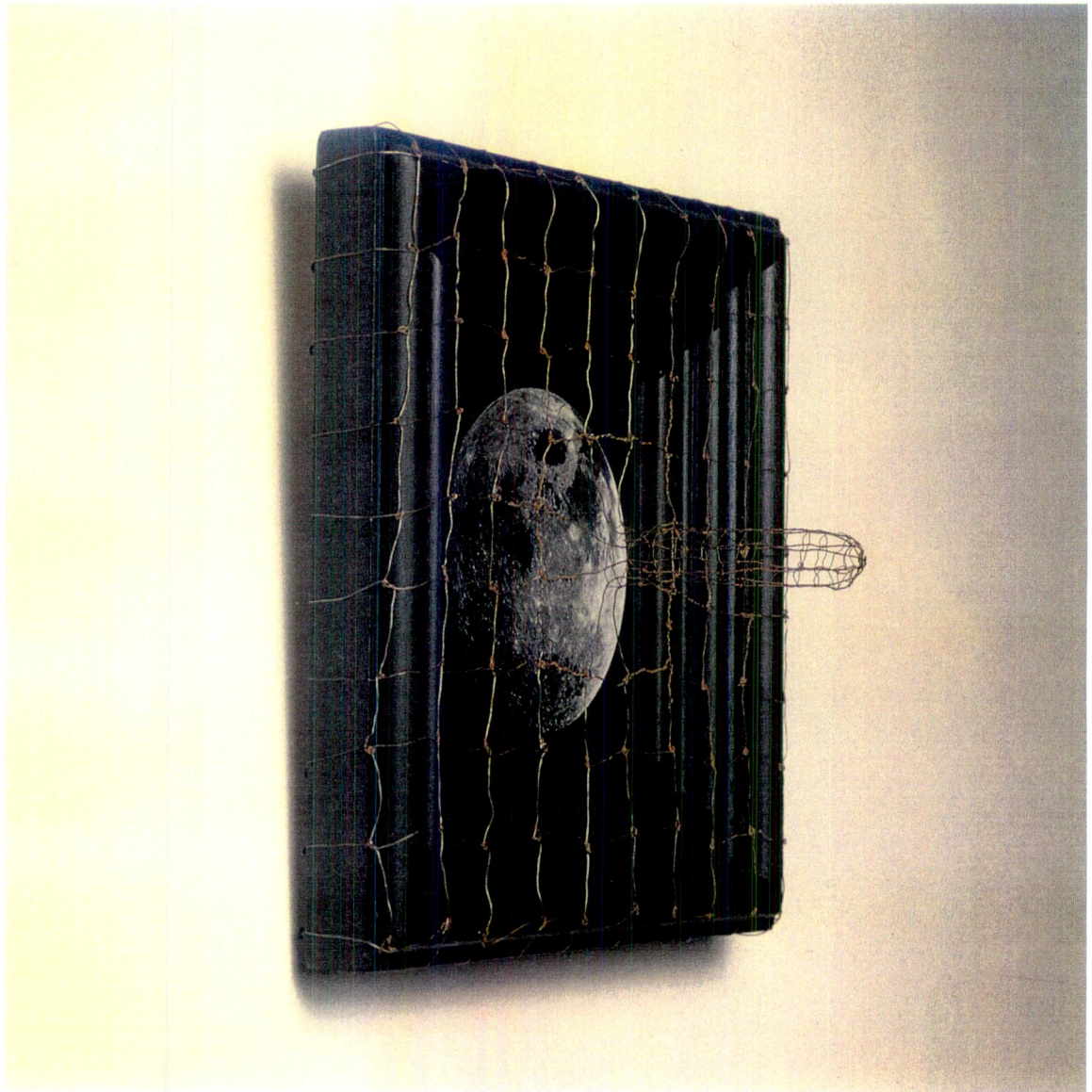
Lacan denied in his earlier work the existence of a feminine essence, according to him it was the definition: 'woman is not man' that defined her as other, not an essence that was unique to the female gender. In his later work Lacan does comment on a feminine essence/dimension. He remarked more and more that:

*"woman has a beyond phallus dimension. This dimension he can say nothing about, since for him language is entirely phallic and any passage to the symbolic happens by 'castration' and turns the object of this passage into a phallic object; therefore according to him nothing can be said about the feminine beyond the phallus".*

(Ettinger, 1993,p.13)

Other theorists, such as Kristeva and Irigaray, have stated that there is a true, innate, feminine essence (or dimension). Like Lacan they place this essence outside of phallic order. Kristeva's work comes from a semiological tradition, most of her work concentrates on the structure of language and representations. Women and men are taught language, its proper order, syntax and representation. Language is their entrance into the phallic world. However language as part of phallic culture excludes a feminine essence, this essence then can only exist outside of language. According to Kristeva and Irigaray, feminine essence exists in the world of the senses, of subjectivity and symbolism. This essence is often an unconscious dimension.

Both Kristeva and Irigaray link this feminine essence to motherhood, to the stage when the child and mother still communicate through their senses and where the child has not entered phallic culture (has not yet learned language ). The difficulty with women having a dimension outside of the phallic order is how to understand or even discuss something which exists outside of phallic culture and language, and inside the domain of subjectivity, senses and symbolism. One can question if this feminine essence exists at all can it be discussed within the modes that are available (language



**Mooncage**



and culture)? At the same time, if there is an innate feminine essence, this creates the possibility to define women not from dominant terms, not as negative or as others but to define her within her own terms, even though these might exist outside of phallic language. To look at all this is also to look at social and gender construction; through language and society (phallic order) we are taught differences, we see femininity being subjected to the dominant term - phallus. At times these subjections and definitions become rather restrictive.

In *Mooncage*, the moon's cage is a knitted phallus; the work suggests that the feminine force (moon) is restricted or even imprisoned by the masculine force (phallus). In *Lighthouse* the force of nature (feminine) is muzzled. Finally in *Bodygauges*, we see a clock ticking away, time is passing by, the female body influenced by time slowly starts to lose its power to procreate life.

In all three works there is a restriction, a limitation at play, and in all three this is a limitation or restriction on what is generally associated with the feminine. At times these limitations and restrictions suggest a link to patriarchal society (phallic order). It could also suggest a link to the limitations women set themselves in order to fit into society.

## **Chapter 2.**

**The work of  
Dorothy Cross  
and feminine sexuality in  
Irish Society**

Dorothy Cross was born in February 1956 in Cork. She grew up in the city but spent her summer months as a child at the seaside. (South of Cork city). When she was 18 she left Ireland to study jewellery in England, after her degree (Leicester Polytechnic, B.A. 1977) she went on to do print-making for four years in San Francisco. (San Francisco Art Institute, M.F.A. 1982). From 1983 onwards Dorothy Cross started to concentrate on sculpture. She received a scholarship to work as an artist in New York for a year. All together, she spent 10 years outside of Ireland. She now lives and works in Ireland and can see herself staying here. In conversation with Cross she said that there is not as much focus on artists in Ireland as there is in other countries, this for her creates a clear atmosphere to work in. According to Cross the fact that the visual arts have not been as highly regarded as the written arts has created more space for artists to work in. The downside, however, is that the visual arts are not always accorded the importance they deserve. Dorothy Cross has widely exhibited in and outside of Ireland, in group exhibitions as well as individual exhibitions. Her most recent work can be seen in the Kerlin Gallery (Dublin) in February 1994. I have written about Dorothy Cross as an introduction to this chapter because as an Irish \*

In this chapter I will be focusing on points in the work of Dorothy Cross that relate to the perception of feminine sexuality and women's roles in Ireland. In order to do this I will take a general look at women in Ireland. In this chapter I will write about the works:

Mr. and Mrs Holy Joe (Ebb), Dishcover (Udder series) and some of the more general elements of Powerhouse and the Udder series. As a final part of the chapter, and separate from some of the issues written about, I will be discussing the work Mother (Ebb).

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\* artist; living and working in Ireland; her work often comments on elements of Irish society.

## **Constitution of Ireland (1937); Article 41**

### **The family**

1.1 The State recognises the family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

2. The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

2.1. In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.

2.2 The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.

To examine gender roles one has to examine also at how they came about, we must look at history, at language and at conditioning, The above articles from the constitution show very clearly what in 1937 was regarded as women's most important role and place, as mother in the home. The articles go so far as to suggest that woman and mother are the same thing, The 1937 constitution drew heavily on contemporary Catholic thinking and social teaching. The articles 40-44 were in direct line with the writings by Pope Pius XI ('The Christian education of Youth', 1929, and 'Christian Marriage' 1930). President Eamonn de Valera's constitution put women's achievements in reverse.

During the 1916 rising, and before, women has been heavily involved in Ireland's struggle for independence, and for better rights. Anny and Fanny Parnell for example, set up the Ladies Land League. Not only did they achieve considerable success in relation to the Land League goals, they also set up a political platform for



women. Under pressure from Charles Parnell (who felt that their approach was much too radical) Anna and Fanny Parnell were forced to back down. In the years approaching the Easter rising, and during it, women played an important role - in nationalist, political and military activity. Many of the women involved were also part of the suffragette movements in which they fought for equal rights for women. James Connolly's socialist ideas would have resulted in equal rights, but the execution of the leaders of the 1916 Rising and the Civil War (1921-22) put all these promises on hold. The campaign for women's rights was still important but increased conservatism made the struggle rather difficult. The 1937 constitution was the final blow to equal rights:

*"mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home".*

After the 1937 constitution the 'marriage bar' was introduced, which meant that married women could not work in the civil service and women were excluded from juries, for example, because this would interfere with "their duties in the home". Furthermore the female representation in the Dail was referred to as "The Silent Sisters" (Ward, 1983); these silent sisters were either unmarried daughters or widows of deputies. All of this reinforced dominant masculine values and left very little space for the liberation of women. Change was initiated around the late 1960's; a feminist movement started to grow in America and Western Europe. Women started protesting for equal rights and for an end to the division of labour and to patriarchy.

In 1973 Ireland entered the EC, an economic unit set up to make trade more effective between the different countries, one of its side effects was to make Ireland less isolated. In the last two decades many changes have taken place: contraception, child care and the slow abolition of labour division have created a more equal situation for women. However there are many more issues that still need attention. To achieve

equality one has to look also at the importance of the Catholic Church in Ireland and at the effects of unemployment.

In 1993 the Irish Times polled a group of women; the aim of the poll was to ascertain how women perceive themselves in Irish society. There was a range of questions dealing with women's issues, one of which asked what women saw as their most important role in life. To this, 74% answered that they regarded motherhood/providing for the family as most important, demonstrating that motherhood still is of main importance. Issues like career (5%) and self-fulfilment/being yourself (6%) scored a lot less. Of course, providing for the family does not necessarily have to be done in a domestic setting, the ability to provide financially and emotionally are just as important.

Between Powerhouse and the Udder series many similarities and differences can be seen. Women's roles in patriarchal society were and still are very much restricted to motherhood and domestic work, while men in contrast play a main part in the industrial world. In the work of Dorothy Cross a division can be seen between work that deals with issues that relate to urban society and rural society. Much of Powerhouse deals with the urban electrical plant at Dublin bay while the Udder series comments more on rural Ireland where the cow is the bread and butter of the dairy-farmer, just as the electrical plant provided the city workforce with its bread and butter. The division of labour is important to an understanding of how gender differences come about and how women's roles are perceived in Irish society. Power however does not just relate to men and women, it is also class-related. One can assume that most of the workforce (with families depending on them for economic support) would have been trapped in wage labour. Dorothy Cross's work is not a political statement about class inequality in Irish society, instead her work comments on a wider context or notions of gender and the power house is a setting for that, Nor am I trying to say that her work could be made anywhere, the powerplant

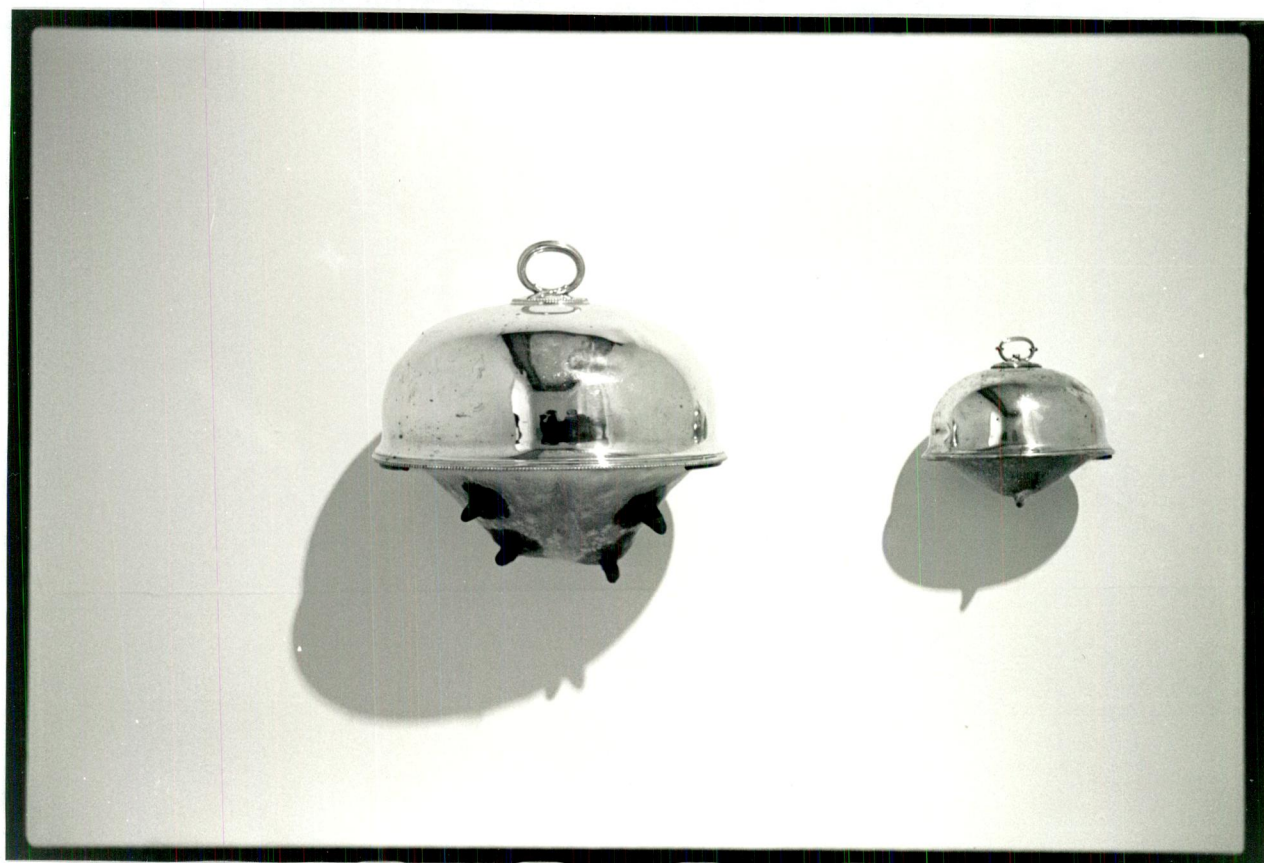


is a specific setting - a place abandoned by a male workforce that left behind its residue, a place where the female was excluded.

The central piece in Powerhouse is Parthenon which shows a series of lockers. These lockers are private spaces (the private is normally associated with the feminine - the domestic). The lockers are painted green, which emphasises the private even more. Green was (and still is in Dublin Port for example) used as a colour applied to the private areas like tool lockers, changing rooms, toilets and kitchens. Powerhouse, in a way, turns gender notions inside out, as the masculine loses power the feminine is portrayed as gaining strength and potency. Parthenon shows lockers with the private residue of the men that worked in the plant; (a pair of socks, a picture of the Virgin Mary) these lockers show the more vulnerable, private side of the masculine workforce, the side that is normally associated with the feminine.

*Dishcover* and *Dishcover baby*, from the Udder series, both show an udder attached under a silver dishcover (the kind of dishcover that is used for serving meals). The udders are different in size. (*Dishcover* is bigger than *Dishcover baby*), both are filled with sand and muslin to give them a swollen, full appearance. Like *Amazon*, when I saw these two works in London, both still looked very swollen but their colour had gone greyish and the skin had dried out which made the image lose some of its softness; nonetheless the impact was strong. The silver dishcover recalls associations with maid servants, women serving men or women being submissive to men's needs. The udder is clearly associated with the breast, the breast that offers nurturing and comfort. In *Dishcover* this nurturing and comfort are served up under a silver cover. It is a feminine image, the feminine serving; the udders hanging to be milked, to be made useful just as the cow is subject to the farmers needs. *Amazon* is the one piece in the Udder series that is non-submissive, in content, and shows a certain potency.

In Irish society there is still a certain degree of inequality especially apparent in the work situation, this is due to patriarchy, and to a lesser extent, the unemployment



*Dishcover and Dishcover baby*

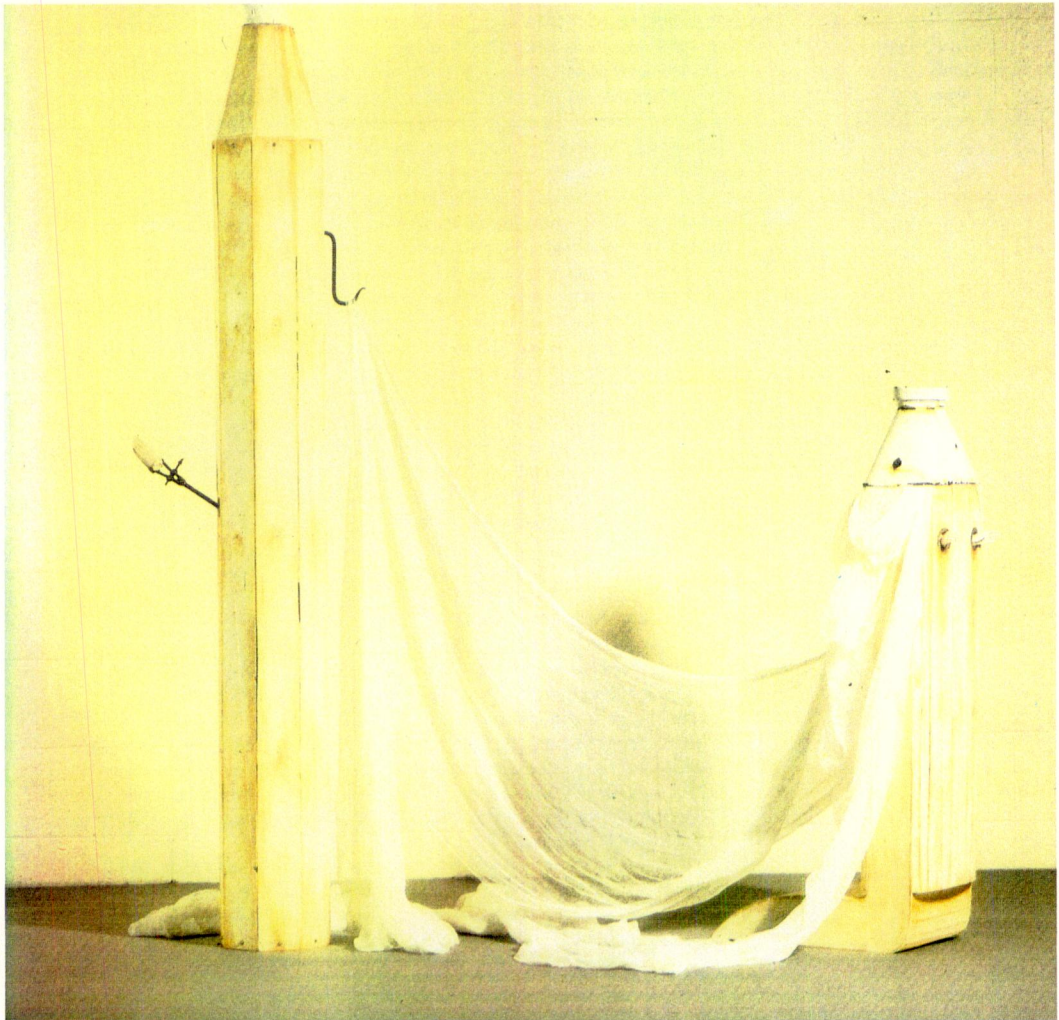


situation in Ireland, Women are more widespread in low-wage jobs than high-paid ones. The low-wage jobs (hairdressers, secretaries, waitresses, nurses etc.) have a lesser status and this in turn effects the status of women and the image women have of themselves, It is clear that Cross is acutely aware of these issues.

Not only did the Catholic Church have a major influence, historically, on the constitution but it continues to extend a pervasive influence on the everyday life of women in Ireland. The Catholic Church regards marriage as the only way in which sexuality can be expressed; any form of sexuality outside of marriage is regarded as immoral and an offence against the principles of the church. Furthermore sexuality within the institution of marriage has its boundaries too; its emphasis, according to the church should be on reproduction and not pleasure.

Mr. Holy Joe is a tall figure, his head is an enamel pipe, where one would expect his penis a small iron bar sticks, out and at its end a small plaster hand is attached. (The kind of hand that can be seen on holy statues.) He has his back to Mrs. Holy Joe, a hook attached to his back has hooked Mrs. Holy Joe's wedding veil. Her head is an enamel collar and she seems to be kneeling. There is no real indication of her sex, but in the space where her breasts would be expected to be, hands can be seen. (These are the same kind of holy statue hands that indicate Mr. Holy Joe's sex.) The name itself is a clear reference to the church. Reinforced by Mrs. Holy Joe's rather virgin-like pose, Mrs. Holy Joe is on her knees, with her hands slightly spread out, like a praying-blessing figure. The wedding-veil suggests the virgin-bride, although if this is Mrs. Holy Joe, she would be married already. The only indication of sexuality is Mr. Holy Joe's erect iron bar with holy hand, otherwise there is an aura of sexual denial about the piece. As is *Erotic Couple*, there is no interaction between the two figures, Indeed in Mr. and Mrs. Holy Joe the two figures are not even facing each other, all that connects them is a wedding-veil. There is no emotion, no passion, no





**Mr. and Mrs. Holy Joe**



sign of love; we are looking at a marriage that might be the picture of morality and principles but it is certainly not the picture of love.

Irish society is permeated with the influence of the Catholic Church. To talk about feminine sexuality in relation to Irish society is, in a way, to talk about something that does not exist without the boundaries of morally and socially accepted codes, Feminine sexuality is regarded as something that only exists within the union of man and woman. In *Powerhouse and Ebb* we see the feminine and masculine struggle; the masculine and feminine within the individual as well as within society, language and/or culture. It is a struggle at times to find a balance, at other times a struggle out of a trapped situation. In *Mr. and Mrs. Holy Joe* we can see a clear reflection of the confinement of society. This confinement exists because of conditioning and social structures, only when these start to change will there be a change in society.

One of the images of the female body, and to an extent of feminine sexuality, that I have touched upon very little so far are the images of the mother. I have decided to discuss this as part of this chapter because of the importance of motherhood in Irish society and also because 'mother' does not necessarily have to stand for the actual bodily mother but can also stand for the historical and institutional mother. This can be what we in our society learn to be the role of the mother, but also the cultural role of mother, which throughout history has had a different importance, These both have led to role-models but also to stereotypes. In relation to the work of Dorothy Cross I will also be looking at psychoanalytic theory on motherhood.

The Irish constitution very clearly defines the role of women as mothers, the two are regarded as synonymous. Women throughout time have been the primary caretakers of children; they nurture, provide, educate and raise their children without an equal input from men. Women play a very important part in the conditioning of their children. Therapists, amongst others, believe strongly that to become a well-adjusted



adult one needs a mother who provides total, warm, unbroken mothering. When anything goes wrong to disrupt this process, women are immediately blamed, this totally overlooks the lack of fathering. In the last few years we have heard much about "the new man": who takes equal responsibility for childcare and domestic duties. In reality women are still mothering; long working hours and career pressure are just some of the factors that keep men from becoming more active parents. The consequent difficulty for many women is the combination of mothering and career.

The work, *Mother* (Ebb) shows an arched figure (the arch is a half circle) in the middle of the arch rising up is another curved shape, which looks like a half-torso. (The big arch resembles legs). At the back of this curved torso are steps leading onto a diving-board, at the front two aluminium sieves, like breasts, can be seen. At the end of the diving-board stands a small version of *Shark Lady in a balldress*, above her head hangs a lightbulb. Going down from the arch to the ground is a long thick rope, at the end of the rope a big rusty marine hook is connected.

According to Cross:

"The idea of mother is something very solid  
and unmoving and yet that's half the problem  
with the mother."

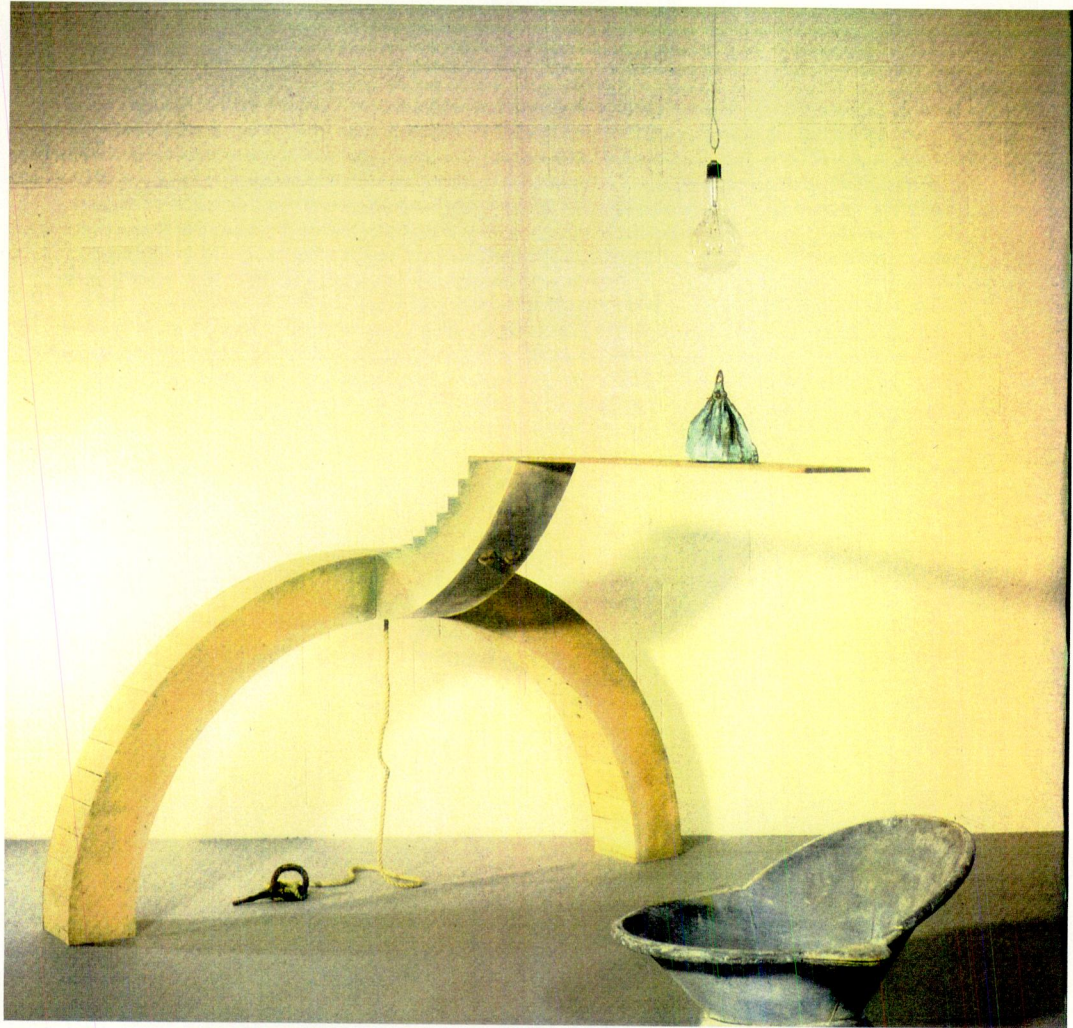
"....She is a big cumbersome figure but she is  
free even though she has this big hook which  
was attached to something else.

But she has an aspect of herself that has  
incredible possibilities of whimsy and mystery  
and madness."

(Cross, 1991, p.18).

Again we can see a multi-facetness, the work is a metaphor for many things, has many possibilities and can be explained in many different ways. This also makes it difficult to take one approach to it. There is a child-mother relationship in *Mother*, mother's child seems to be *Shark Lady*; the rusty state of the hook and umbilical-cord and *Shark Lady's* position give the impression that *Shark Lady* is ready to detach herself from her mother and gain her own independence. *Mother* is becoming the





**Mother**



diving-board for *Shark Lady*, she has offered her nurturing and now watches her child walk away. *Mother* is the primary caretaker of *Shark Lady*, she is a 'single mother'; there is no father-figure around.

In the early '80s Cross made a series of works named the '*Matriarchal series*', the series was a reflection on Mother Ireland. We expect the mother to comfort, to nurture, we have similar expectations of what we regard as home. Expectations are not always met, either because of the impossibilities of the expectations on people's inadequacies. The Catholic church and its influence on society has to a large extent put boundaries on women's liberation which makes Ireland, for some women, a rather hostile place in which to live.

Psycho-analytic theorists have written at great length on the importance mothers play on the child's development. Freud in writing on gender differences wrote much about the mother. He defined two types of mother: the 'phallic mother' and the 'castrated mother'. Children regard their mother as phallic before they enter into the Oedipal stage. She is the core of their life and provides for their needs. However, when children become aware of the body they then realise that the mother has no penis. The Oedipal stage makes them realise that the mother is castrated, she does not possess the penis or phallus and is not powerful. Freud's theory, on genital awareness as the reason for gender differences has already been discussed. Nancy Chodorow turned the penis-envy around and called it womb envy; according to her the child's primary identification is with the female body, it makes more sense then that the child regards the male body as "other". Her main focus is on sociology of gender and the reproduction of motherhood. According to Chodorow it is society that produces the mother as primary caretaker; one has to only take one look at society to see that women are the main parent, this situation is repeated over and over, it is so deeply constructed in our society that it will be difficult to change. (Chodorow, 1978)



Dorothy Cross says that the mother : "has an aspect of herself that has incredible possibilities of whimsy and mystery and madness". I have thought about this statement and tried to figure out what Cross meant by this 'aspect'. When going back to the actual figure (*Mother*) the image does recall associations with the earth-mother or even a Sheela-na-gig (even though there is no representation of the vagina in *Mother*). Both have visual similarities and *Mother*, like Sheela-na-gig, and the earth-mother seems to suggest the celebration of fertility and the power of nature. The images of Sheela-na-gig first originated in Western Europe, it is thought, as part of the church's visual preaching against sexual sins. In Ireland it appears that their function changes, they became fertility symbols, a sexual celebration. (Archaeology Ireland, 1993, p.13). In chapter one I have already related the feminine power to the power of nature; nature can be "whimsical, mysterious and mad", maybe it is these "incredible possibilities" that the work suggests. If so, Shark Lady might have inherited more than just some of her mothers conditioning she may have the power to create life.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have focused on images in the work of Dorothy Cross that represent feminine sexuality and the female body. Chapter One related psycho-analytic theory on sexuality to the work of Cross. Chapter Two looked at images that can be seen as reflections on perceptions of sexuality in Irish society and examined aspects of women's roles in Irish society. One of the questions I asked myself when I started this thesis was whether Cross created an image of a new feminine sexuality in her work. Looking back now I would not describe the work as an image of a new feminine sexuality, however Cross does show a side of feminine sexuality that is not often seen, a potent and strong side. Cross's main interests, and this is clearly reflected in the work, is with perceptions and notions of gender differences. In her work Cross plays around with standard notions and perceptions on sexuality and gender differences. At times the work fragments these notions, other times they are turned around, often this is done in a rather tongue-in-cheek way.

Cross has been influenced by psycho-analytic theory (in Ebb the influence of Jungian dream theory is very apparent) but also by feminist theory on gender differences. The work is analytical in that it questions 'fixed' meanings and human behaviour especially between the sexes. In conversation with Cross (1994) she stated

*"Everything is informed by the difference of sexes".*

(Cross, 1994)

In the work we can see the feminine and masculine struggle, there is never a harmony between both; at no stage do the two seem at ease with each other, there is always some tension, some wariness of each other. The feminine, at different stages in the work, seems to need to assert herself. What is generally associated with the feminine (passive, nurturing submissive, vulnerability) can rarely be seen

as characteristics of Cross's female figures, more often they show masculine characteristics like aggression and potency. If they do show feminine characteristics they do this often in an exaggerated way, for example the female figure in *Erotic Couple* 'bends over backwards' to be passive and inviting and *Dishcovers* only purpose seems to be that of servitude and submission. The male counterparts seem to possess the more feminine characteristics, they are often vulnerable and passive, seldom aggressive. The work is therefore, often about the masculine made feminine and the feminine made masculine. In relation to the Udder series<sup>3</sup> Cross mentions (Cross, 1994) that she was interested in the reduction of the cow. All the cow seemed to be significant for was its udder; Cross wanted to elaborate on this insignificance and at the same time to give the udder an other function and still make it complete.

If her work is a comment on the construction of sexuality and the construction of difference between the sexes; whereby one is made more significant than the other; it in itself does not escape these boundaries of construction. Dorothy Cross does not repeat but subverts these constructions. By subverting roles she creates the possibility of showing the potency of the feminine thus escaping from what is normally associated with the feminine.

Mirjam Keune.

3. The Udder Series was inspired by a visit of Cross to a folk museum in Norway, where a cow udder was exhibited that has been used as a sieve; this other function of the cow udder inspired Cross.



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