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**THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART**  
**DESIGN**

**FACULTY OF DESIGN**

**DEPARTMENT OF FASHION AND TEXTILES**

**(WOVEN TEXTILES)**

**SHEELA-NA-GIG:**

**GODDESS OR WHORE,**

**ANCIENT OR MODERN?**

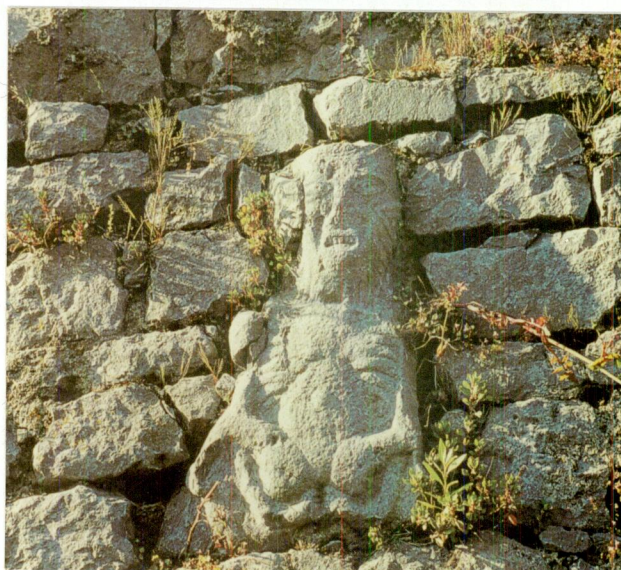


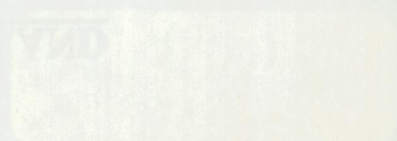
Fig. 1.1.

***BY***

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*The bloody tent flap opens. We slide into life, slick with slime and blood. Cunt, or Cymric Cwm, Chaucerian quente, the first home from which we are sent into banishment to spend our whole life cruising to return, raising a puny mast to back into those moist lips that overhang the labia minora and clitoris. To sigh and die upon the mount of Venus, layer after layer of warm moss, to return to that first darkness! Small wonder she grins at us from gable or church wall. From the howling babe life's warm start: man's question mark?*

***"Sheela-Na-Gig"***

***(Montague, 1992, p. 40)***



Fig. 1.2. Moate Castle Sheela-na-gig, County Westmeath



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## INTRODUCTION

*The Virgin Mary gives suck to the infant Jesus both as historical mother and as the metaphysical image of nourishing Mother church. (Warner, 1985, p.283)*

In Ireland we have been brought up to envisage the above description as the archetype image of woman in Christian iconography. In total negation to this symbol of perfection, we are confronted with the stone effigies known under the name of Sheela-na-gig, which were found predominantly in ecclesiastical settings of the medieval era. The characteristics of such a figure have been described as follows:

*An ugly, mask-like face with a huge scowling mouth, skeletal ribs, huge genitalia held apart with both hands, and legs apart (Sharkey, 1975, p.8).*

This elusive image does not conform to any preconceived ideas of the female in a Christian context. These figures occur throughout the British Isles and it is astonishing to find that the majority of these are in Ireland, a country which is steeped in religious prudery. Despite pogroms against them over the years, the Sheela-na-gigs have survived remarkably well, due to a deep regard for past and present tradition and folk practice.

Since there is an absence of documentation from the Medieval period prescribing an explanation for these figures, they have been labelled as elusive and mysterious. Even today they have been dismissed by the academic establishment.

*Scholars have been reluctant to devote time to the study of these carvings, of which hundreds exist, not because of social attitudes and the climate of opinion regarding matters of an improper or indelicate nature, but because they have not considered them important (Weir & Jerman, 1986, p.9).*

The aim of this thesis is to discuss essentially the Sheela-na-gigs of Ireland, their role, context and significance.





## CHAPTER 1 - ORIGIN AND FUNCTION, PAGAN OR CHRISTIAN?

*one of those old fetish figures called Hags of the  
Castle or Julia the Giddy, or the Girl of the Paps,  
or the Whore, or the Idol, or St. Shanahan, or  
Cathleen Owen, or Sheila O'Dwyer...(Weir &  
Jerman, 1986, p.11)*

Over the years these terms have been consigned to a group of female exhibitionist stone carvings. They first entered into prominent public discussion in Ireland during the nineteenth century when rediscovered by antiquarians, and have proved intangible figures to the archaeologist as well as to the art historian.

Nowadays the title most frequently used with reference to these carvings is 'Sheela-na-gig'. This name is said to have been "*extemporized by a countryman to satisfy some amateur investigator's thirst for traditional lore*" (Macalister, 1928, p.348). Sheela-na-gig was the declaration initially applied in the description of a figurative carving found at Rochestown, County Tipperary in the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy published between 1840 and 1844 (O'Connor, 1991 p.11). Sheela-na-gig, the anglicised form of the Irish expression Síhile na gCíoch which is defined as "*a stone fetish representing a woman supposed to give fertility*" (Dinneen, 1927, p.1027), has gained so wide a currency that it is now the commonly accepted term and spelling.

Essentially Sheela-na-gigs are a group of nude female stone sculptures represented in the frontal aspect. They are usually displayed in a squatting birthing position, with hands pointing to or pulling apart the vaginal cavity. Breasts are never more than normal, often barely suggested and sometimes excluded altogether. The genitalia are over-emphasised both in size and position (Andersen, 1977, p.19). It is of modern popular belief that Sheela-na-gigs date from the eleventh century to the later sixteen hundreds, although Dr. Anne Ross, author of Pagan Celtic Britain, (1967) is one among many who are of the opinion that their origin is of indeterminate date. Sheela-na-gigs have been found on churches and castles and to a lesser extent on standing stones, wells, walls and bridges. Within the British Isles, twenty one have been recorded in England, seven in Wales and three in Scotland



(Smyth, 1988, p.134), but is in Ireland that they enjoy their greatest popularity, where there are approximately one hundred and twenty of these female carvings (Cherry, 1992, p.4-10)

Sheela-na-gigs have aroused considerable emotion over the course of time and their descent and exact significance have so far bewildered scholars due to the fact that most of the current beliefs concerning them are of present day vintage. These express contemporary preoccupation's rather than those of the medieval era which incorporated these female sculptures. Because there is an insufficient body of literature and folklore regarding Sheela-na-gigs, it is difficult to assess the precise intention of their compelling image. The strength with which these carvings have clung to existence has eluded many and so a variety of opinions about their initial derivation, purpose and longevity have been widely expressed .

Eamonn Kelly, the Acting Head of Antiquities in The National Museum, is of the opinion that Sheela-na-gigs developed in Western France between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries as part of the Romanesque art tradition. They acquired as their models the late classical sculptures which were fertility carvings relating to Greek and Roman Goddesses such as Demeter (Kelly, 1994, p.48), an earth mother figure who is essentially associated with vegetation, fertility and the annual cycle of sowing, growth and harvest.

Throughout parts of medieval Europe, several types of exhibitionist figures were prevalent and were frequently carved on the stonework of churches, particularly on those situated along pilgrim routes. From the eleventh century onwards, large numbers of Irish were engaged in pilgrimages to Rome, France, Spain and elsewhere (Kelly, 1994, p.48). During these visits they would have encountered Romanesque architecture with its exhibitionist figures illustrating sexual themes such as groin biting beasts, couples copulating and women suckling serpents.

Particularly in France, even before the twelfth century, a large repertoire of Sheela-like carvings existed on ecclesiastical buildings. These were mostly acrobatic figures exhibiting their genitalia in contorted poses,. They formed a characteristic part of the decoration on Romanesque churches, although they were confined to corbels. A corbel acrobat at St. Quantin de Racannes, France (Fig. 1.3) depicts a Sheela in her seated posture with a widely splayed



vulva. Another exhibitionist from the decorated tower of the village church at Guéron in the Basque region (Fig. 1.4) conveys a female figure with her legs pulled up displaying her genitals. She stares wide-eyed at the other masks which the corbel decoration incorporates. (Andersen, 1977, p.54-57)

Even though European churches provided a variety of models including males and animals as well as females, it seems that the corbel acrobats such as mentioned in the previous paragraph was the continental influence which in Ireland was almost exclusively epitomised by the female exhibitionist Sheela na gigs. Helen Hickey, author of Images of Stone, (1976) suggests that the reason for this may be found in the fact that the early Irish church "viewed women as evil seductresses and the cause of man succumbing to the sin of lust"(Hickey, 1976, p.50). The Middle Ages was a period of reforms in clerical life, requiring austere principles and prescribing intensified security around the spiritual life of the church. To address a largely illiterate congregation, its teachings were conveyed with the assistance of symbolic imagery. Within this frame of reference Sheela-na-gigs have been classified as morality lessons in stone, reminders of and warnings against the sins of the flesh (O'Connor, 1991, p.18).

Throughout the medieval church's existence, prominent among its doctrines were the Seven Deadly Sins, which included the iniquities of lust and avarice. Avarice was considered to cause the destruction of the male character while lust was regarded a female crime. The medieval era has been described as the most male-dominated society that Western Europe has ever known (Kelly Appendix One). Females were seen as the vehicles whereby men were on the slippery road to damnation. It has been suggested that the emphasis on the genitalia of Sheela-na-gigs, which are amplified and exaggerated, related to the church's teaching that sinners of carnality would be punished in hell through the bodily organs which they had offended. "*This is where you come from and this is where you are going to*"(Ní Dhomhnaill, 1994, p.55).

According to Eamonn Kelly, this is the context within which Sheela-na-gigs were introduced into Ireland. This may have been the case although we must remember that in Ireland the female genitalia were seen as powerful and it was believed that they possessed the energy to avert the evil eye. Thomas Wright, in his discussion of erotic subjects, entitled The Worship of the



Generative Powers during the Middle Ages of Western Europe (1957), states that:

*It is a singular fact that in Ireland it was the female organ which was shown in the position of protector upon the churches...and that they were seen as objects of great importance* (Wright, 1957, p.35).

A story told by Mahon Smith in The Irish Times, September, 1977 serves a good example of how the naked female form with displayed genitalia has historically been regarded as a powerful force to safeguard and repel evil. He related how in 1913 a bloody faction fight was averted when the bean-an-tighe (the woman of the house) lifted her skirt, displaying her naked genitals. *"The enemies of her and her family fled in terror"* (Lalor, 1990). In the famous epic Táin Bó Cuailgne, believed to be dated in its earliest form to the eight century, women use genital display as a weapon to subdue Cu Culainn on several occasions., as he *"followed the rump of a misguiding woman"* (Kinsella, 1969, p.251). Powerful sagas such as this would have encouraged the belief that sheelas could ward off evil.

I believe that during the later medieval period of the Gaelic revival, Sheela-na-gigs would have been seen as protective images both in a Christian and mythological sense. During this era, families of medieval Ireland would have been listening to tales of the powerful mother goddesses of the ancient world such as Brigid, Queen Meadhbh and the Morrigan. These authoritative female figures were part of the Irish tradition. It is often assumed that these characters were large, ample, friendly figures. This is seldom true. Like the Sheela-na-gigs they were powerful and protective but these attributes were often achieved through an alluring yet deadly manner. The message of the Sheela-na-gig is double-edged *"the opening of her vagina and the smile on her face elicit both awe and terror, one might venture too far inside her and never return to the light of day again"* (Getty, 1990, p.66)

James H. Dunne, in a journal of Irish studies entitled Síle na gCíoch in Éire - Ireland, finds strong connections between the Sheela-na-gig and the Morrigan, who is identified with Anú the mother of the Irish gods. The Morrigan often appeared in triple form, revealing the inherent unity of Birth, Life and Death. She retained the role of a war/fertility sorceress, mother/queen, and crone/part-time hag. She appeared as a hag to Conaire,

King of Ireland, in a cycle of tales called Togáil Bruidne Dá Derga (The Destruction of Da Dergas Hostel). *"A Woman big mouthed, huge, dark, ugly hideous was behind him. Though her snout were flung on a branch, the branch would support it. Her lower lip would reach to her knee"* (O'Connor, 1991, p.21). She has also been described as the woman *"whose pudenda hang down to her knees"* (O'Connor 1991, p.21). It is prevalent that such descriptions of the female organ be connected to the devouring mother aspect which ultimately emerges from many Sheela-na-gigs, who exhibit grossly exaggerated sexual characteristics. "I would like to suggest", says Dr. Anne Rosse, *"that in their earliest iconographic form, they do in fact portray the territorial or war-goddess in her hag-like aspect..."* (Andersen, 1977, p.88).

The notion that Sheela-na-gigs derived from pagan virtues and were Christianised and embedded into the fabric of the medieval church in order to render them tractable, is a view suggested in many texts relating to these carvings. In the book The Serpent and the Goddess (1989), its author Mary Condren outlines the adoption of the pagan goddess Brighid as a patron saint by the church. She advocates that Brighid still continues her maternal role as Mother Goddess, for example in the medieval church at Killinaboy, County Clare where her image as a Sheela-na-gig is conveyed by *"a figure holding the entrance wide open, carved on top of the arch to the door, effectively allowing the congregation to enter the church through her womb"* (Condren, 1989, p.4)

Brighid (also known as Brigit, Bridget, Bride) is a figure giving ample evidence of Christian doctrines whose origins can be traced back to pagan beliefs. This idea is prevalent in The Life of St. Brigid (1877) wherein lie so many obvious pagan attributes. Her feast day is the first of February, which is to say Imbolc, the pagan spring festival. Her symbol is fire *"the fiery dart of Brigit"* (Smyth, 1988, p.25) and she is associated with movement, represented by the sun symbol, Brigit's Cross. *"St. Bridget, is an old heathen goddess of fertility disguised in a threadbare christian cloak"* (Frazer, 1987, p.135)

In addition to the texts I have already mentioned, J.G. Frazer's The Golden Bough (1987), Mircea Eliade's Patterns in Comparative Religion (1958)



and Jane and Colin Bord's Earth Rites (1982) have provided my instinct with evidence that Christianity did not immediately suppress paganism. The magical rites of paganism have been proved to have survived into both early and modern day Christian principles. Brian Branston unites the religions of the old and new in his Lost Gods of England (1957):

*The death and resurrection of Jesus was a necessity that the world might live. This was what the 'new' story, the 'new' myth, the 'new' religion meant to the ordinary people, and it was compatible with many fertility rites and observances such as the blessing of the plough, of rivers and the sea, with the conjuration of fruit trees, with prayers for good seasons, rain and the general fertility of the earth, with thanksgiving at harvest, with mourning and rejoicing at Easter for the death of the god and his resurrection (Branston, 1957, p.200).*

Branston also gives an exceptionally colourful view of the meaning emanating from Sheela-na-gigs.

*Sheela's represent the Earth mother waiting to be fertilised by the Sky Father. This is the reason why the pudendum is being so invitingly held open (O'Connor, 1991, p.20).*

If Sheela-na-gigs represented a pagan goddess, or even the Earth Mother herself, as has been suggested here, surely the Church would have disapproved of the prominent position of such a figure as protectress upon ecclesiastical buildings. Perhaps they believed that such an earthy, maternal figure would invite pagans of the middle ages to become believers in the Christian faith. Helen Hickey in Images of Stone, states "*Christian missionaries tended to be tolerant of pagan practices and where possible modified and transmuted rather than destroyed cherished beliefs*" (Hickey, 1976, p.25). It has been suggested in Earth Rites that the churchmen in medieval times integrated ancient pagan practices with newer Christian ones. In both Ireland and England there is sufficient evidence to reveal that this was the case, indicating a continuance of paganism spanning over a wide area during the Middle Ages.



In 1282, the priest at Inverkeithing in Fife had to appear before his bishop because he had led a fertility dance round a phallic figure during an Easter celebration. In the fourteenth, the monks of Frithelstock Priory in Devon were known to worship a female effigy like "*the unchaste Diana*" at an altar in the woods (Bord, 1982 p.75).

The Middle Ages in Ireland were perilous and superstitious times. Destruction impended from many angles. The epidemic was a recurring nightmare for a medically helpless people. In Ballyvourney in West Cork a carved wooden female effigy was carried in procession around the district as a charm of protection against evil and infirmity. To this day, in Ballyvourney on February 11th, St. Gobnait's feast day, a ritual pattern takes place. Worshippers visit Saint Gobnait's Abbey where a Sheela-na-gig carved in stone is fitted in roughly as a lintel over a trefoil window. Part of this pattern is fulfilled by stepping up onto a sill and touching with a handkerchief the small emasculated female figure. This tradition, invoking superstitious pagan attributes, has survived in Ballyvourney since the Middle Ages, due to a folk-belief in the healing powers of the Sheela-na-gig (O'Connor, 1991, p.21)

The Seir Keiran Sheela from County Offaly (Fig 1.5) has been seized upon as being pictorial evidence of occult practices in Ireland. This figure features an array of cup marks around the abdomen. These seem to suggest fertility practices at some stage, since age-old Irish beliefs the cup-mark was a symbol of fertility. This figure also features drilled holes in the crown of its head which could be seen as indicating that some attachments or adornments were placed on this Sheela for ritual purposes. "*Certainly at some stage there must have been people who believed in the power emanating from that image, some ritual must have been centred on it, some rite have been addressed to it*" (Andersen, 1977, p.31).

So many theories have been expressed about the function of the Sheela-na-gig in general and the meanings emanating from their image. I believe they served to fill the gap between paganism and Christianity. I feel that they stemmed directly from pagan beliefs and represented pagan duties which were the stronghold of existence. The Church was unable to eradicate these and so allowed them to exist side-by-side with objects of the Christian orthodoxy. Sheela-na-gigs have been described as "*protective, tutelary and apotropaic*" (Weir & Jerman, 1986, p.10). I believe that their protective



function expanded as a general protection against evil in all contexts. This can be ascertained by the fact that during the latter half of the Middle Ages, Sheela-na-gig appeared on secular buildings in the powerful position of protectress.



Fig. 1.5 Seir Keiran Sheela-na-gig, County Offaly.



1942



## CHAPTER 2 - SHEELA-NA-GIG CONFINED AND RELEASED

In Ireland one hundred and twenty Sheela-na-gigs have been recorded. The earliest exhibitionist figures appear to be associated with Romanesque buildings, for example the acrobatic figure on the twelfth century Nuns Chapel at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly (Fig. 2.1). This is a small figure of a woman carved as a spandrel motif on a voussoir. Various small faces and animal's heads appear in similar positions as spandrel ornament on the arch, but they are all less elaborate than the acrobatic Sheela, who is depicted as a naked female in a contorted pose, presenting her genitalia.

Eamonn Kelly states that the bulk of "*true Sheela-na-gigs*" found in Ireland seem to date from the post-Norman invasion period, and that their volume lies within areas where there was heavy Anglo-Norman settlement, such as in the Fethard areas of County Tipperary (Kelly, 1994 p.49). These post-invasion figures tend to be single carvings which were placed in isolation high up on the walls and over the arched entrances of churches or castles. A protective nature, emanated from such a striking position upon these buildings.

In Ireland the vast majority of Sheela-na-gigs are still located on their original monuments. The National Museum of Ireland holds a collection of twelve of these carvings. Another eleven are housed between the smaller art institutions of The Ulster Museum Belfast, The Cork Public Museum, The Athlone Castle Museum and the Millmount Museum, Drogheda (Cherry, 1992, p.6).

These Sheela-na-gigs are the stone sculptures which became dislodged from their initial sites and were found in immediate proximity to a church or a castle. During the late 1800's many of them would have turned up as loose carvings scattered around graveyards, and as peoples consciousness of their importance began to develop from the early 1900s, they were seen as valuable artefacts of our heritage. This is the reason why from the beginnings of the twentieth century The National Museum began collecting these carvings as relics worthy of attention and preservation (Kelly, Appendix One).





Fig. 2.1      Acrobatic figure from the twelfth century Nun's chapel at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly.



1990

1	Bunratty	Co. Clare
2	Cenagh	Co. Clare
3	Killaloe	Co. Clare
4	Killinaboy	Co. Clare
5	Ballynacarriga	Co. Cork
6	Glanworth	Co. Cork
7	Killeagh	Co. Cork
8	Ballinderry	Co. Galway
9	Rattoo	Co. Kerry
10	Blackhall	Co. Kildare
11	Coollagh More	Co. Kilkenny
12	Croanagh	Co. Kilkenny
13	Ballaghmore	Co. Laois
14	Cullahill	Co. Laois
15	Porthalinch	Co. Laois
16	Tinnakill	Co. Laois (detached)
17	Dynaman	Co. Limerick
18	Tullavlin	Co. Limerick
19	Doon	Co. Offaly
20	Garry	Co. Offaly
21	Cloghan	Co. Roscommon
22	Scragg	Co. Roscommon
23	Behy	Co. Sligo
24	Ballinaclogh	Co. Tipperary
25	Ballynaboy	Co. Tipperary
26	Ballynabunch	Co. Tipperary
27	Cashel	Co. Tipperary
28	Fethard (Abbey)	Co. Tipperary
29	Fethard (Wall)	Co. Tipperary
30	Kilfinane (Castle)	Co. Tipperary
31	Kilfinane (Church)	Co. Tipperary
32	Lathmore	Co. Tipperary
33	Redwood	Co. Tipperary
34	Shanahan	Co. Tipperary
35	Thurles	Co. Tipperary
36	Moate	Co. Westmeath



It seems that Sheela-na-gigs lost their cultural existence in the late mediaeval period and appear to have been simply disregarded. It was only in the last century that they were rediscovered by antiquarians who brought them to the knowledge of archaeologists and art historians. One of the earliest documented references to Sheela-na-gigs comes from the antiquarian and topographer John Donovan. In his Ordinance Survey Letters for County Tipperary of 1840, he described in detail the ruins of the old parish church of Kiltinan:

*On a stone placed on the extreme top of the south wall at the southwest angle is carved the figure of a woman in basrelief, rudely done, but whose attitude and expression conspire to impress the grossest idea of morality and licentiousness... Oral information says that this ill-executed piece of sculpture...represents a woman who was know by the name of Síle ní Ghig, a person described as having precipitated herself by her follies into the gulph (SIC) of destruction. She is in fact represented (by the locals) not as a human being but ... in all aspects a brute (O'Connor, 1991, p.6).*

Since John O'Donovan's survey in 1840, the subject of Sheela-na-gigs have arisen frequently in the journals of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. The general public may have become aware of the existence of these carvings through such periodicals, but I believe that the greater perception of Sheela-na-gigs would have really developed with the onset of such publications as The Witch on the Wall (1977), and Images of Lust (1986), which examine in great depth these exhibitionist figures.

It was during the 1980's that Sheela-na-gigs became a dominant cultural issue in the public eye. The reason for this was the fact that The National Museum's collection of Sheela-na-gigs was in storage and not accessible for public view. These female figures began to create controversy for the museum in 1987, when a Canadian researcher, Colleen Dale Hamilton wrote to The Irish Times indicating that the Sheelas were not on display to the public due to prudishness on the part of the museum. She stated "*Museums should be the keepers of artefacts, not the watchguards of morality*" (Donovan, 1990, p.7). This statement gave rise to a contentious double-sided debate.

Eamonn Kelly, the Museum's Acting Head of Antiquities, answered this proclamation by affirming that any decision to exhibit or not to exhibit was based entirely on an academic assessment of the importance of the Sheela-na-gigs and what they tell you about Medieval Ireland. He stated "*Sheelas are a minor aspect of the archaeological story of Ireland*" (Donovan, 1990, p.7). Professor Roger Stalley of Trinity College gave the perspective of an art historian to this statement and said "*I know that Sheela-na-gigs fascinate people from an anthropological point of view as they are products of the medieval folkloric imagination, but they are not a very significant part of medieval sculpture*" (Donovan, 1990, p.7).

Pat Wallace, the Director of the museum, proposed that the exhibits on show in the late medieval sculpture section of the treasury are much more outstanding than Sheela-na-gigs and questioned why people did not focus on Cistercian Abbeys instead. He gave the blatantly conservative and sexist view that "*Sheela-na-gigs are ugly and unflattering to women*" (Donovan, 1990, p.7). Anthony Weir, co-author of a book on sexual carvings on Medieval Churches, Images of Lust (1986), put forward the opinion that the Sheelas were not shown on exhibition because they might shock people. He remarked that Ireland was full of religious prudery and due to this the Sheelas had been labelled as obscene.

The concept of obscenity changes from age to age and from culture to culture. It is apparent that during the middle ages when Sheela-na-gigs were incorporated into buildings, genital display was not considered immodest in the way it is extensively seen today. It is obvious that some people would be taken aback by the blatant sexuality emanating from the decontextualised vestiges of the National Museum. This would be due to the fact that through education and upbringing some people have become accustomed to misinterpret the moral climate which prevailed during medieval times. The carvings could cause offence to members of the public, admitted Eamonn Kelly, but the museum took the view that Sheela-na-gigs represented a fairly insignificant theme in medieval sculpture and there were many other objects in the museum's collection more worthy of public exhibition (Armstrong, 1990, p.5).

I believe that neither of these opinions forwarded by Eamonn Kelly is sufficient reason for the Sheela-na-gigs to have been kept from public view.



It is outrageous that they were in storage in the crypts below the museum for so many years and that special permission had to be obtained to view these momentous artefacts. I consider Sheela's to be as significant as the other kinds of ecclesiastical sculpture such as a carved stone capital from the thirteenth century St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, which is an exhibition in the medieval sculpture section of the museum. Sheela-na-gigs evokes the mystery of superstition and mythical tradition which prevailed in Ireland during the Middle Ages.

It was only in the summer of 1989 that the Sheela-na-gigs emerged out of the stores of the National Museum and into public view. This took place in the rotunda of the museum but only for a short while because they began building a shop in this area. So the carvings reverted back to their hermetic existence in the basement of the museum. This episode once again caused chaos for the museum within the media and the public eye. Articles such as "*Please can I see the Sheela-na-gigs?*" (Donovan, 1990, p.7) dominated the headlines of leading Irish newspapers.

It was not until 1994 that the positive effects of such a controversy began to unfold. Declan McGonagle, the Director of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), conceived the idea to have a collection of Sheela-na-gigs exhibited in the Museum's show '*From Beyond the Pale*'. He went with this request to The National Museum. The Director and Head of Antiquities finally realised that the image of the seized upon as an important icon by contemporary society and for this reason agreed to unearth the Sheelas and present them to the public.

Although Sheela-na-gigs were integrated during the Middle Ages, they exist today as well. These figures are powerful symbols and popular interest in them has flourished since their rediscovery during the last century. They have been comprehended as political objects, supporting various notions, for example, "*They are seen as a feminist icon and a celtic icon*" (Kelly, Appendix ). The demand to see these carvings is based on modern preoccupation's regarding the mysterious and hidden explanation which envelopes these figures. It is great to see Sheela-na-gigs juxtaposed with other controversial works of more recent vintage. The Irish Museum of Modern Art is such an appropriate venue for '*From Beyond the Pale*', as it largely addresses a popular demand by people with contemporary agendas.

The Sheela-na-gigs in the context of this ongoing show are exhibited between question raising works of key contemporary artists, which correspond with the questions raised by these historical figures.

'*From Beyond the Pale*' at IMMA is a rolling open-ended season of contemporary art and is probably the most aspiring and far flung programme of visual art ever mounted in this country. *"The phrase 'Beyond the Pale' has become part of the common currency, meaning outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour"*, (Ferguson, October 9, 1994.) says Declan McGonagle. In Ireland, from the fourteenth century onwards, the Pale (from palisade) specified the contested border times around an area in Dublin within which English jurisdiction could be administered. This control expanded and contracted over many centuries. The area within the pale was seen as civilised, whereas beyond the pale was considered to be beyond authority, therefore uncivilised.

'*From beyond the Pale*' houses a constellation of presentations, residencies and artist's projects which tests *"tradition from positions both within and without the pale, by raising questions about the qualities of male/female modern and pre-modern, and the status of the art object"* (McGonagle, 1994, p.4). The exhibition is structured to be inconclusive. Instead of one major authoritative show, it offers a series of fragmentary juxtapositions and a set of stimulating dialogues. The immense diversity of visual art is so distinct and contrasting. Each level of the exhibition unfolds explorations of contemporary art, and its scope enables the work and ideas of artists of renowned international significance to be accessible to the general public.

On level one in the East Wing of IMMA the vitality and viability of pre-modern ideas is emphasised as you encounter two juxtaposed exhibitions - Sheela-na-gig figures and '*Picasso to Koons*'. These two adjacent displays form a significant part of the season of '*From beyond the Pale*' and continue the length of the season. Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys and Jeff Koons form the '*core exhibition*', and raise the questions about the status of the art object, ideas of the modern and pre-modern and male and female images and values. This show is pitched against the genitally upfront Sheela-na-gigs in a display of pre-modern female figures. In order to discuss the implications and arguments which have arisen



from such a juxtaposition, I will describe the structure of the exhibition in the East Wing.

As you embark upon this level you are initially confronted by two enlarged photographic images of the Sheela-na-gig of Malahide, Castle, County Dublin. To the unformed eye this does not blatantly stand out as a female exhibitionist as it is one of the most weather-beaten examples of all Irish Sheela-na-gigs. From this image you are drawn into an array of photographs which place these figures in their proper monumental context. Then you are confronted by a collection of eleven stone carved Sheela-na-gigs. From such an encounter, the absolute diversity and variety of their characteristics become pronounced. Many of the Sheelas are androgynous looking, yet they all possess vaginas. Some appear more feminine with delicate facial features and sinewy hands. Others have protruding ribs, harsh faces and stubby fingers. The gesture of the hands towards the lower abdomen and an almost yawning vulva, are the features which connect these Sheelas, although the treatment of each figure is of inconsistent sculpted style. Because of this all the Sheelas are charged with a unique personality from which emanates an individual statement.

I personally believe that the Ballylarkin Sheela-na-gig, from County Kilkenny, is the most aesthetically appealing of all these figures, and was delighted to be confronted with her image in *'From beyond the Pale'*. She depicts a female in a demure pose which is conveyed through an exquisite sculpted treatment. She is carved in relief on a slab of limestone measuring 58 cms in height and 32 cms in width. She is displayed in a seated posture, embellishing many interesting details such as large ears, slits in her bulging eyes, small breasts under which double curves suggest lean ribs. Her hands are in an elegant stance as one finger from her left hand touches the opening to her vaginal cavity in a cherished embrace.

An example of one Sheela-na-gig who ultimately contrasted so strongly in both sculpted technique and characteristics to the Ballylarkin effigy is the Sheela-na-gig from the old church in Cavan. This female figure measures 43 cms in height and 21 cms in width and is carved in brownstone. She is shown in a pose representative of many Sheela-na-gigs. She displays widely exposed thighs with hands clutching an absolutely gaping vulva. Her face is particularly distorted with a deeply furrowed brow, large nose, and a tongue





*Sheela-na-gig, Ballylarkin, Co. Kilkenny  
Photograph: National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.*



Sheela-na-gig, Seetheman, Co. Offaly  
Photograph: National Museum of Ireland, Dublin





*Sheela-na-gig, Co. Cavan.  
Photograph: National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.*





*Sheela-na-gig, Burgesbeg, Co. Tipperary  
Photograph: National Museum of Ireland, Dublin*

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protruding from goulishly wide lips. I believe that she evokes the *cailleach*, hag of Irish folklore and mythology. She depicts the devouring mother aspect of the Maiden, Mother and Crone, whose yawning vulva splayed and exaggerated is frozen in the moment after or just prior to giving birth. Her image is one of ferocious enchantment.

The juxtaposition of such figures as the Ballylarkin and Cavan Sheela-na-gigs with 'Picasso to Koons' is one of disparity. As you leave the earth mother atmosphere created by the female carvings you immediately emerge into a stream of contemporary art initially converging upon Picasso's La Parisienne et figures exotiques (1906) and Warhol's Jean-Michel Basquiat of 1984. These two exhibits set the scene for what *"superficially appears to trace an almost traditional art historical line - white, male, European, sophisticated"*. (Clancy, November 8, 1994). Along this corridor mingling with Koon's porcelain erotica and Duchamp's inscrutable Dada, is a display of the female exhibitionists Sheela-na-gigs. *'These figures are defined as primitive by a vision of Modernist authority which their presence her quickly demonstrates to be unsustainable'* (Clancy, November 8, 1994). This juxtaposition creates the order disorder pose around which the critical debates revolve.

In the course of *'From Beyond the Pale'*, arguments have arisen about identity, gender and the representation of women and otherness, which are issues contemplated by the exhibition. But this is all part of the programme and coincides quite aptly with a series of debates during the show. The juxtaposition of the Sheela-na-gig figures with the core exhibition Picasso to Koon's, has triggered off discussion and debate. This fits neatly into the context of the exhibition which mainly sets out selected categories of twentieth century preoccupation.

Two public lectures at IMMA were devoted to the subject of Sheela-na-gigs. First, on November 8th, 1994, a discussion was presented by Eamonn Kelly of the National Museum, with regard to the origin and function of these exhibitionist figures. The reaction to his opinion that the Sheela-na-gigs originated in France was electric. People came with very fixed views. Many had read his essay in the catalogue book *'From Beyond the Pale'*, and totally disapproved of the documentation of his case. With regards to this, he said that most of the views that people have about Sheelas are acts of fate: *"They*



believe it because they believe that it serves as their point of view" (Kelly, Appendix One), and that anyone who has studied these figures in a rational way and looked at their context has come to basically the same conclusion as his on the origin of Sheela-na-gigs.

A discussion which specifically dealt with the juxtaposition of the Picasso to Koons, and the Sheela-na-gig exhibitions within the context of 'From Beyond the Pale' took place on November 22nd, 1994. Hilary Robinson a lecturer from the Faculty of Art and Design in the University of Ulster, Belfast chaired the debate. She chose the title '*Between Sheela-na-gig and Picasso-to-Koons, or within the Pale in Beyond the Pale*', for her discussion.

She analysed how the juxtaposition of Picasso-to-Koons and the Sheela-na-gigs functioned as adjoining exhibitions and could be seen as holding the season '*From Beyond the Pale*' together. She looked at how this season conceptualised and positioned woman and femininity and how this idea was reinforced by these two displays. She was interested in how the exhibition in general had internally established within it a particular concept of women.

Even though a number of females form part of this show, Hilary Robinson still remained critical of the overall construction of woman and femininity as it was emerging from the season. She was critical of the fact that Picasso to Koons is given the title '*core exhibition*' while its partner, the Sheela-na-gig display is described as merely "*important*". She referred to the leaflet of the exhibition which has Warhol's Jean Michel Basquiat on the front and on the flap inside the Sheela-na-gig from Blackhall, County Kildare. As you open it up, those images are at either end "*Front and back, left and right, beginning and end, male and female*" (Robinson, November, 22nd, 1994.). These images and the relationship between them frame the whole exhibition, she claimed, mirroring the way in which the two exhibitions from which they are drawn construct the other exhibitions.

"*Fundamentally core is biologically a female connotation, she declared, as it denotes womb, vagina, vulva. It is ironic that core is used for the work of five men!*" (Robinson, November 22nd, 1994). She suggested that the following works would be more productive than the juxtaposition presently seen. A selection from Judy Chicago's Dinner Party (Fig. 2.2) from the 1970s in which she used the vulva as a mythological and historical image of

women, Monica Sjoo's, God Giving Birth, from 1968, a piece which was censored on two occasions as being blasphemous when it was shown in two public gallery's in the States during the Seventies, and Hannah Wilkes Pink Champagne (Fig. 2.3) 1975, which is an heroic figure of "*cunt-positiveness, masturbation and multiple orgasms*" (Broude and Garrard, 1994, p.201).

In an interview with Eamonn Kelly, I asked him what his opinion was of the juxtaposition of 'Picasso to Koons' and the Sheela-na-gigs. He believed that these figures were in their proper context engaged alongside the core exhibition. He said "*Picasso was a right old misogynist and so were the people who conceived the notion of Sheela-na-gigs*" (Kelly, Appendix One). When I made reference to the fact that Hilary Robinson believed that the Sheelas would have been more in context juxtaposed beside very powerful feminists works, he chauvinistically replied "*You couldn't possibly call them feminist art....but they are clearly of concern to feminists*" (Kelly, Appendix One).

*The art and artists in 'From Beyond the Pale', test tradition from positions both within and without hte pale by raising questions about the dualities of male/female, modern and pre-modern and the status of the art object. (McGonagle, 1994, p.4)*

I believe that it would have been more in context to have both male and female interpretations of Sheela-na-gigs juxtaposed with the real images of these figures. I feel that the likes of Barry Cooke's (Fig. 2.4) Sheela-na-gig, 1964 (Fig. 2.4) and Nancy Spero's Chorus Line 1, 1985 (Fig. 2.5) would have effectively connected the theme of modern/pre-modern and male/female. Such a juxtaposition would have expressed contemporary pre-occupations with the image of the Sheela-na-gig.





Fig. 2.2. Judy Chigago, *'The Dinner Party'*, 1974-1979.





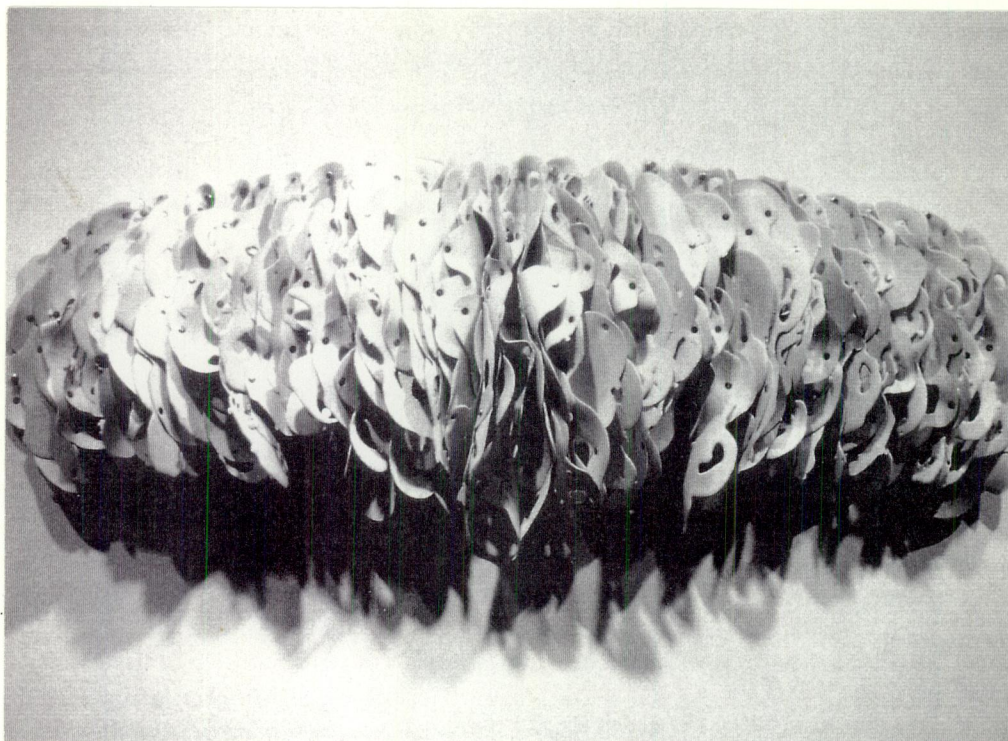


Fig. 2.3. Hannah Wilke, *'Pink Champagne'*, 1975.

Fig. 2.4. Henry Cooke *'Sheela-na-gig'*, 1964.

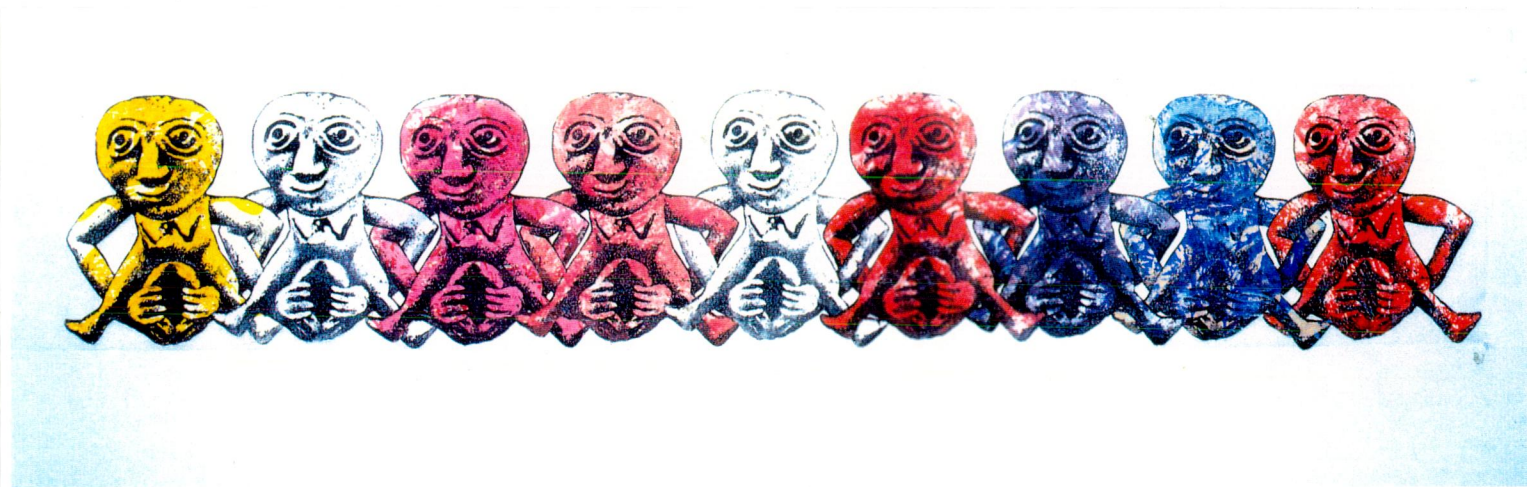


Fig. 2.5. Nancy Spero '*Chorus Line I*', 1985.





### **CHAPTER 3 - A SHEELA-NA-GIG REVIVAL**

Sheela-na-gigs have an almost mythical status in contemporary society because our understanding of them is not yet fixed or complete. Many have become fascinated by these mysterious images of squatting female figures exposing their genitalia. At present the interest in Sheela-na-gigs is undergoing something of a revival. Artists have incorporated this influential icon to challenge and explore their personal concepts of this compelling image. Fiona Marron and Pat Connor are two Irish artists who have approached this subject in contrasting mediums, yet they connect in their theories of these powerful female figures.

#### **Fiona Marron**

Fiona Marron from Clane, County Kildare, received a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin in 1983. Since this she has established her reputation as an Irish painter through exhibiting in Ireland and the United States. Her work is represented in the collections of the Bank of Ireland, Trustee Savings Bank and the Allied Irish Banks in Dublin.

Fiona Marron, recognised for her painted landscapes evoking abstract expressions of Mother Earth, began a love affair with Sheela-na-gigs in 1982 when she first encountered these momentous artefacts in the National Museum. She was allowed twenty minutes' access to the collection of these controversial carvings which were in storage. Her reaction was one of "*awe, amazement and excitement*" (Marron, Appendix Two). She made several attempts to gain further entry to the museum's crypts to do some drawings of the Sheelas but was denied admittance. At this time she was busy with college and getting her degree, so she moved onto other projects. She literally forgot all about the Sheelas for several years.

She moved to Portland, Oregon in the United States, in 1988 with her husband. When she was pregnant with their son, she began having recurring dreams of the Sheelas she had seen. She attempted to do drawings of what she was dreaming but was unsuccessful. The urge to see and draw these figures again, became an obsession. Thus resulted in her journey to Ireland in 1992. She was so determined to acquire permission to the National



Museum's crypts that her persistence was eventually rewarded (DeMarre, 1993, p.4)

She spent three days down in their basement entombment which was *"very old and dark and smelled of antiquity"* (De Marre, 1993, p.5) sketching and drawing the Sheelas in their confinement. Fiona Marron says she never expected to do figurative work, but her discovery of Sheelas affected her in a spiritual way. *"It was like an impulse, an instinctual thing. It was like they were calling me to draw them, and the more involved I got in my work, the more involved they got with me"*.

To Fiona Marron, Sheelas are symbols of another time and way of thinking, when goddesses of protection and fertility were honoured and were part of daily life. *"They are manifestations of a primitive goddess, the core of the divine feminine image"* (Marron, Appendix Two). She feels that they are a survival, a consciousness of the power of the Ancient Earth Mother, from whose womb comes good energy and all living things, man and nature. She sees Sheelas as celebrations of life, icons of regeneration and rebirth, an expression of the power of woman.

On a voyage of discovery, Fiona Marron embarked upon many visits to the Sheelas of Ireland which were still in their monumental situations. Her first Sheela in situ was the figurative carving of Killinaboy, County Clare<sup>7</sup>. This Sheela is positioned high above the round-headed door of a medieval church. This twelfth century building marks the monastic site which is named after St. Inghean Bhaoith, and the figure above the door has been known under her name.

Marron felt *"incredible, unbelievable"* (Marron, Appendix Two) as she encountered this figure, standing with legs splayed and hands above thighs, joined in gesture towards the lower abdomen. She sat in front of this figure for a long period, allowing its presence to suggest a particular artistic approach. The result was her interpretation Sacred Enclosure, (1992) (Fig. 3.1). She recalls how this Sheela initially looked wonderful but slowly her expression changed to an extreme sense of sadness. Marron says that this is what happens to all the Sheelas when she is looking at them for a while. *"Each Sheela seemed to emerge from the rock to be her own individual*





Fig. 3.2. Fiona Marron '*Coral Rag Hag*' 1991.





*character when I was working on them. They seemed to suggest their own emotions and colours" (Duckler, 1994).*

Fiona Marron returned to Portland having created many drawings and sketches of the Irish Sheelas. She relinquished control and began working intuitively in oil, acrylic, pastels and mixed media and these figures began to emerge. '**Coral Rag Hag**' (1991) (Fig. 3.2) was one of her initial artistic endeavours, incorporating a Sheela figure. This piece was influenced by her experience of the strong, defiant, creatress/destructress aspect of the Cavan Sheela.

Initially Fiona Marron was very private and protective of her paintings but she was besieged by her friends to show these '*re-enactment's*' of a primitive goddess' to them. When she had about twenty finished pieces, she placed them all in her studio. For their first show, she invited a group of about fifteen women. The reaction was incredible: "*Everyone was possessed with something.....ultimately all present were deeply affected*" (De Marre, 1993 p.6). Marron knew from this response that she had to share these powerful images with the general public. "*It was time to release the Sheelas from their centuries of silence and bring them into modern day context*" (De Marre, 1993, p.6).

In January, 1994, Fiona Marron's emotion provoking paintings and drawings captivated audiences in Portland and New York, as her interpretations were placed on public exhibition, she began giving slide presentations all over North America to give women an opportunity to discuss women's issues. She held workshops where people created their own images of Sheelas from clay.

Fiona Marron's paintings of stone-goddesses inspired '**Patience and Passion**', a collaboration of dance and music celebrating Marron's work. The performance featured Luciano Proano, a renowned Peruvian improvisational dancer, Brian Dunning, Marron's husband and an acclaimed flutist with the band Nightnoise and jazz guitarist John Butler. '**Patience and Passion**' was intended as a sensual synthesis of sound, visual and physical expression. "*The performance triggered abstract emotions which were then stripped to the essential*" (Merridawn, April 9, 1994). It was an uplifting celebration of the Sheelas.



In August, 1994 Fiona Marron discovered that the National Museum's collection of Sheelas was to go on public display in the exhibition 'From Beyond the Pale'. She felt she had to show her interpretations to coincide with this momentous event. She returned to Ireland with her series of paintings entitled 'Voices from the Rock' and opened an exhibition in the Gerald Davis Gallery in Dublin. This show consisted of twenty-four images of Sheela-na-gigs ranging from "*the beautiful to the defiant, from a young embryonic look to the angry screech of the hag or the crone*" (Hanna, 1994).

Working from original stone-carved Sheelas, Marron reflected in her figurative renderings the stark, cold, elements of stone. Calling on her refined skill as an abstract impressionist landscape painter, she brought these figures to ecstatic life. She surrounded each image in a sea of colour: blues, greens, reds and golds expanded and contracted in varying degrees of intensity. The overall imagery was organic, evoking reflections of the sea, fields and mist-swept limestone rifts which define Ireland's landscape.

Two of my favourite pieces from the exhibition were 'Hag in the Iron Wood' (1993) (Fig. 3.3) and 'Sapienta-Wisdom' (1994) (Fig. 3.4). 'Hag in the Iron Wood' was an interpretation of the Sheela of Carne Castle, County Westmeath, accomplished through mixed media on paper. This rendering measuring 22 x 30" was one of magical vibrance. Sunburst life-enhancing golden yellows and tones of rusts and reds embraced this figure who seemed to be immersed in a sea of amniotic fluid.

This Sheela was portrayed in a pose of motherly gentleness, a feeling which was conveyed through the delicate treatment of her body. 'Sapienta-Wisdom' reinacted the image of the Ballylarkin Sheela of County Kilkenny. This figure was enthroned within an archway which appeared as an illuminating shaft of light. This piece incorporated mixed media and also measured 22 x 30". Like the real stone-carved figure, this reinterpreted Sheela engaged a divine sense of sacredness. This was displayed through Marron's delicate treatment of the form. She surrounded this Sheela in soft strokes of dark pastel which enhanced the figure and created the impression of this Sheela emanating in glory from the rock.



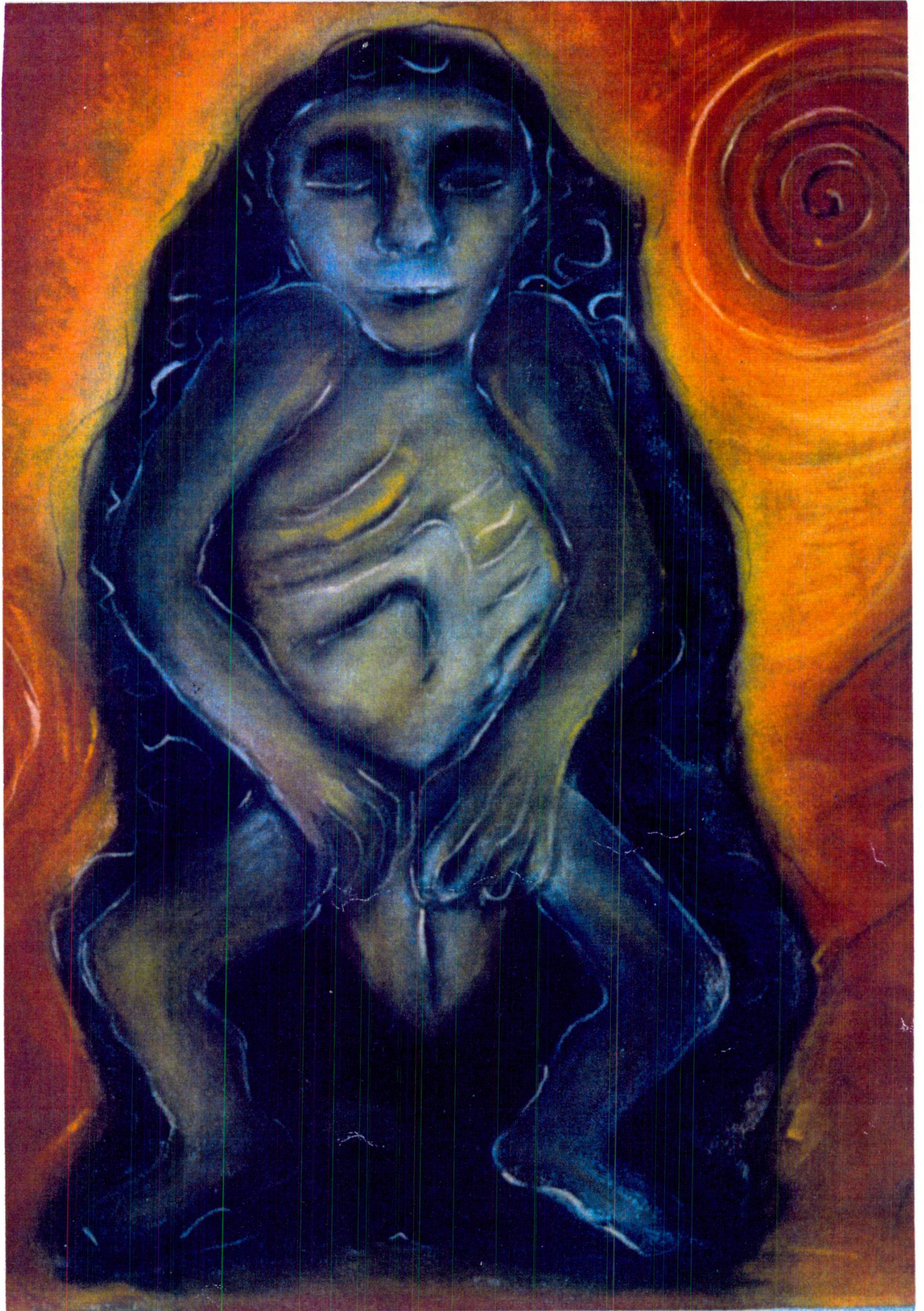
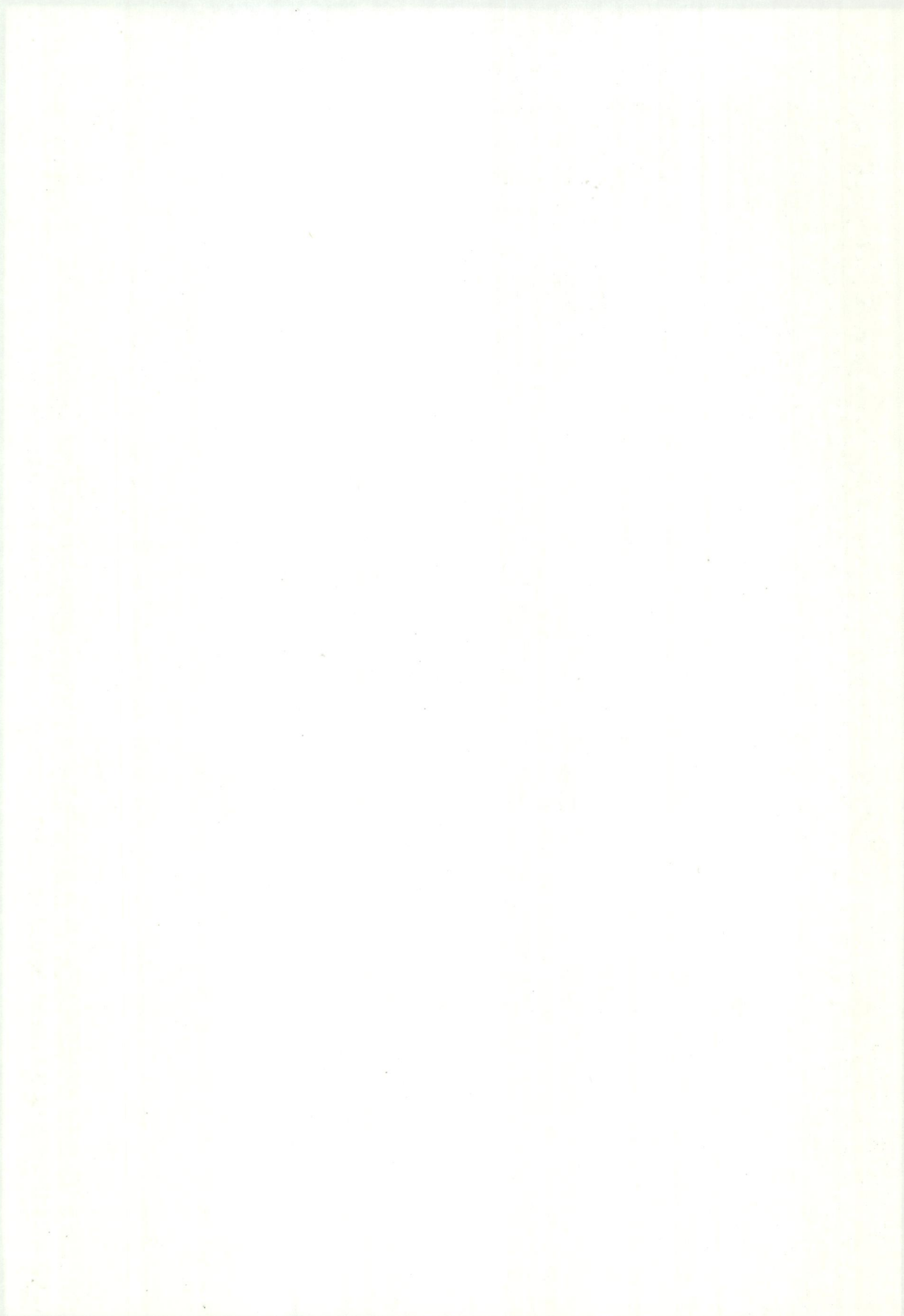


Fig. 3.3. Fiona Marron '*Hag in the Iron Wood*' (1993)







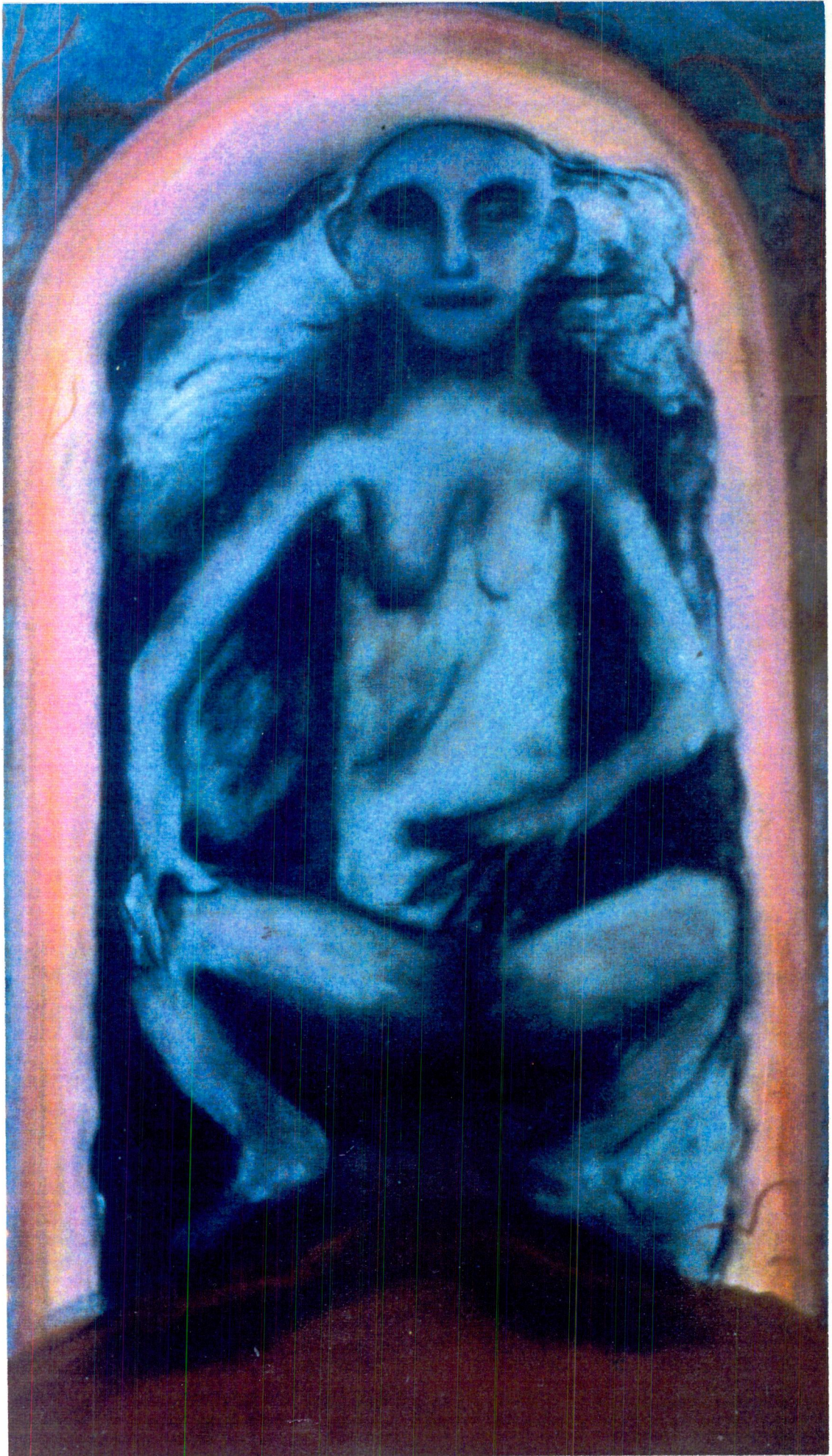


Fig. 3.4. Fiona Marron '*Sapienta-Wisdom*' (1994)





I was highly impressed by this exhibition *'Voices from the Rock'*. The impact of Marron's contrasting images of Sheelas was electric. Each piece individually evoked a personality. The Sheela-na-gigs were captured in a number of different styles "*sometimes using wild nightmarish colours and sometimes gentle reassuring shades*" (Clancy, November 11, 1994). This contrast of styles effectively emphasised the differences in mood and form of the originals. The result of this was a compelling show of feminine power, a reminder that magic's basic tool is the body, and a celebration of creativity which refuses to be bound by gender.

### Pat Connor

The Irish sculptor and ceramicist Pat Connor, known for his witty and irreverent figures as well as his fine craftsmanship, believes that among all relics of antiquity in Ireland "*nothing remains as enigmatic as the Sheela-na-Gig figures*" (Lalor, 1990). For this reason he has turned his hand to creating his own reinterpretation of this "*timely goddess*" (Connor, Appendix Three) as he calls her.

Connor was first introduced to Sheela through a male friend in the early eighties, who suggested that he consider his own personal version of this powerful female figure. He said "*I did not find her, rather she found me*" (Connor, Appendix Three), as he recalled initially meeting Sheela-na-gig in Jørgen Anderson's book The Witch on the Wall.

Connor is highly influenced by the concept of Sheela as a symbol of fertility. He referred to the Shrine of Saint Gobnait, in County Cork where an erotic female effigy is displayed. Saint Gobnait is the patron saint of beekeepers and bees are a symbol associated with fertility. One of the many customary practices of Ireland's past folk traditions, was to give honey to newly wed couples to promote and maintain fertility within the marriage. This was originally referred to as Mí na Mealla which translates as month of the honey and is now popularly known by the anglicised version of honeymoon.

To Connor, Sheela-na-gig relates considerably to the early fertility figurines of ancient cultures, where goddess deities were the stronghold of existence. Since time immemorial our ancestors have been concerned with the idea of life and death, rebirth and fertility. From 35,000 B.C. Goddess figurines



formed from clay and ask and fired in the hearth, or carved from horn and ivory have been found all over the extensive boundaries of Europe. Even though these figures contrast in shape and form they show a consistency of the theme of the maternal female who is "*honoured as the giver and maintainer of life, out of her belly, the great mystery issues forth and to her all return*" (Getty, 1990, p.5) These figures display a woman's proficiency to give birth, to menstruate each moon, to nurture and protect, and eventually to die and be reborn.

The traditional Irish term for Sheela-na-gig is Síle na gCíoch, which signifies Sheela of the breasts, but in fact these female figures are essentially very bony in appearance so Pat Connor in his re-interpretation has engaged characteristics from the Venus figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic period. These figures have been described as:

*"representations of the pregnant goddess of fertility, who was looked upon throughout the world as the goddess of pregnancy and childbearing, and who, as a cult object not only of women but also of men, represents the archetypal symbol of fertility and of sheltering, protecting and nourishing elementary character".* (Neumann, 1963, p. 96)

These figures have also been depicted as "*amulets to being good luck*". (Haddingham, 1980, p. 96)

The Venus figurine which has influenced Pat Connor in particular is the '*Venus of Willendorf*' (Fig. 3.5) which was found at Willendorf in lower Austria and is believed to date 40,000 B.C. It measures four and a half inches and is carved in limestone. It is a powerful display of a mature mother figure with great emphasis on her sexual characteristics. Her full breasts, prominent buttocks and signs of pregnancy suggest a fundamental concern with fertility.

In Pat Connor's re-interpretation of the Sheela-na-gig (Fig. 3.6) he has encapsulated the image of both the legs apart, the genitals displayed position which is the single element customary to all Sheelas, with the voluptuous roundness of the '*Venus of Willendorf*'. The result is a precious talismanic goddess who embodies an almost archaic sacredness. Connor's Sheela figure stands one inch high and can be mounted on a necklace or carried as a good

luck charm. Initially the prototypes were sculpted in clay, since this is the medium which governs Connor's creative thinking. Then moulds were made of the type used by jewellers for producing waxes to be applied in the lost wax method of casting.

The metal used for these figurines is silver, the reason for this being that silver is the metal associated with the moon which is the heavenly body attributed to the feminine character. It governs the laws of nature's recurring cycle, fertility. The message which Pat Connor wishes his personal interpretation of Sheela to evoke is "*Good luck, the demise of patriarchy, change*", (Connor, Appendix Three). She is a symbol of power and fruitfulness.





Fig. 3.6 Pat Connor '*Silver Sheela-na-gig*'



Fig. 3.5. '*Venus of Willendorf*'

1911

1911

1911

1911



## CONCLUSION

From researching this thesis I have gained a greater knowledge of Sheela-na-gigs, the atmosphere which prevailed in Ireland during The Middle Ages and the attitude which governs these carvings today.

I believe that the Sheela-na-gigs were repositories of the divine power of the Feminine during the transition in Ireland, Britain and France, from an overtly pagan culture to a christianised and ultimately Christian one.

The fact that all Sheela-na-gigs are so multifarious suggests that at one stage in Europe a greater volume of these figures existed. Over the years many of these carvings have been defaced or withdrawn from their original monuments. This conveys that the concept of these figures has changed since their adoption during the Middle Ages.

*'Sheela-na-gigs have been linked with Celts and early Christians, blamed for curses, claimed for cures, adored as goddess and condemned as whore'*  
(O'Connor, 1991, p.29)

Whatever meaning emanates from these vestiges, they are icons of regeneration, an expression of the power of women. Limited information on these figures ensures that this subject will remain enigmatic. Discussion grows apace.

<b>Sheela-na-gig:</b>	<b>Goddess or Whore,</b>
	<b>Ancient or Modern.</b>

## APPENDICES

### Appendix One

Interview with Eamonn Kelly, the Acting Head of Antiquities in The National Museum of Ireland. The interview took place on December 12th, 1994.

*The interview questions were as follows:*

- 1) How many Sheela-na-gigs are housed by The National Museum of Ireland?
- 2) When and why did the museum begin to gather these artefacts?
- 3) In what locations were the majority of these figures found?
- 4) When were these female carvings first placed on exhibition in The National Museum?
- 5) What is your personal opinion on the controversy which began in 1987, regarding the fact that the museums collection of Sheela-na-gigs was not accessible to the public?
- 6) What is your opinion on the meaning emanating from these vestiges?
- 7) Whose idea was it to place a collection of Sheela-na-gigs in the exhibition 'From Beyond the Pale' alongside works by contemporary artists?
- 8) Why did the Museum agree to lend its collection to The Irish Museum of Modern Art?
- 9) Do you find the juxtaposition of Picasso to Koons and the Sheela-na-gigs appropriate?
- 10) Hilary Robinson in her lecture at IMMA on November 22nd, 1994 suggested that works by the following female artists - Chicago,



Wilke, and Sjoos would be more productive than the juxtaposition presently seen - what is your opinion on this?

- 11) What will happen the Sheela-na-gigs when 'From Beyond the Pale' ends of February 25th, 1995?

## Appendix Two

Written interview to Fiona Marron, in Portland Oregon.

*The interview questions were as follows:*

- 1) When did you first encounter the image of Sheela-na-Gig? What was your reaction and feelings?
- 2) What meaning does this image seem to suggest to you?
- 3) Is there any particular Sheela-na-gig which has highly influenced you? Why?
- 4) You are primarily a landscape artist, why did you choose the figurative subject of the Sheela-na-gig?
- 5) Were most of your initial drawings done in the National Museum or on location?
- 6) What medium did you use for your interpretation of the Sheelas?
- 7) Why did you choose the title 'Voices from the Rock' for your collection?
- 8) How did your exhibition come about in the Gerald Davis Gallery? What were the reactions to your collection.
- 9) You said in your interview on Anna Livia that you have been giving slide shows and lectures in the States. Do you feel that there is a large contrast between the American view and the Irish view of the Sheela-na-gigs?

- 10) Could you give an account of the work you do with women's groups in the States, and describe how the subject of the Sheela-na-gigs interacts with this work?
- 11) Would you plan any further collections using the images of Sheela-na-gigs as a subject matter?
- 12) Do you feel that the Sheelas of Ireland have recently achieved a greater openness and awareness in comparison to when you first became interested in them?

### **Appendix Three**

Interview with Pat Connor, ceramicist and sculptor in Schull, West Cork. This interview took place on November 27th, 1994.

*The interview questions were as follow:*

- 1) When were you initially introduced to Sheela-na-gig?
- 2) What meaning does this figure seem to suggest to you?
- 3) Is there any Sheela in particular or any related carving which has influenced you specifically?
- 4) When did you begin to fashion your personal interpretations of Sheela?
- 5) What method and technique did you employ in crafting these figures?
- 6) Why did you choose silver as a metal for your Sheelas? Is it because silver is associated with the female?
- 7) What have people's reactions been to your interpretations?
- 8) Could you envisage your miniature figures increasing in scale?
- 9) What message would you wish your interpretations to evoke?



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