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**NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
FACULTY OF CRAFT DESIGN (CERAMICS)**

**THE INFLUENCE OF NATURE
ON THE WORK OF FOUR
CONTEMPORARY SCULPTORS**

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**SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF HISTORY
OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY
STUDIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF BACHELOR OF DESIGN, 1997.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Marie Foley and Alanna O'Kelly for their time and support in allowing me the benefit of interviews. Also, I am greatly indebted to my tutor Nicola Gordon Bowe.

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Introduction

The subject of my thesis is the influence of nature on the work of four contemporary Irish women sculptors.

I am interested in Irish women sculptors because I feel that it is important for me as a young artist to be aware of the context within which I work. I decided, rather than taking a general look at Irish women sculptors, to investigate the artists whose work spoke to me as a physical manifestation of their sensitive relationship with nature and the environment.

In my first chapter, I will take a brief look at the importance of nature as a source of inspiration for contemporary artists all over the world.

In chapter two, I will examine the work of artist Catherine Harper and her interest in the natural history, archaeology, ecology and mythology of the Irish landscape.

In chapter three, I will discuss the work of artist, Aileen KcKeogh who draws her inspiration and materials from the organic world.

In chapter four, I will investigate the work of multi-media artist, Alanna O'Kelly, whose work deals with the whole question of the relationship between humans and their natural environment.

In chapter five, I will discuss the work of artist, Marie Foley, who has developed a very individualistic way of working from nature.

Finally, in chapter five, I will examine the work of Marie Foley, who has developed a very individualistic way of working from nature.

CHAPTER I

Nature, a Source of Inspiration for Contemporary Artists.

Nature and Culture

As far back as pre-history and well into the last century in many supposedly “primitive” societies, culture and nature were very closely linked. There were hardly any artificial distractions. Our ancestors were literally part of nature, living on the land, between earth and sky. They were dependent on the cycles of the earth.

Since the world’s population has increased to the point of chronic overcrowding, this bond between culture and nature has been lost. Our essential awareness of our environment, our sense of community, tradition and natural rhythm have been all but lost.

Now, in an age dominated by information technology, our relationship with nature and the environment is being questioned. Contemporary artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and David Nash have become very conscious of man’s impact on nature. They are aware that most of us have little contact with the natural world. Through this awareness, they have stimulated a renewed interest in nature, perhaps in the hope that we may rediscover something more positive and comforting for the future.

Nature and Art

Nature has long been the principal source of creative inspiration. From the very first works of art to the present day, nature has provided mysterious and inexhaustible inspiration:

“Nature exists to be raped”

(Pablo Picasso, John K. Grande)

This statement is an example of one artist’s attitude towards nature at the beginning of this century. He was among many who insisted on manipulating nature as a form of expression. By contrast, the passionate embrace of nature by a number of contemporary artists and crafts people reflects a renewed faith in this primary source of artistic inspiration.

A number of environmental artists, whose work engages with the landscape and nature, have appeared over the last few decades in Europe and America. These artists, e.g. Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Richard Long, have at one time or another used natural materials such as earth, rocks or plants in much of their work and have frequently constructed their work outside on natural sites such as rivers, valleys and woodlands.

Responding directly to various aspects of climate, geology and vegetation, today's most prominent environmental artists - David Nash, Karen McKoy, Andy Goldsworthy and Nils Udo among others - express these concerns by creating natural constructions: installing plantings, welding ice assemblages, making dandelion chains, grafting tree forms, arranging patterns of berries and leaves in backwood settings far from the urban centres where most of us live. Although these artworks refer to nature, the artists' methods, styles and even intentions vary widely. These artists have been creating work that corresponds to the natural environment but which also has its own distinctive personality.

A shift in creative values has been taking place around the world. People are beginning to realise that human, particularly male domination of the earth, can no longer work. The identification of a woman's body with the earth is no longer seen as an inferior reflection of patriarchal oppression but as a source of the integral strength of femininity. A Cuban American exile, the artist Ana Mendieta (1949-1985) was greatly influenced by the myths and traditions of African and Pre-Columbian nature worship. She drew inspiration from the earth, a source of both privation and nourishment. She used her own body to create images in the landscape around Iowa City and near Mexico, that identified with nature as a procreative force.

She began work on her Siluetas Series in 1977, outdoor earth body sculptures. Using natural rock formations, vegetation, debris, soil, stones, water, wood and fire, she created female forms, natural icons (fig.1).



Fig. 1 Untitled 1977
Silueta Series, Colour photograph
20 x 13 ¼ inches
Old Man's Creek, Iowa City, Iowa.



Fig. 2 Untitled 1977
Tree of Life Series Colour Photograph
20 x 13 ¼ inches
Old Man's Creek, Iowa City, Iowa.

One of her most powerful pieces is from her Tree of Life series of 1977 (fig.2). Here the artist stands in a hieratic pose - her back against the huge trunk of a living tree, her arms raised with palms facing out. Her eyes closed, and her naked body completely covered with mud, dry grass and leaves at old Man's Creek, Iowa City, Iowa. Mendieta used colour photography to record this amazing work.

Time and time again, throughout her career, until her untimely death in 1985, Ana Mendieta drew her inspiration from nature and various African and Pre-Columbian traditions of nature worship. Her work underlined humanity's need to shift its priorities, to respect the earth's procreative capacity, and to merge with, rather than destroy, nature as a life-giving force.

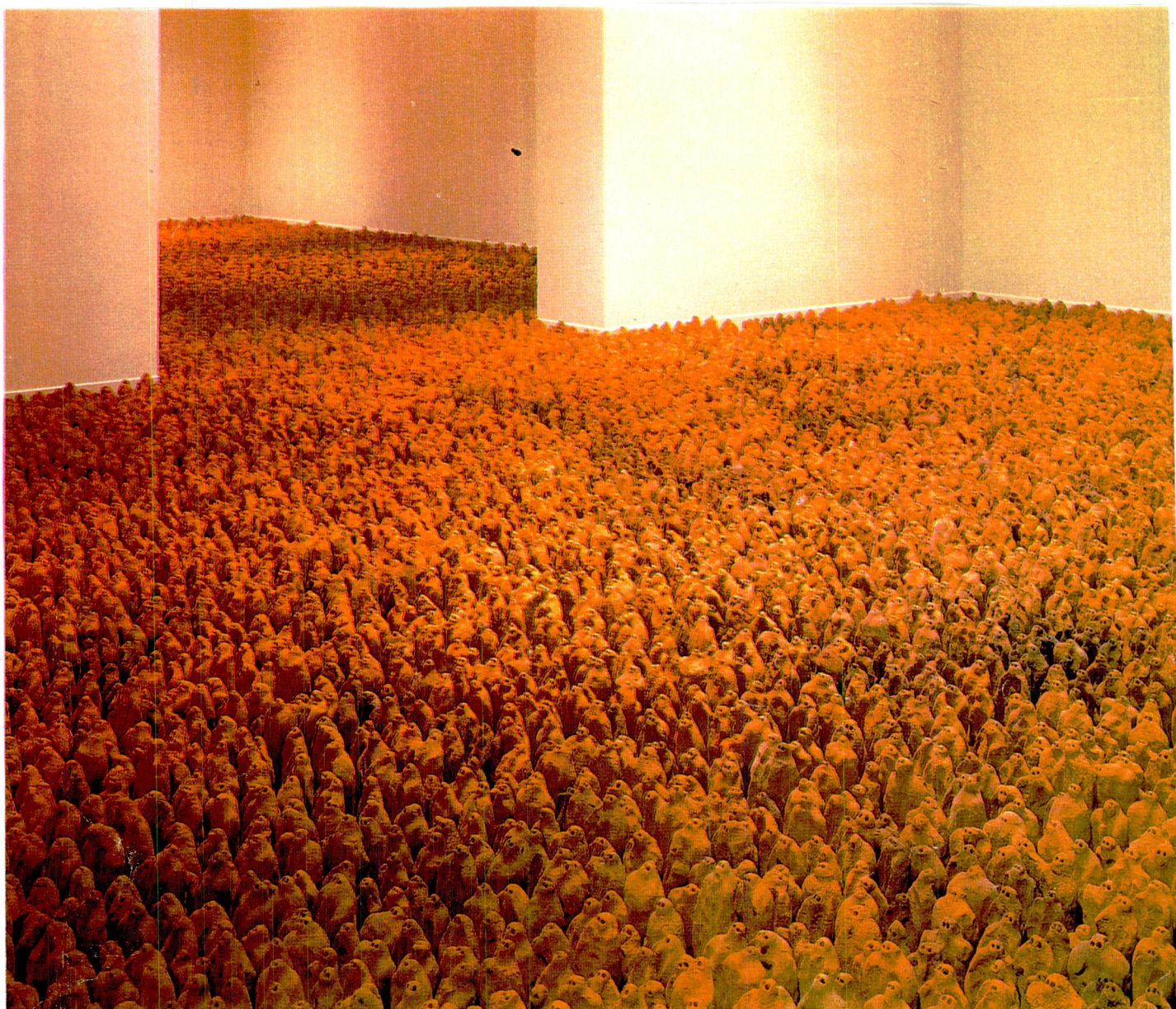


Fig. 3 Field, 1993
The Montréal Museum of Fine Arts.



Nature is within us. We are sick when we do not feel it.
The sickness of feeling separate from the world is what is
killing it. We are earth above ground, clothed by space,
seen by light. The distance inherent in sight has made
us treat the "outside" as different. If we are to survive,
we must balance outer action with an inner experience
of matter. This is the great subjectivity and the great unity.
This unity is expressed by those who live close to the
earth in living ways. We must integrate our perceptions
of the dynamic interpenetration of the elements with the
workings of the mind and realise them in the workings of the body.

(Antony Gormley, 1989)

This statement sums up Antony Gormley's approach to his art, which is aimed at reinstating the age-old myths through which humanity has identified with its place in nature. This has been achieved by working directly with materials drawn from nature.

Antony Gormley's installation "Field" (fig.3) was a floor level flood of 42,000 small, red, yellow, brown and orange people made from red terra-cotta clay who filled the halls and pressed the walls of the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts in Canada.

In 1990, Gormley went to Mexico to work on "Field" with a family of brick-makers, who made the figurines which were roughly hand-modelled hand-sized figures with two holes for the eyes. The direct experience of working with local materials and the rhythm of production identified the work with the infinite flux of life, birth, decay, and rebirth. Just as the earth reflects our consciousness back upon us, each of these figures has its own character, and was made by an individual. Through this work, Antony Gormley re-introduced the element of ritual into the process of making art.

Ana Mendieta and Antony Gormley are only two of the many contemporary artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Long, Anish Kapoor and David Nash, who are exploring concepts of nature and culture in a new and interesting way. They take their inspiration and materials from the natural world. They merge with nature to create art work that respects its source and which realises humanity's need to return to nature.

CHAPTER II
CATHERINE HARPER



Fig. 4 Artist Catherine Harper
with "The Big Red" 1994
in the background.



Born on the 13th of May, 1965, artist Catherine Harper grew up beside the boglands of the Sperrin foothills in County Derry.

She felt in the bog;

“a pagan spirituality, a rawness and darkness”.

This environment became the initial source of her work, which deals with the natural history, archaeology, ecology and mythology of the landscape.

Background

Catherine Harper studied at the University of Ulster, Belfast, where she received a First Class (Hons) Degree and a Post-Graduate Diploma (Commended) in constructed textiles. She then went on to receive a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering. Since 1987, she has exhibited in Ireland, the U.K., Germany, Netherlands, the U.S.A. and Japan. She has received a large number of awards and bursaries and her work is included in numerous private and public collections.

Sources

Catherine Harper's interest in bogland stems from childhood explorations of the boggy uplands of the Roe Valley in her native Co. Derry.

“To walk into the bog is to open the senses
to a subtle battering”.

Catherine Harper in Dunne, (14-2-93)

Catherine Harper often uses natural materials she has gathered when walking across the surface of the bog or from exploring its cracks and crevices. She collects bones and interweaves these with bogland motifs and notions of decay, producing powerful and sometimes frightening work which plays on primeval fears.

Working Method

Harper sketches her ideas and keeps them. They may or may not become finished pieces. She keeps an open mind about different methods of working and new materials. Her work is a marriage of planning and exploration. Some of her best images come from accidental discoveries. For example, she once discovered that when working with layers of water-colour washes, overloading the paper with water resulted in the paper splitting as it dried. She used this technique to create splits and cracks in many of her works.



Fig. 5 "Post coitum omne animale
triste est" 1991

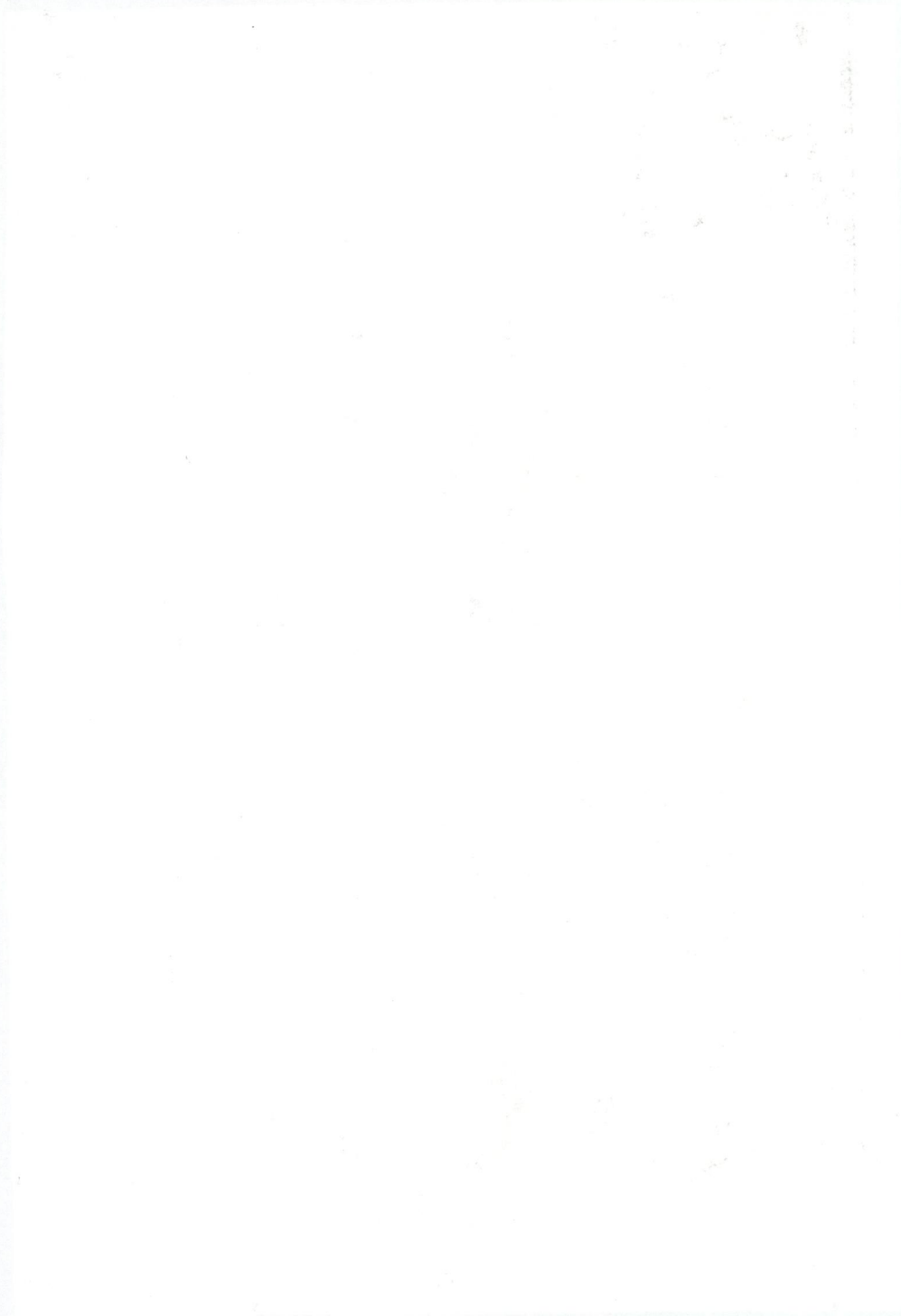
Pencil on card, 68 x 81 cms.



Fig. 6 "Conceptua Immaculata" 1991
Pencil on card, 68 x 81 cms.



Fig. 7 The body of the Tollund man,
Sithebog Museum.



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Fig. 8 The body of the
Lindow Man.



Her early work

Catherine Harper's early work was based on the physicality of the bog. She spent time walking there and recording what she saw. These references provided her with a range of inputs: the moisture, the slimy sensuality, the dry crumbling, the incredible flora and the elusive fauna. She recorded this physical wealth in media from fibre to hand made paper to oil and water based paint and pastel.

Harper is very interested in the myth and history of the Iron Age "bog bodies". These people were ritualistically drowned and submerged in the bogs of Ireland, Britain and Scandinavia, presumably as part of an offering to a female earth Deity. Harper came to know Seamus Heaney's poems about bodies buried in the bog. She also read the book which influenced him, P. V. Glob's mystical account of ritual burials in Denmark, (Glob, 1969).

Harper travelled to Denmark to see in reality the Danish bodies of Tollund (Fig. 7), Grauballe, Eilling etc. She also went to England to see the Lindow Man (Fig. 8) and to Czechoslovakia to see human and equine remains. These experiences were curious for her:

They are really beautiful, the preservation by the bog is amazing. The rush of emotion seeing them was very strong. I think I fell in love with them also they had great vulnerability, as though they were sleeping and as if their innermost thoughts were on display

Catherine Harper in McGongle (1991) p.14.



Fig. 9 "Ourselves Alone" 1991
mixed media, wall relief
108 x 145 cms.



Fig 10 "Stewing in her own juices"
1991 Hand-made paper, collage
126 x 167 cms.

The figurative works that resulted from seeing the “bog bodies” at first hand made her explore her feelings towards them. This series of work includes “Ourselves Alone”, 1991 (fig. 9) and “Stewing in our own juices”, 1991 (fig. 10). Through these works Harper tries to communicate the emotion of facing her ancestors. These bodies could have been her father, sister, lover, child or even herself. The sensuality of these images is very important. In her quest for an understanding of what these bog people might have been like, she sought parallels of human experience in her own time. Using her personal knowledge of the human condition she invested the bog people with emotions, feelings and experiences which she drew from her own life.

Land and the Female

A further theme to Catherine Harper’s work concerns the ancient associations of land and the female. This allows her to explore a more personally felt female history along with the history of the bog. She sees the bog itself as both human and female, an earth mother,

“with folds, faults, intrusions, rifts and crevices
wombs and lairs”

Catherine Harper in Dunne (14-2-93)

The artist believes the land is certainly female, producing life, growth and eventually decay in the continuous cycle of life and death. She finds the image of people being swallowed into the black bog ditches, and being held there preserved, a vivid one.

Catherine Harper perceives the bogs as a metaphor for life and death, and a symbol of the raw potency of our sexual energy. She sees the bog as both a womb and a tomb:

The ignition of life deep within the womb begins a journey that conception is held, as the bog people are, in suspension and in a state of unreality. Ejection from the womb echoes the tearing of a body from the bog, and marks a key point in that endless cycle of life and death. Bog is built by and rejuvenated by death and decay, pushing new life to the surface while simultaneously drawing in and digesting the old. The Earth Mother/Goddess nourishes us and we depend on her fertility, while she in turn is nourished by our inevitable demise.

Artist’s Statement, I.M.M.A. (1995)



Fig. 11 "A Strong Woman
made Weak" 1991,
34 x 140 cms



Fig. 12 "The Come On Smile"
1991, Mixed Media
30.5 x 140 cms.



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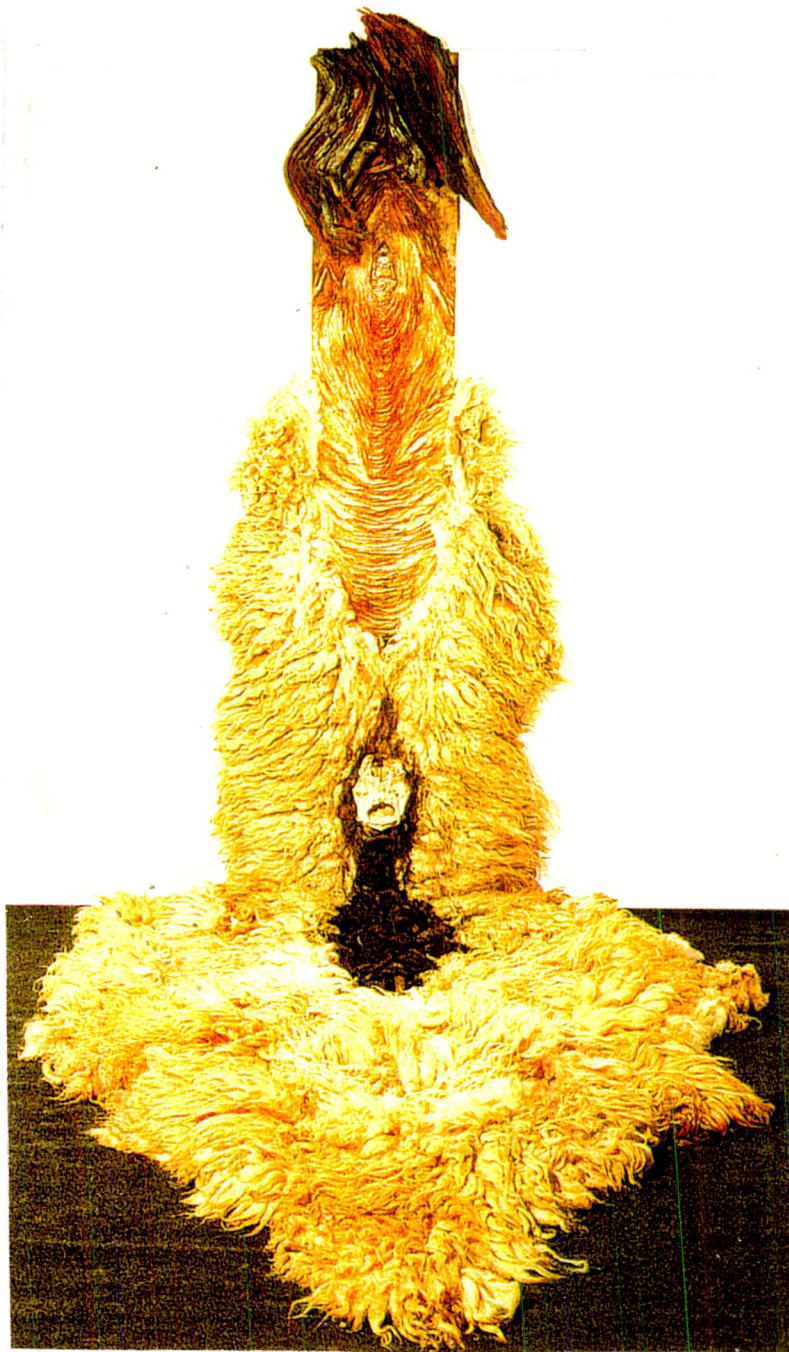


Fig. 13 "Conceptua Immaculata" 1991
Mixed Media, 180 x 250 x 240 cms.

Catherine Harper uses natural materials together with paint, glue and fibre in Conceptua Immaculata 1991 (fig.13). Fleece, rope and sheep dung are constructed into an installation piece which, creates, metaphorically, a wolf in sheep's clothing. It is a message to man as wayward patriarch, with a gold nugget phallic symbol placed appropriately.





Fig. 14 "Begotten Forgotten" 1991
Mixed Media, 140 x 100 x 85 cms.

Harpers strange figures are like animated bog people, emerging from the peat which had covered and protected them for centuries. They are turned inside out, revealing their interior secrets, their bleached bones and coiled innards. In works such as "Begotten forgotten" 1991 (fig. 14) the figure is coming into life, entering the twentieth century from a peaty time capsule. In "Vagina Dentata" 1992 (fig. 15) which is based on the Sheila-na-gig form the figure is sexual and fertile, but chillingly aware of the darker side of things, of betrayal, pain, loss, death and decay.



Fig. 15 "Vagina Dentata" 1992



In 1994, Catherine Harper was invited to take part in a Fibre Art Exhibition at the Galway Arts Centre. Her installation, "The Big Red" consisted of a huge, livid wall of twining, twisting red fabrics. Catherine said that this work was:

"An attempt to place the raw bloody visceral package
of my feelings towards my biological father outside of
myself".

Catherine Harper in Dunne (1994)

Her anger towards her father stems from his decision to play no part in her upbringing and his virtual withdrawal from her life. She first addressed this issue in a series of drawings, made in 1993, which remain private.

"The Big Red" shrouded an entire wall with masses of ragged, falling fabric strands, of different textures and densities, but all dyed red. The effect created was that of a murderous waterfall which bled into a thick carpet of fleece which lined the floor and filled the room with a warm, heady animal odour.

A Change in the Work

Catherine Harper took part in the Artists' Work Programme at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, from March 1995 to March 1996. During this time she developed a series of large scale collaged panels, using a range of hand and commercially made papers from Africa, Japan, Nepal etc. She used imagery that followed her previous work with motifs from the land (layers, lines), pre-history (labyrinths, "wombs and tombs") and femininity (eggs, spirals, circles), with a symbolic use of the colours of blood, bone, gold and stone. Her working process involved staining and drawing on unprimed canvas and then building up areas with wax, paint and varnish - then stripping away parts of the surface, until a type of "conflict" occurred.

During this residency, Harpers' work began to change. Being away from her Presbyterian heritage helped her to develop more personal work. She felt that she had exhausted history as a source and began to think much more about the senses, about sex and sexuality and her position in the world.

The work she produced during the residency was a diptych, a two-part work, portraying actual vagina dentata. She became interested in the notion of animus anima, the idea that within a single human being there is the possibility to be “masculine” and “feminine” and that there are very few people who exhibit characteristics that are absolutely feminine:

I have been very conscious of my animus of my maleness, of my possibility to be quite masculine. If you want to list what that list of masculine traits might be and you're on to dodgy territory then. What I have done here is given myself a protective vagina and I have provided myself with a phallus, a penis, so I'm trying to reflect that duality, that it's possible within one woman to have both of those areas covered.

Catherine Harper in O'Shea (1996)

This change in Catherine Harper's work is a progression rather than a break. She has moved from the Sheila-na-gig with a stylised vagina to making actual vagina dentata which have teeth made from bones. She began to use horns as male symbols of virility and found these forms exciting starting-off points.

I take on board all sorts of theories; penis envy, castration theory, Colombian art motifs, and those all inform that notion of the vagina dentata. There's all this Freudian, Jungian theory that I might want to explore. It can be explored simply from those starting off points. So I have years of work mapped out for me in those alone. That's where I'm going these are the next steps.

Catherine Harper in O'Shea (1996)

Catherine Harper is currently living and working in London. Although the themes of her work continue to change and develop, her love of nature and the environment remains a vital force in her sculpture. Her deep sensitivity and unique understanding of the bog landscape still provides her with the inspiration to create strong and powerful work which deals with contemporary social issues.

CHAPTER III

AILEEN MCKEOGH

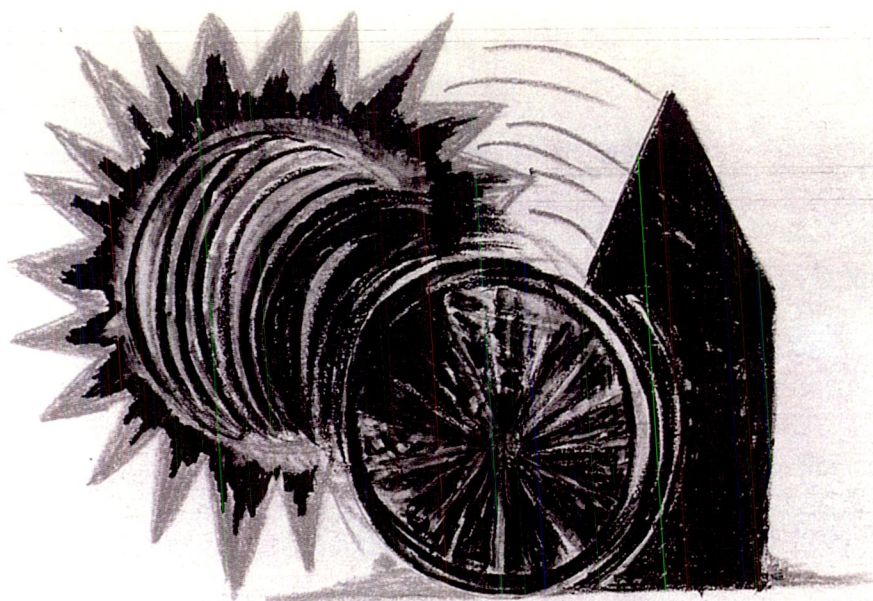


Fig. 16 "Firewheel" 59 x 42 cm
Oil pastel, graphite, conté 1989

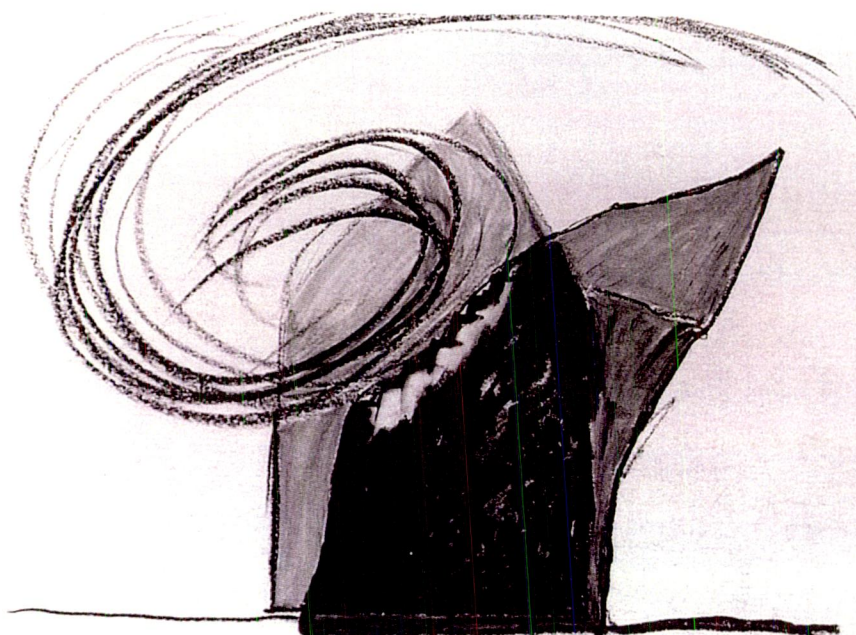


Fig. 17 "Ill Wind" 59 x 42 cm
Oil pastel, graphite, Conté 1989

Handwritten text, mostly illegible due to fading. Faintly visible words include "The" and "of".

Handwritten text, mostly illegible due to fading. Faintly visible words include "and" and "the".

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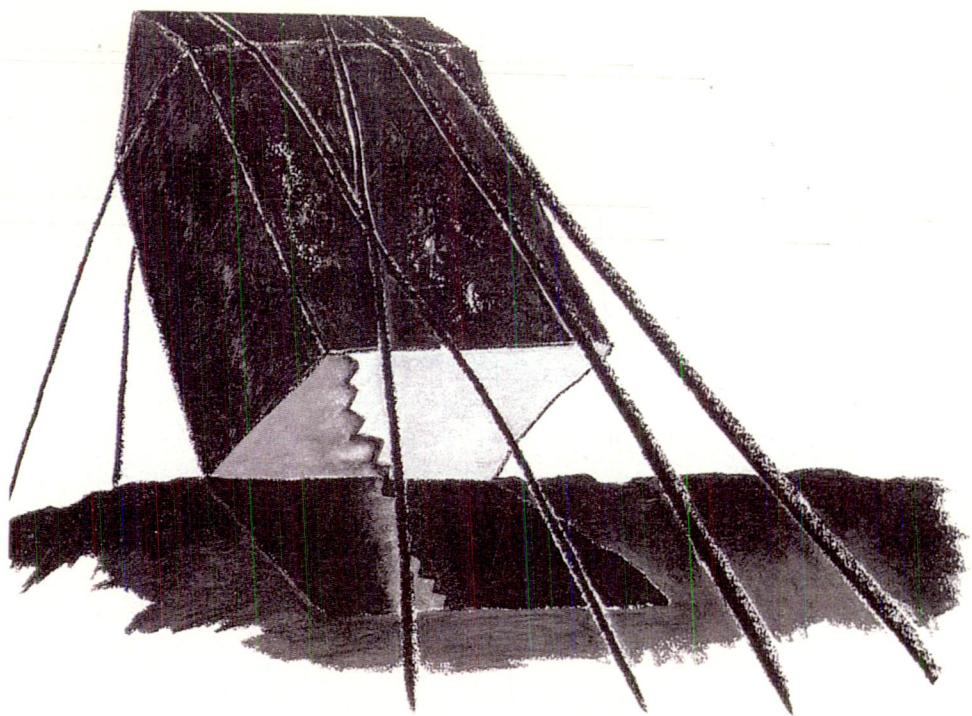


Fig. 18 "Upheaval" 75 x 55 cm
Oil pastel, graphite conté 1990.

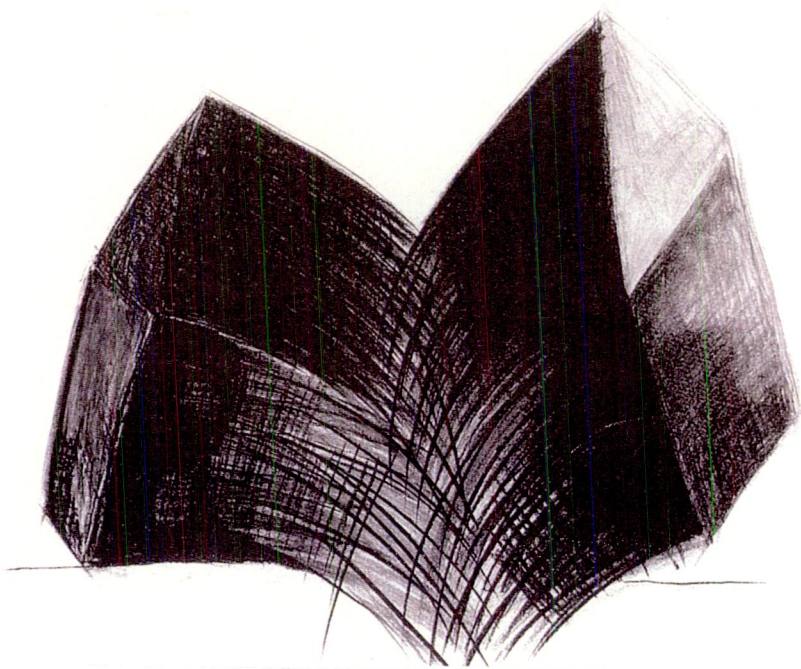


Fig. 19 "Fragmenting" 75 x 55 cm
Oil pastel, graphite conté 1990



Aileen McKeogh is a multi-media artist whose work radically changed after the tragic death of her nine-month old son in 1987. Although the content of her recent work represents a radical departure from her earlier exhibitions, the materials she uses continue to have their basis in nature. This reflects McKeogh's deep sensitivity to and appreciation of natural materials.

Background

Aileen McKeogh grew up in Sandyford, on the slopes of the Three Rock Mountains outside Dublin. She has been surrounded by woodland for much of her life. She attended the National College of Art and Design where she received a Diploma in Fine Art (sculpture) in 1976.

Early Work

Aileen McKeogh's close relationship with a woodland environment provided the inspiration for her earlier work. While studying at the University of South Illinois, 1979-81, McKeogh was surrounded by forests. These forests had no interference from man and were left to follow their natural cycle. She observed the destruction wrought by nature. She watched violent storms decimate huge trees.

While in America, McKeogh began to work in bronze, casting branches. She wanted to use casting facilities while available to her but she found this medium too removed from her source and, as a result, she destroyed most of this work. Instead, she began to use softer and less permanent materials such as wood, paper, paint and fabric. These materials suited her work much better. She started each piece with a definite idea of what she was going to do, and would go into the forest and look for the branches and twigs that she needed:

“The forest is my natural shop”

McKeogh in Dunne (1982)

McKeogh worked with moulded paper, fabricating rounded husks of tree trunks and she grouped bundles of thin branches together to form one solid trunk. She developed

various methods of working and these then recurred with variations in installations and relief work.

During her time in Illinois, McKeogh made two installations, both on the forest theme, one with specially composed music. This reflected her desire to create a complete environment. She was fascinated by the notion of making her own forest:

“I’m trying to create my own forests. I suppose it ties up with a sense of the place where I grew up”.

McKeogh in Dunne (1982)

In 1983, in the Triskel Gallery in Cork, Aileen McKeogh made an installation entitled, “Thebral Thicket”, (fig. 20). The piece consisted of about thirty six “trees”, each one standing about six feet high, in a basic grid, over a square floor of the gallery. Each tree was in fact a split, black painted branch, about an inch in diameter. They were split to form an elongated v-shape. The tips of the v’s met to form a pointed arch at about head height. This church-architectural reference was reinforced by the use of membranes of pale synthetic tissue which spanned the spaces between the higher branches. These translucent planes, edged by black branches, referred to the leaded lights of church windows. The artist’s control of the forms produced a set of shifting relationships, aisles dissolving into single elements which re-directed the eye to other possible groupings. The meeting of slanted and horizontal strands and the manipulation of the black, spindly tips, sometimes resting one on another, sometimes passing closely by but not touching, was sensitive and read true to experience. Overall this created the meditative effect that being alone among trees can induce.



Fig. 20 "Thedral Thicket" 1983
Triskel Gallery, Cork.

Aileen McKeogh has had a long-standing involvement with the landscape. Following her installation work based on the forest theme, she became particularly interested in the way that a section of land contains different textures and layers and how it acts as a storehouse for different meanings.

McKeogh's relief sculptures are fantastically elaborated accounts of the landscape, abstracted like cross-sections. Within a defining metal outline, she built slabs of wooded hillside, made from networks of branches and twigs, spanned by a taut skin of paper, imbued with dull earthy colours, withered greens and rusted browns. She allows us to see the tree roots mirroring the branches above. These pieces are similar to scale models but models of nature as an object made up of interacting processes. These ecological works note the influence of man on the environment. Some of these relief sculptures, such as "Treescape", 1985, fig. 21, for example possess certain religious connotations. McKeogh's use of symbolic imagery, such as ladders along with bold outlines and bleak compositions recall the harshness of religious work. These sculptures and installations set out to encapsulate something of the spirit of a forest as a hollowed, special place, an harmonious, self-sustaining eco-system.

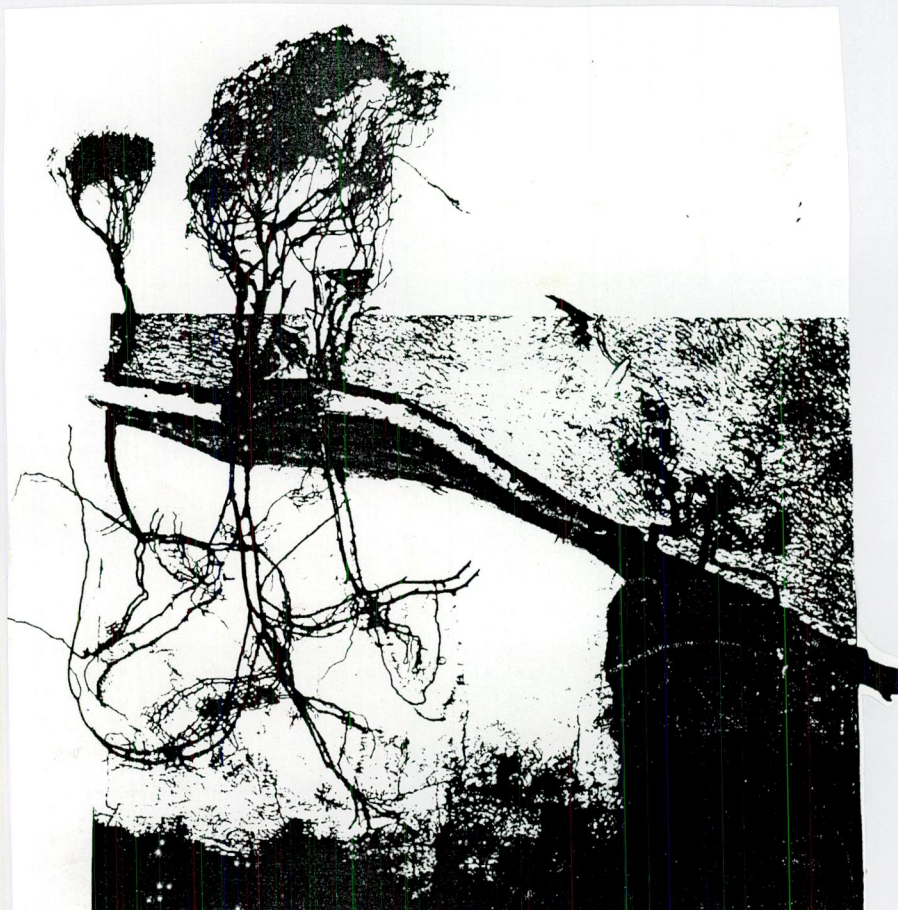


Fig. 21 "Treescape" 1985.

House

Aileen McKeogh's baby boy, Luke, died in an accident in the family home in November, 1987, when the baby-sitter tripped accidentally on the stairs and the baby fractured his head against a concrete floor. He died two days later.

Aileen was so heartbroken and distraught that she closed her studio and didn't work again until September 1989. Her new work was closely associated with her house, where the tragic event took place.

Aileen McKeogh began working again by making drawings which were a response to her child's death. Her early sketches of the house outlined a structure which is both threatening and essential, surreal and heart-breaking. The house dominates the picture space. It is a powerful image which sometime edges past the picture frame as if controlled by a greater force. She used strong colours, sometimes strong reds and yellows. Her mark-making was sometimes jagged, at other times rhythmic. Sometimes the house is solid and intact but it also appears turned upside down or compressed into the ground, as if under pressure from natural forces. In other drawings the house appears to be splitting open or its front is open.

McKeogh continued to work on these self-contained drawings alongside her sculpture. When one examines the sculpture that she made during this time, one can see an emphasis on surface qualities similar to that in her drawing. This series of sculpture and drawing, made in response to her child's death, resulted in an exhibition, called "House" in the Project Arts Centre, Dublin in 1991.

She worked with the idea of a house and a home. She saw that the membrane is fluid, moving constantly, changing shape and form, intelligent, emotional. The structure of the house keeps the membrane intact. There are external elements and interior elements. McKeogh has explored and developed this image, creating compelling work which marks out an emotional journey in the aftermath of her baby's death.

In McKeogh's exhibition, "House" 1991, the gallery acted as a metaphor for a house. Her sculpture is placed within a framework of tables and chairs. These are set at different heights, which symbolises the different levels of the house and the stages from birth to death. The sculptures represent different states and stages. Images are

transformed from one piece to the next. For example, the seven etchings on the seven doors of "Locating the Pain" (fig. 22) are based on drawing, while two etchings on the doors in Haemorrhage I and II (fig. 24 and 25) are more obscure representations, that might be interpreted as the pouring of ashes from an urn, or as a cleansing process.

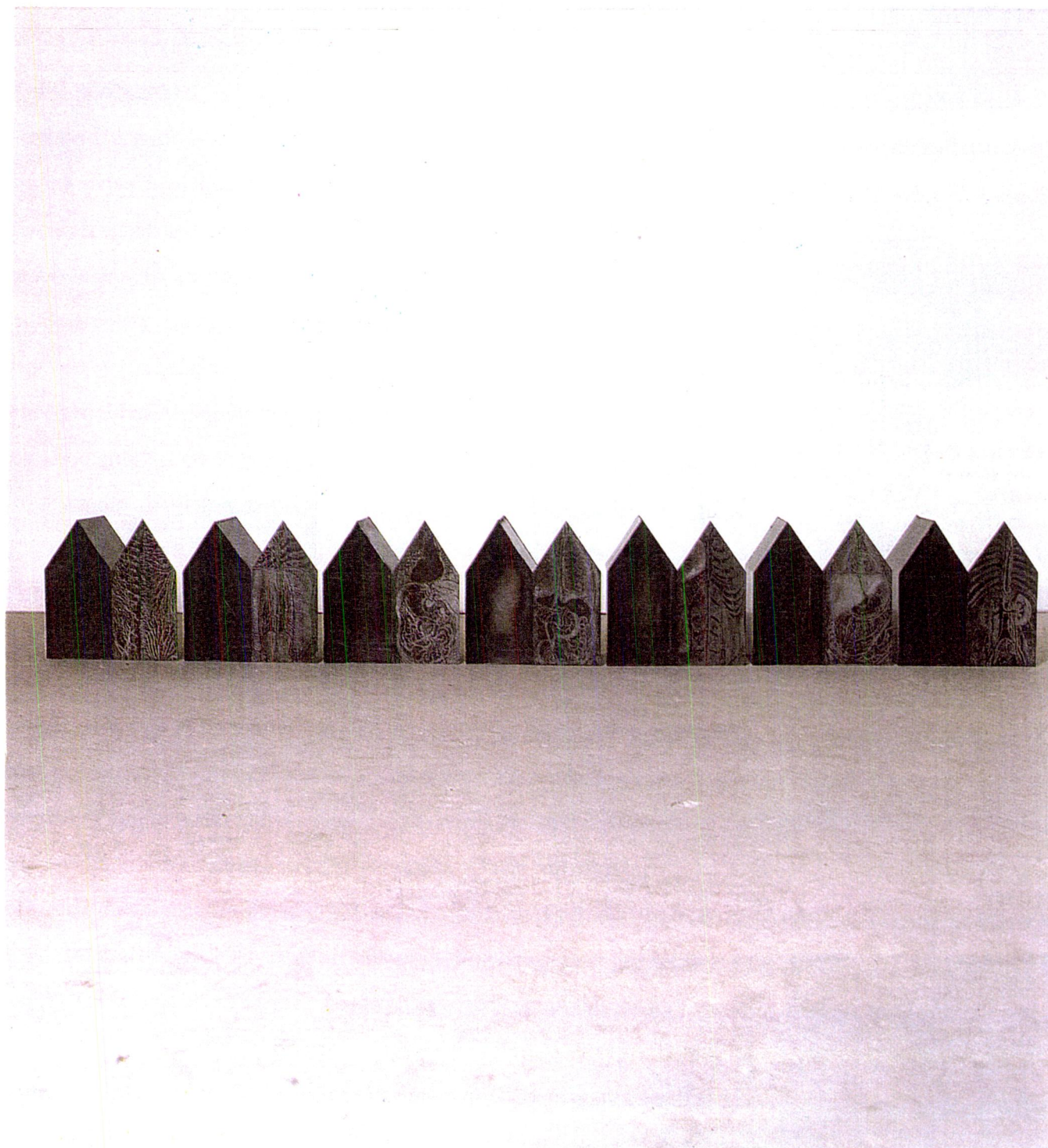


Fig. 22 "Locating the Pain". Installation
193 x 392 x 35 cm. Etched steel, porcelain 1991



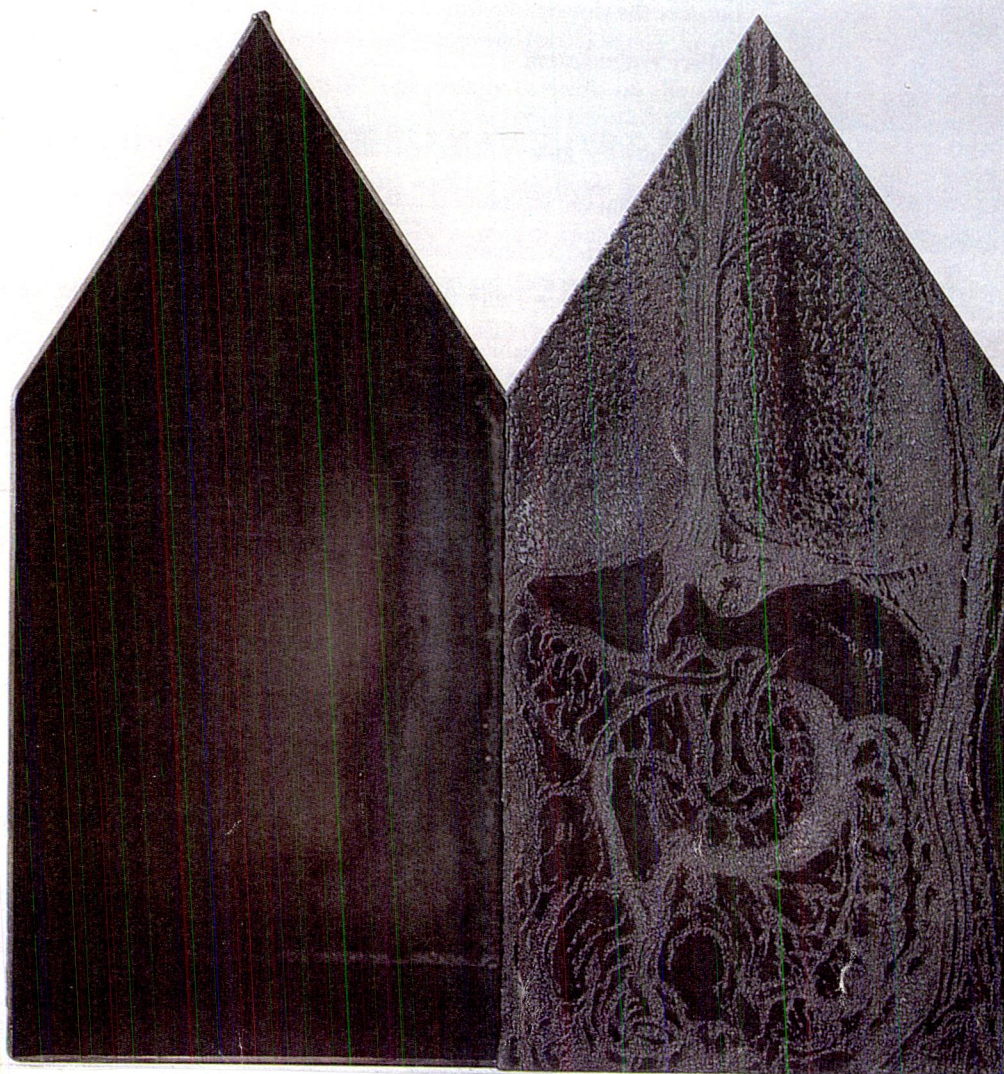


Fig. 23 Detail "Locating the Pain"
37 x 36 x 25 cm Etched Steel 1991.



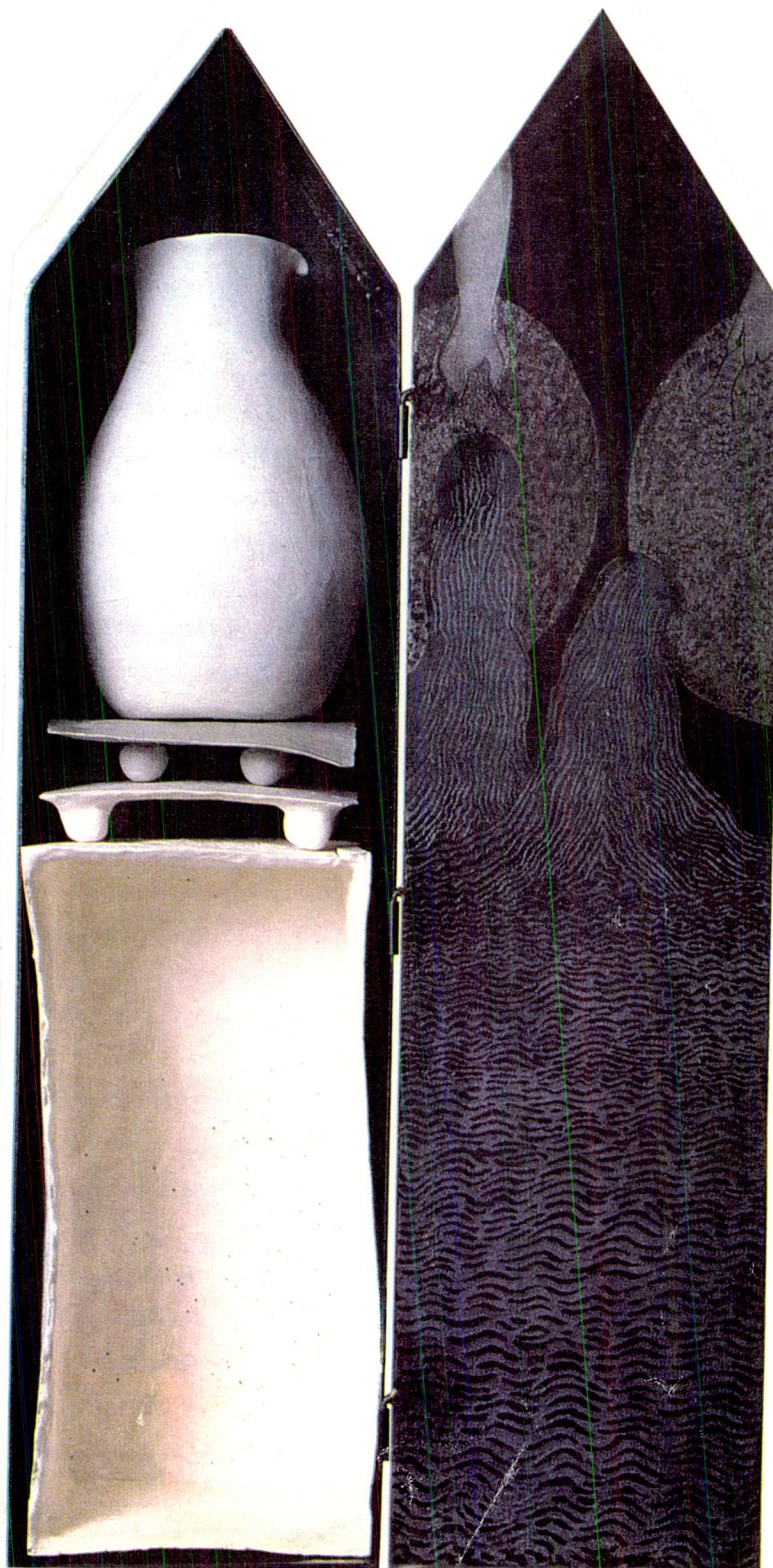


Fig. 24 Haemorrhage I

74 x 36 x 18 cm. Etched steel, porcelain 1990-91.



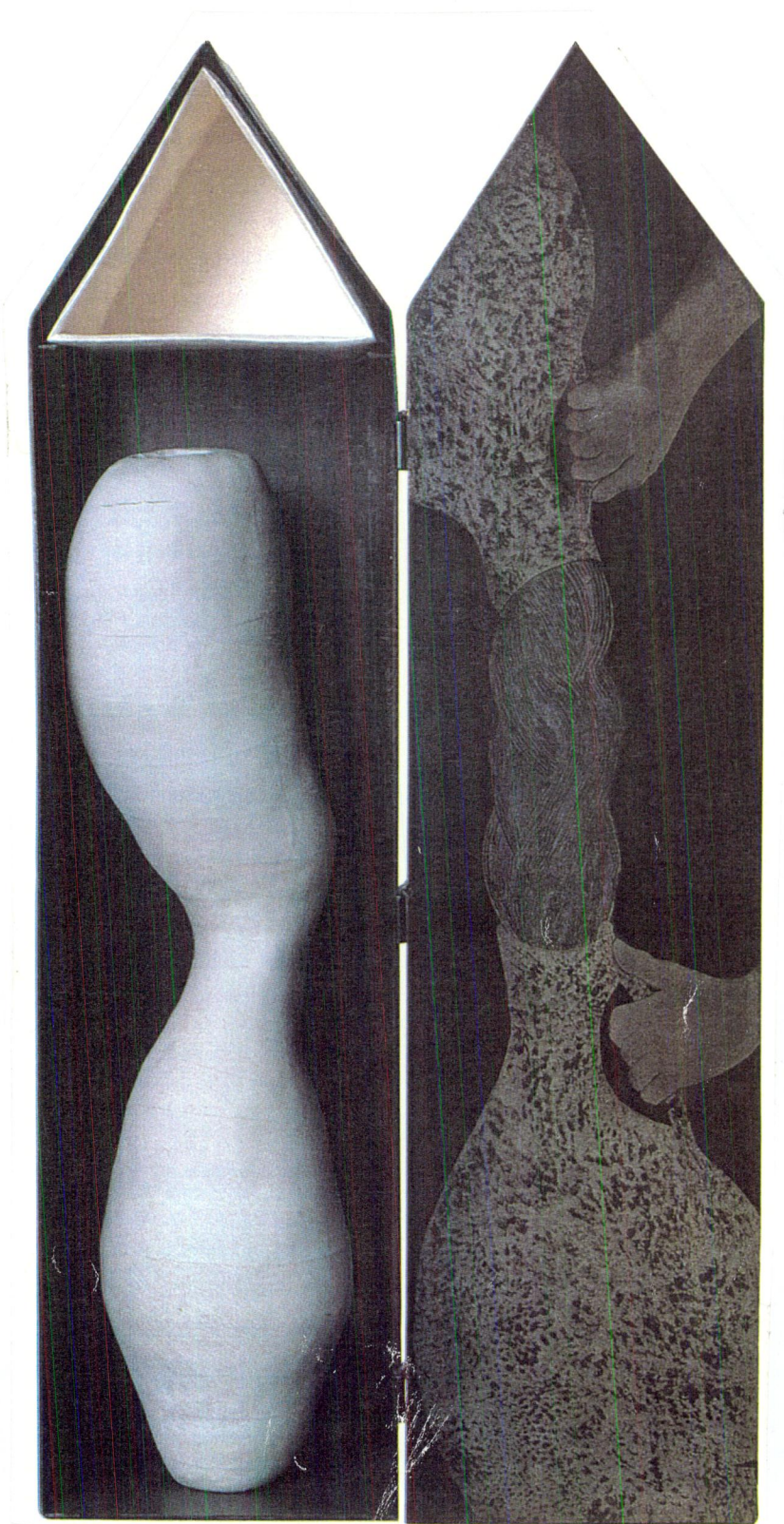


Fig. 25 Haemorrhage II

74 x 36 x 18 cm Etched steel, porcelain 1990-91.

In her drawings, (fig. 16,17, 18 and 19) McKeogh uses colour and surface to suggest tension. The viewer is shown the outside walls of a house which sometimes seems to be coming under pressure from inside and sometimes from outside. McKeogh recreates this sense of tension through colour and surface over and over in her sculpture. She uses fresco to form a splattered surface in "The Intestinal" 1990, the prevalent blue, yellow and orange colours of each of the three houses has a different mood, a different character.

McKeogh's houses resemble both Irish churches and later, Irish houses. The interiors of some houses are light-filled and glowing, others are dark and empty. Some contain objects, others don't. The Haemorrhage pieces contain jars but we cannot see what's inside them. In "Inclusion", fig 26 a moulded glass house contains an inner glass vessel, and inside it is a porcelain organ. While these structures imitate the most basic structure of all - the house and home - which represent the primary level of security - there is a fundamental fragility about that security

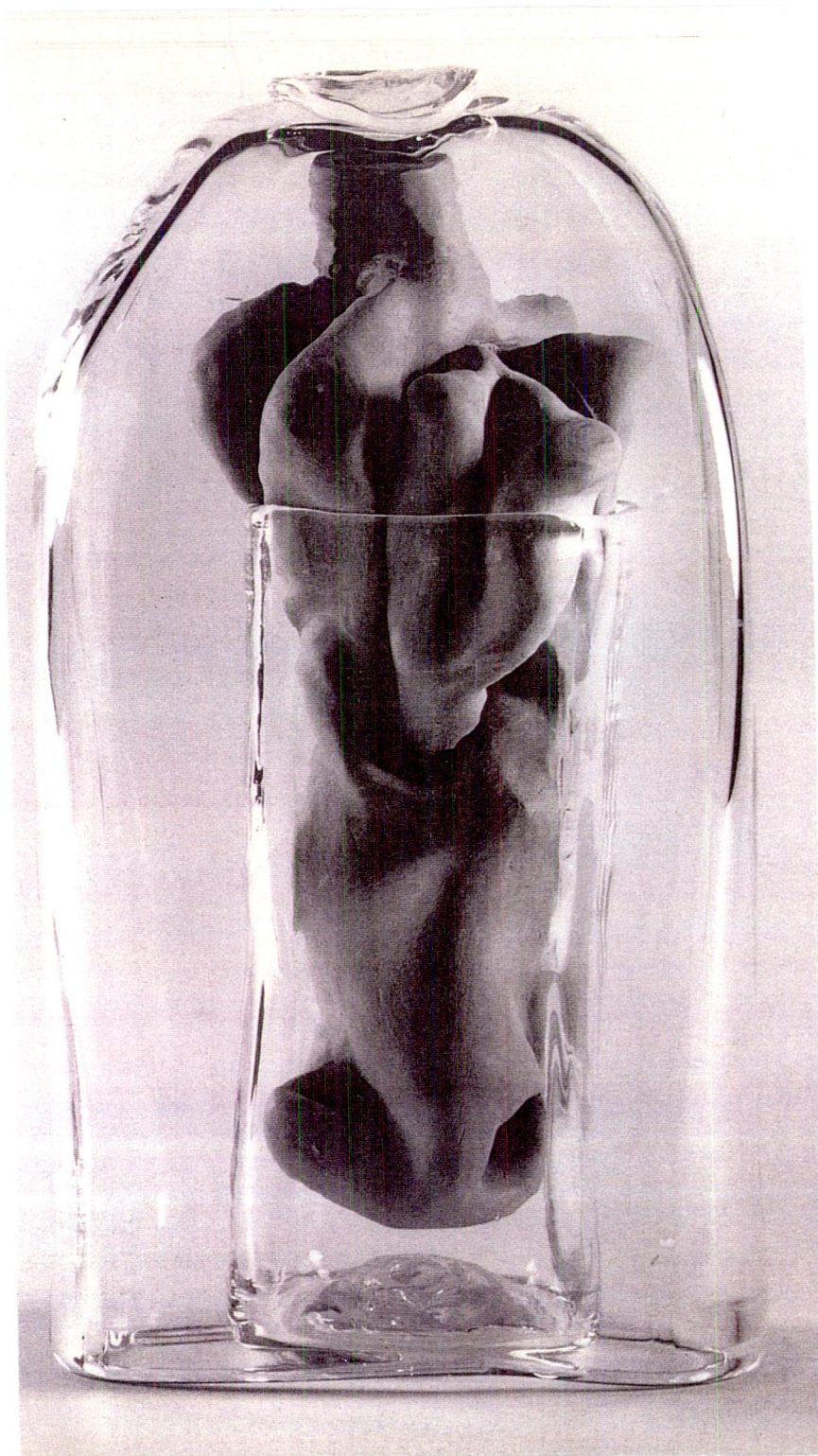


Fig. 26 Inclusion I

38 x 20 x 13 cm glass, porcelain 1991.



Fig. 27 "Contracture" 51 x 22 x 20 cm
Etched steel 1990.



In "Contracture" 1990 (fig 27), small rectangles of steel are apparently balanced on top of one another, to form a house. This is directly reminiscent of a house of cards that, as we know, will collapse with a puff of breath. The twenty two images from the Tarot card pack have been etched into the twenty two steel rectangles, which implies that our tomorrow's cannot be secured through logical projections of the future.

All the materials which went into the making of "House" have their basis in nature. Most are transformed through human interventions which change the basic materials into something quite different. Clay comes directly from the earth and porcelain is the result of human intervention in fusing it with other elements through extreme heat. Steel is the result of iron being fused with other substances. The bronze and glass used in sculpture are also the result of combining metals, and chemicals through firing and cooling which creates a new element. The etchings are the result of placing the steel plate into an acid bath which eats into the steel and creates an image. These processes are symbolic, and involve the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. The materials are therefore symbols for the possibility of life.

Enormous care has gone into the crafting of these objects, an approach which emphasizes the continuity between this work and the artists earlier work.

CHAPTER IV

ALANNA O'KELLY

Alanna O'Kelly is a multi-media artist whose work deals with people and places and is often deeply social and of an ephemeral nature.

Background

Alanna O'Kelly was born in Gorey, Co. Wexford in 1953. She graduated from N.C.A.D. in 1978 and then went on to study in Finland for a year. Since then, she has worked as a practising artist in Europe and the U.S.A.

I first met O'Kelly in 1994, while attending a performance workshop that she gave in Galway Regional Technical College. We spent an intense but exciting few days exploring ideas of history and identity through sound and movement. She has a great enthusiasm for life and a unique way of looking at the world around her. We experienced a blurring of the normal distinctions between life and art. She returned to the college the following year, as a part-time lecturer. Being a student of O'Kelly's was a truly enriching experience.

Sources

O'Kelly looks towards her background and surroundings as a vital source in her work. She uses first-hand experience and information close to her, coming to terms with the wealth of information from her local landscape and people. This search for local sources for her work has involved her more with the processing of natural materials and organic growth than with the built object itself.

Early work

In college, Alanna worked with resin, but she was very unhappy with it. During a visit to Nigeria she saw how indigenous materials were used, how form and function changed to a human touch. She then changed to natural material, such as sallies and flax and these determined the shapes that emerged.

In Finland, where she studied for a year, she saw the widespread use of wood in building and was particularly excited by its use in playgrounds. Wooden structures for children seemed, she says,

“like huge static toys, unlike the
mechanical amusements usually seen in Ireland”.

Alanna O’Kelly in *A Sense of Ireland* (1980)

Through works like “Oasis” 1977, (fig 28), one can see that O’Kellys is very sensitive to the nature of the materials she uses and through her work she links artistic practice to the natural cycle:

“Materials that I bring together, weave together,
take their energy from the earth. It is not removed,
i.e. the work does not disturb the natural order of things”.

Alanna O’Kelly in Thompson (4-10-92)

The source of these materials was the countryside along the Wexford coastline of her childhood. The materials were natural - sallyrods, flax, wood and stones and she brought these together in their natural form. Nature dictated how they were and how long they would last. She made flax sculptures and installations. She employed natural and primitive craft forms, by implication indicating their virtue and appropriateness. To O’Kelly, the gathering of the materials, the ritual of making and the place itself is as important as the finished piece. This can become obscured by the methods of presentation within a conventional gallery space. It is difficult to present this work but O’Kelly’s deep sensitivity and love for nature enables her to embody the spirit of the sources and to pass it on to the viewer through the feel and smell of her work.

Through her conscious use of natural materials O’Kelly echoes an increasing disillusionment with the hard, abstract, impersonal forms of Late Modernism. She reflects that which the American land artists of the sixties such as Robert Smithson, had articulated: the rejection of the synthetic in favour of environmental concerns.

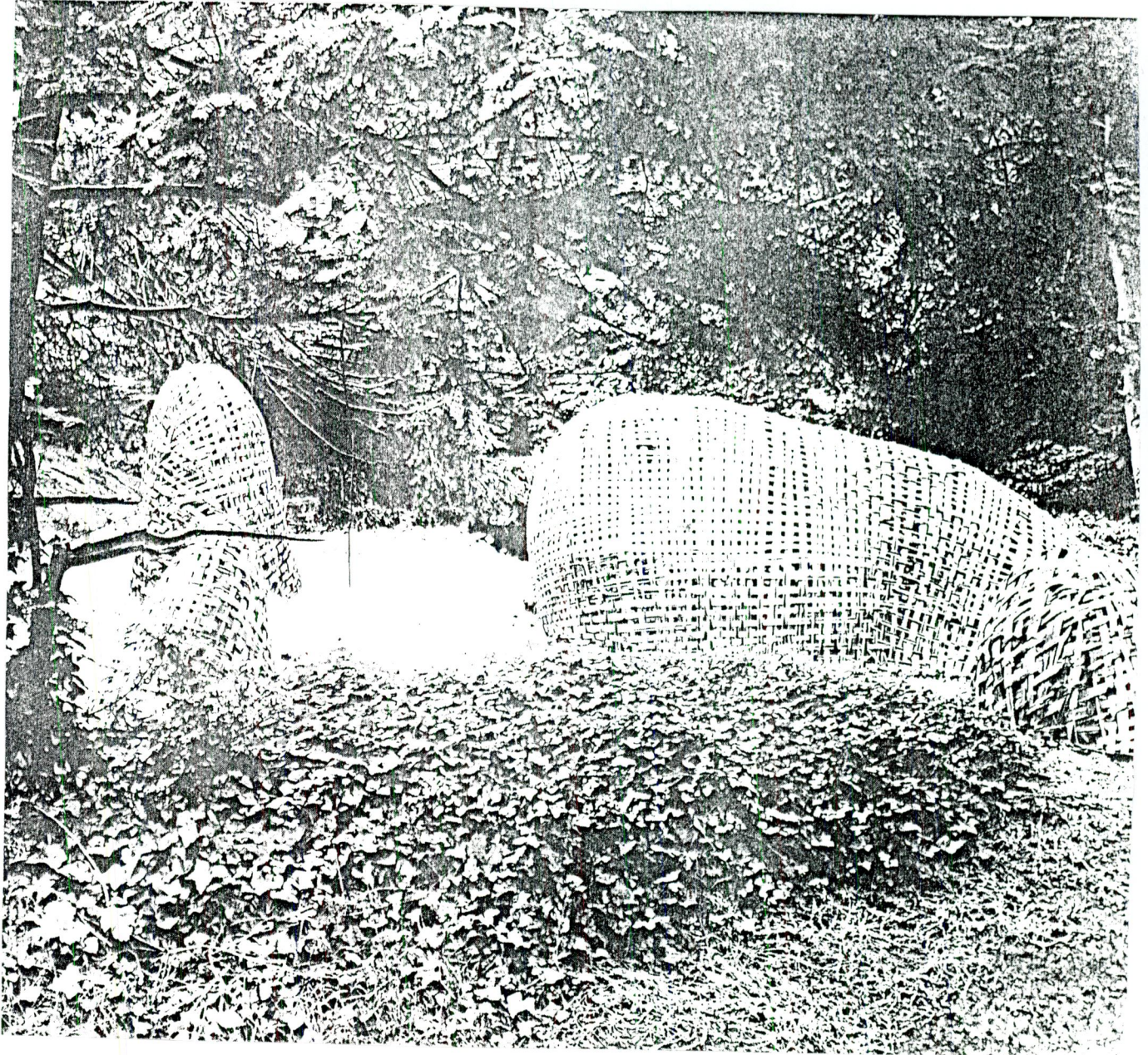


Fig. 28 "Oasis" Dublin 1977.



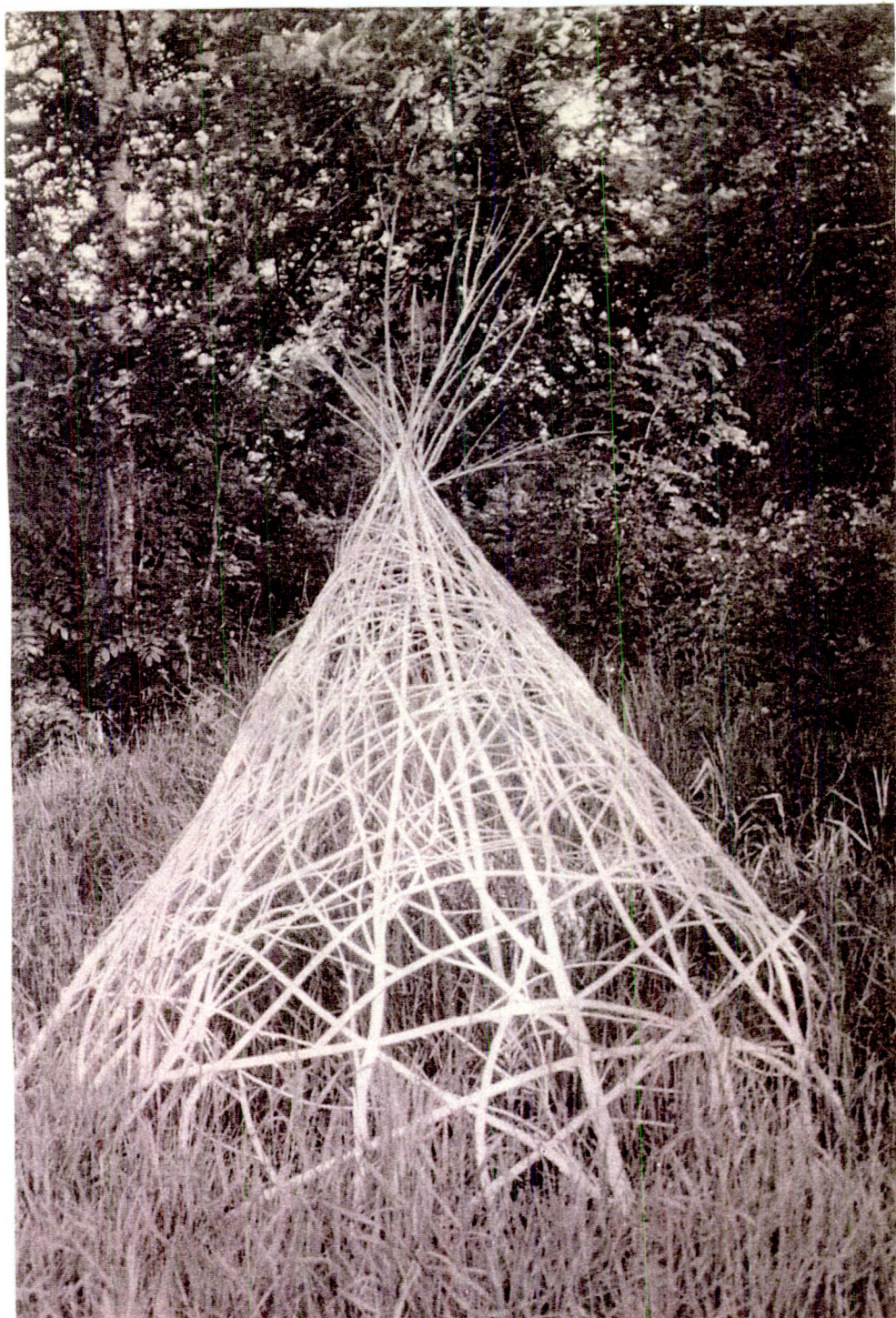


Fig. 29 "Barriers" an installation with drawings and photographs, 1981. Project Arts Centre, Dublin.

Recent work

A particular problem identified by feminist theorists has been that

“the relationship between women, ideas and production has been so undermined by women’s role in reproduction”

(Barber (93) p.7)

Within cultural representations however, there is an expanding body of work within which the role of women in the family is not seen as focused solely around the traditional reproductive function of childbearing, but extends to the reproduction and transmission of culture. This is often found in forms of oral narratives, in the stories handed down within families like treasured possessions.

Interests such as these have led O’Kelly to address her work to contemporary issues, using a wide variety of media including live performance and video installation. Elements of the oral traditional of women’s culture in Ireland recur throughout the artists’ work, through her emphasis on story-telling and her use of keening in an earlier piece, “Chant down greenham” 1986. This was a stunning performance piece in which she confronted threatening mechanical sounds, such as helicopters, with traditional Irish keening. This performance, in which she used her own voice, was a graphic demonstration of the conflict between human and technological values.

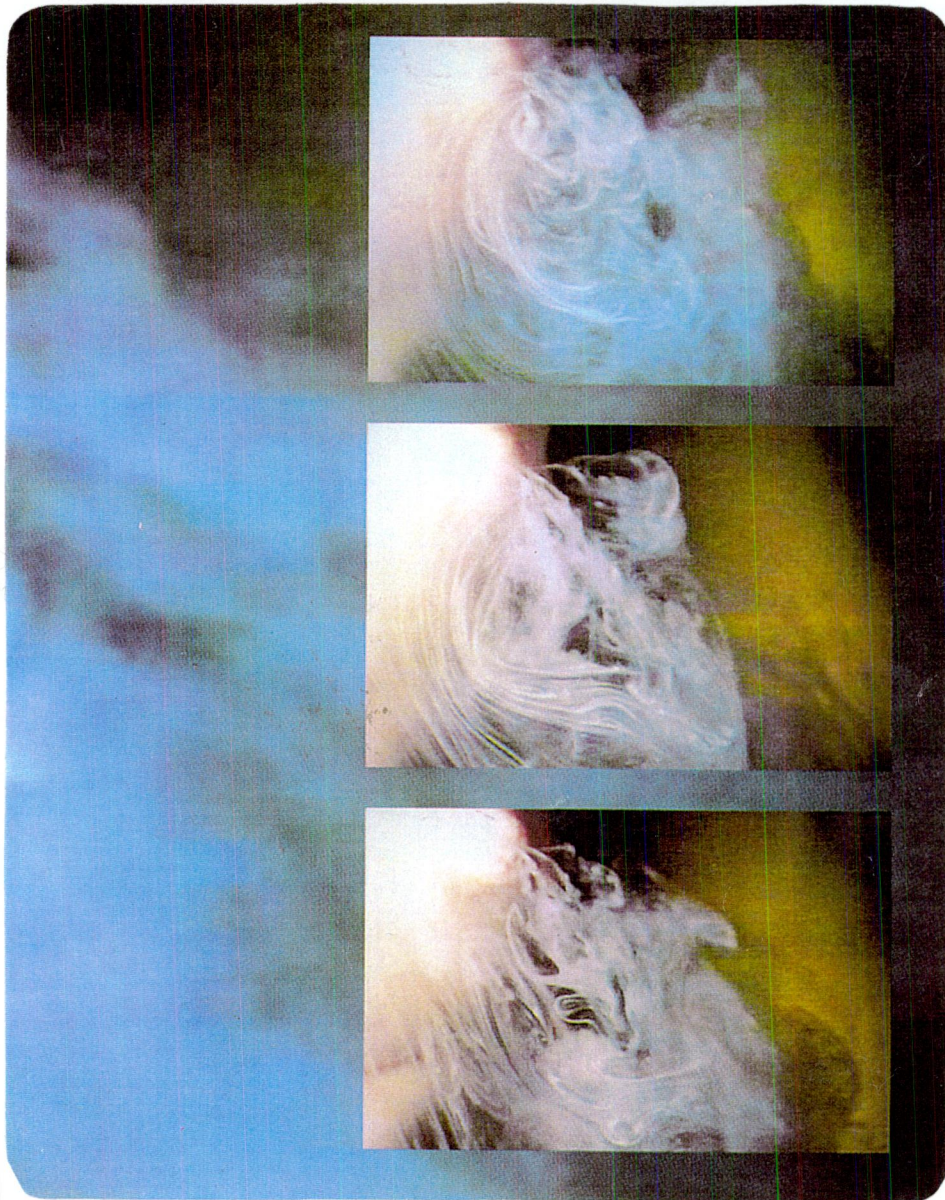


Fig.30 Composite video stills from
“A Beathu”, 1966



In "The Country Blooms a Garden and a Grave", 1992 (fig 31) a mixed-media installation at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, O'Kelly presented an interesting view of a subject most of us have relegated to the darker corners of our minds, the Irish Famine.

Teampall Dumhach Mhór is a mass famine grave on County Mayo's west coast. it is a sandy mound that sits on the strand. Its shape changes constantly with rocks sliding, sand shifting and raw bones revealing themselves. It has managed to resist serious erosion until recently, when Atlantic storms have washed much of its story out to sea.

Alanna O'Kelly sees starvation and emigration as the two ongoing themes that gnaw at Ireland's national psyche and body politic. Like the famine graves, these themes are known but avoided, lying unsettled beneath the top soil of Irish identity.

Alanna feels strongly about the injustices of famine -

"There is plenty of food in Somalia, food is not the problem, it's other political issues that create the problems".

Alanna O'Kelly in Thompson (4-10-92)

While living in London, O'Kelly found that there was a wilful ignorance about Irish culture and so began reading about and researching the Irish famine of the last century.

Irish peasants of the time relied totally on potatoes for their diet and had to sell any crops and livestock to pay rent to their, mostly Anglo-Irish absentee landlords. When blight struck the potato fields, they had nothing. While the people starved, Irish foodstuffs - meats, grains, dairy products - were shipped to England.



Fig. 31 Teampall Dumach Mhór,
1992 image from
"The Country Blooms a Garden and a Grave".



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You would imagine you would go crazy in such situations but I wanted to show the dignity of the people. And maybe we do need to lament this aspect of our past.

Alanna O'Kelly in Dunne (20-3-94)

Alanna O'Kelly's work in video, installation and photoworks takes the viewer on a visual and spiritual journey through the famine. It employs a series of compelling images, not only to evoke feelings of pain, fear and hurt but also to suggest the possibility of a journey of discovery and healing.

In, "The Country Blooms a Garden and a Grave", 1992, O'Kelly begins with a series of huge photographs of begging hands covered in stone dust (reminiscent of the road-building schemes that were part of the famine relief work in Mid 19th C. Ireland), moving through black and white shots of hands in varying, frozen, ambiguous gestures or closing over the artists face. Then, using three video screens, side by side, the artist presents beautiful yet disturbing images of famine using the mass famine grave (Tempall Dubhach Mor) on Silver Strand, Thallabhan in County Mayo as her inspiration. The video images dissolve into each other until dissolution becomes their meaning: the fiery, orange scales of a bleached whaleskin becomes a redish-brown wall of mud-caked fingers, and these fingers become bones on the beach. These bones become shells beneath the water. The cries of whales become the whispers of Irish place names and then, a womans love song.

For the artist, this passing from one thing to another, acts as a memorial. Through exhuming this national corpus, she reveals the deep gap in our history and opens up a social space for mourning, which she feels is the final act of dissolution.

The final two spaces in the exhibition were more meditative. The first hosted a huge photograph of the famine grave mound as it is today, sagging like a sandy, bony breast with a small floor-lantern calming its presence with a meditative glow. The final room contained a video performance of the artist's breast oozing milk, with the hollow sound of an Australian didgeridoo in the background. O'Kelly had been sitting in the bath and thinking of her son; as she did so, milk streamed from her breasts into the water. She videotaped this, in slow motion, against a dark background. Only her breast and its flow were visible on the museum's monitor. This breast also resembles a

smouldering volcano, the milk resembling smoke in the water, it was a true metaphor: a volcano of remembering.

Alanna O'Kelly's sculpture asks questions, not only of herself but of the people who see it. It is work quite clearly made by a woman, a distinction worth noting in respect of the organic, earth spirit/mother spirit character which her work shares with many Irish women artists. Her work is open, fresh, alive and continuously developing.

I work from a need. Often this need comes from within,
from my dreams, my desires, my passions - or sometimes
from a place within society, from our collective dreams.
My concerns are almost, people and place, about relationships,
often deeply social. I have a passionate attachment to a place,
a life, a history.

Alanna O'Kelly in Dunne (20-3-94)

CHAPTER V

MARIE FOLEY

Marie Foley is a particularly interesting figure in Irish art. Deeply rooted in nature, she explores the spirituality of the North American Indian, ancient Egypt, the Far East and the Christian West. Her work is highly individual. Found objects, bog oak, slate and porcelain are her favourite sculptural materials, allowing each piece to evolve into works that reflect her totally original approach to the spiritual and psychological ideas that absorb her.

Background

Born in 1959, Marie Foley grew up in Kanturk, Co. Cork, "by the river". After completing her post-graduate studies in sculpture, which necessitated living in cities - Cork, London and Cardiff, she set up a studio in the Nore Valley, in Thomastown, County Kilkenny.



Fig. 32 Marie Foley in her Studio, 1993.



Early work

At first, Marie Foley wanted to model things from nature -

But in doing that I could never make anything
as beautiful as nature makes for us. Then I began
to pick things out of nature that had completed a
cycle. Autumn leaves and driftwood, things washed
up on the beach.

Marie Foley in Fitzgerald (20-5-90)

She assembled them into small pieces of sculpture. Gradually, the deeper, universal significance of the shapes she observed in nature took over and she began to work in fine clay to represent not only the shapes themselves but the human responses they trigger within her.

Sources

Marie Foley's way of working is exceptional, in that she collects masses of source material. Her walks are trawling expeditions for natural materials:

"The things I find in the Irish countryside
are part of a history and they have stories
of their own beyond what I do with them"

Marie Foley in Thompson (14-2-93)

In her efforts to discover the workings of the world, Marie Foley's studio is full of hundreds of found objects as the connection between artist and scientist. Her collection includes animal, vegetable and mineral objects - Slate tiles, unusual stones from the Burren, dried seeds, leaves, twigs, bits of rusty metal, the remains of dead birds, a dolphin skull, fish fossils, crab legs, animal bones and teeth, dried fish heads, dried artichokes, pomegranates and fungi.

She likes to be surrounded by a wealth of sources. These include numerous drawings and various photographs of trees, dry stone walls, ruined cottages, windmills, pyramids, overhead views of African villages. Many of these photographs have been

taken on visits to ethnological museums. She has also travelled. A trip to Egypt in 1991 had a profound affect on her entire sculptural language. The sense of space and forms and the atmosphere of the tombs and temples impressed her deeply and their influence can be seen in much of her recent work.

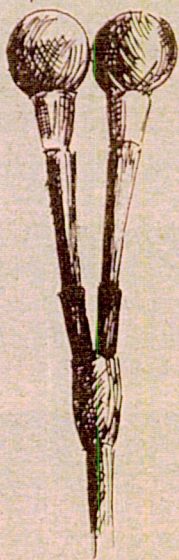
Materials

Exploited for its qualities of delicacy, fineness and translucence, porcelain is Marie Foley's favourite material for working with:

"It's so fine a material that the lightest touch makes an impression in it. You need to achieve a real rapport, with it as a material it's a challenge".

Marie Foley in Fallon (15-8-89)

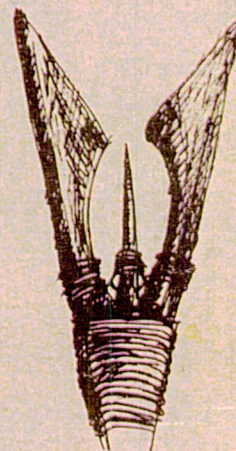
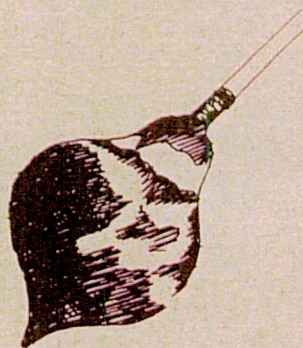
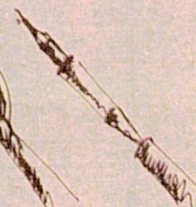
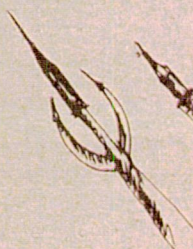
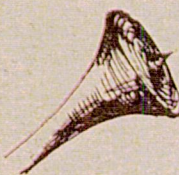
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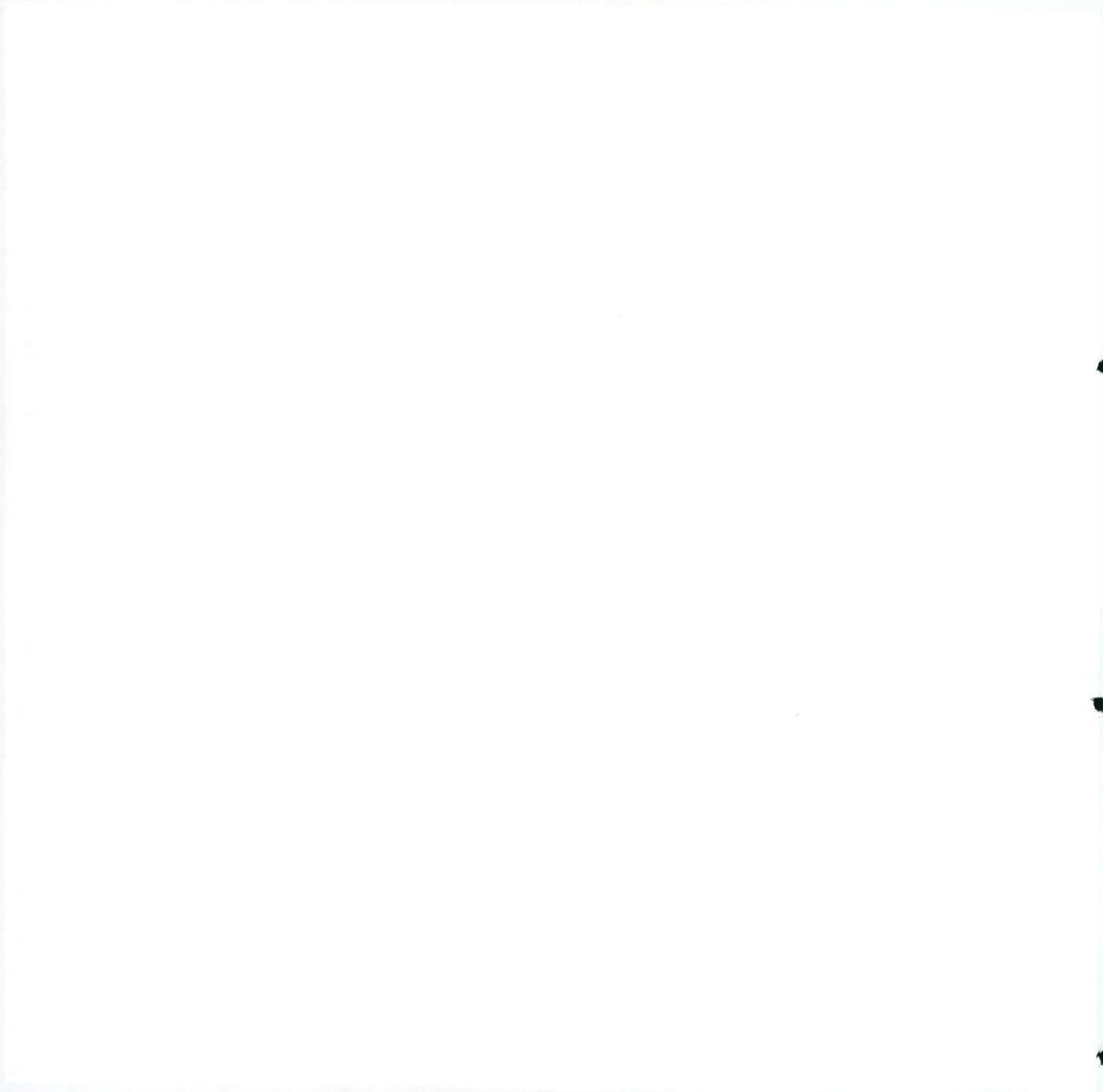


Last Tribes of the Amazon
Museum of Mankind LONDON



National College of Art and Design
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Fig. 33 Reference drawings, 1987.



Besides modelling it and firing it, she also uses it as a surface for drawing on. Foley is also aware of the symbolism of this material:

The material comes from the earth,
and yet it becomes translucent, and you can
see the light through it.

Marie Folen in Fallon (15-8-89)

The making of porcelain requires the four elements, air, earth, fire and water, and these contribute to the depth of symbolism in her work. Much of the intensity of the visual contrasts of her sculpture is to do with her use of black and white, symbolic of much, including darkness and light, good and evil, heaven and the underworld.

Dominated by strong horizontal and vertical axes, each of her sculptures is usually made up of numerous pieces. These are assembled in situ. She never uses glue, preferring to interlock the tiny delicate segments, often with silver wire. Marie Foley thinks of the parts of each piece as organs making up an organism. She believes that there is a "power" in natural materials that simply does not exist in manufactured substances like plastic. Using natural materials allows the sculpture to "give back" something of nature's power.

Marie Foley uses her sculptural materials as reflections of the forms visible in nature. Rust-encrusted metals with tooth-like structures provide a parallel to the bird and fish bone patterns seen in the remains of deceased life forms.

The Work

Marie Foley's sculptural language is one of depth and complexity. There is a profound and impressive philosophy behind her work.

Her earlier pieces are linked by the concept of death as the gateway to life. Marie Foley's mother died of cancer when she was only fourteen years old and her father died in a tragic accident in 1988. Her works are thus forms of prayer. The imagery she uses in her sculpture suggests that there is a destination beyond death, something that transcends it.

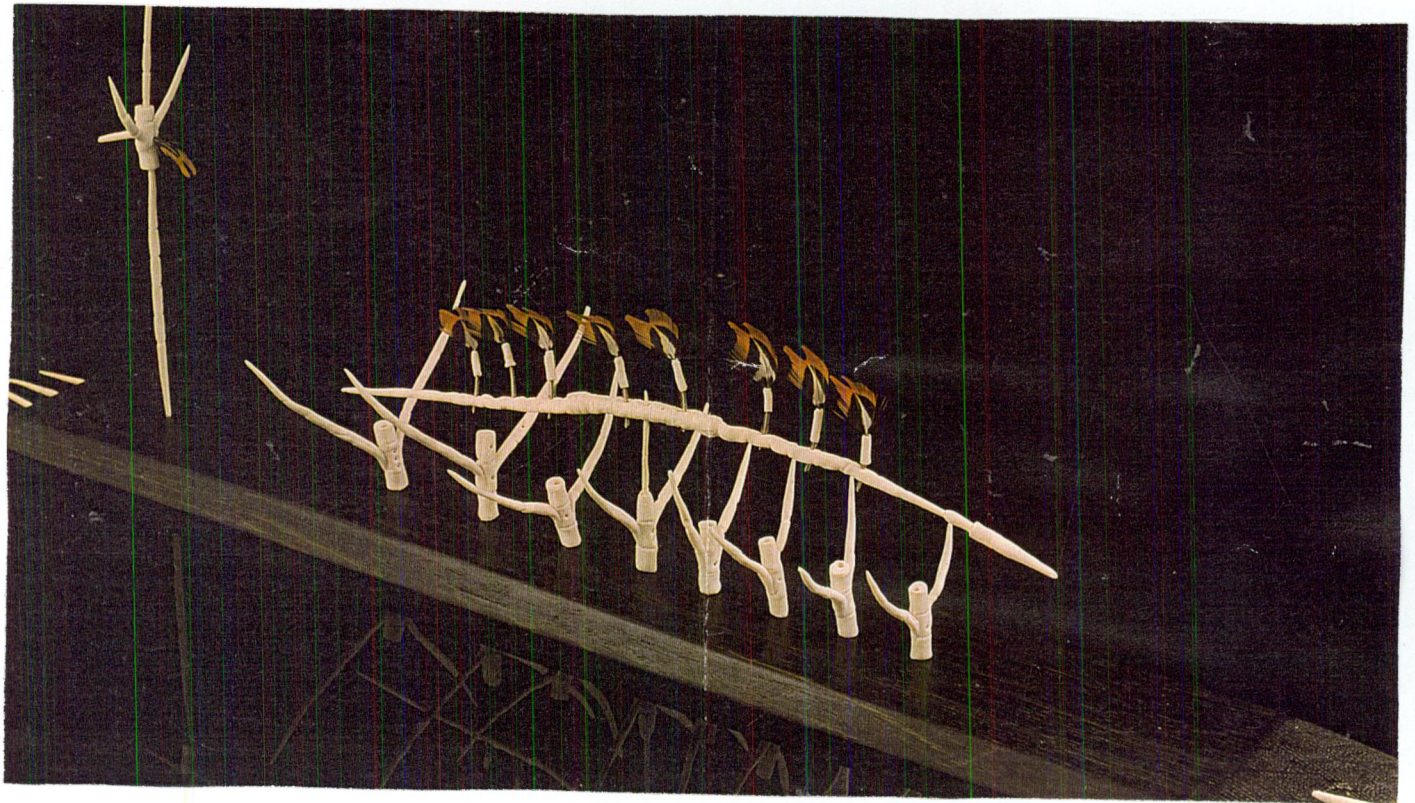


Fig. 34 "Death Raft" 1989
700mm long



In "Death Raft", 1989 (fig. 34) a body mounted on a flat wooden barge sails to its after- life. The essentially skeletal, porcelain form arches against the black bog oak base with a kind of life energy. A fringe of feather tufts lift this skeletal form, creating a feeling of optimism and the attainment of something higher. These feathers are a symbol of flight, freedom and hope. The feathers create a curious but unmistakable levity in the piece. This airiness and lightness of touch contrasts with the darker elements, such as the solid base. As if to further underline the positive aspect of its voyage, the death raft also has a feather rudder. It is a relatively long and horizontal work, the dead calmness of the water implied by the wooden platform contrasting with the energy of the skeletal arc and the spindly verticality of the crucifixion mast at the prow.

There are many symbols at work in this piece. There is of course, the bird and all that it might symbolize but there are a number of other basic symbols at work as well. The cone is a symbol of life. It is a potential repository for spiritual meaning that bears in its form the signs of its development. Inverted, it narrows to a point that penetrates time and the unknown.

The cube is one of Marie Foley's favoured forms, along with the sphere, cone and pyramid. It is essential to recognise these elements in order to understand her language. The cross is the most important symbol she uses, and it is found in virtually every work she makes. In the centre point of the cross is the meeting of all opposite terms - the zenith and the nadir, the vertical and the horizontal, the heavenly and the terrestrial. The cross of Christ is, of course, identified symbolically with the Tree of Life, the tree of unity. The tree is Marie Foley's metaphor for people in general and for the artist in particular. The roots of the tree provide nourishment and the tree will grow and bear fruit and reach towards heaven. The symbol of the cross is obvious in works like "The Way and the Disciple", 1993 (fig. 35)

A notion present in all of Marie Foley's work is that of a journey or movement through time. In, "Stone Map", 1989 (fig. 36) the slate base resembles a boat, and the porcelain "stones" on its cruciform mast are inscribed with maps, which represent the body of rational and intuitive knowledge that guides the voyager.

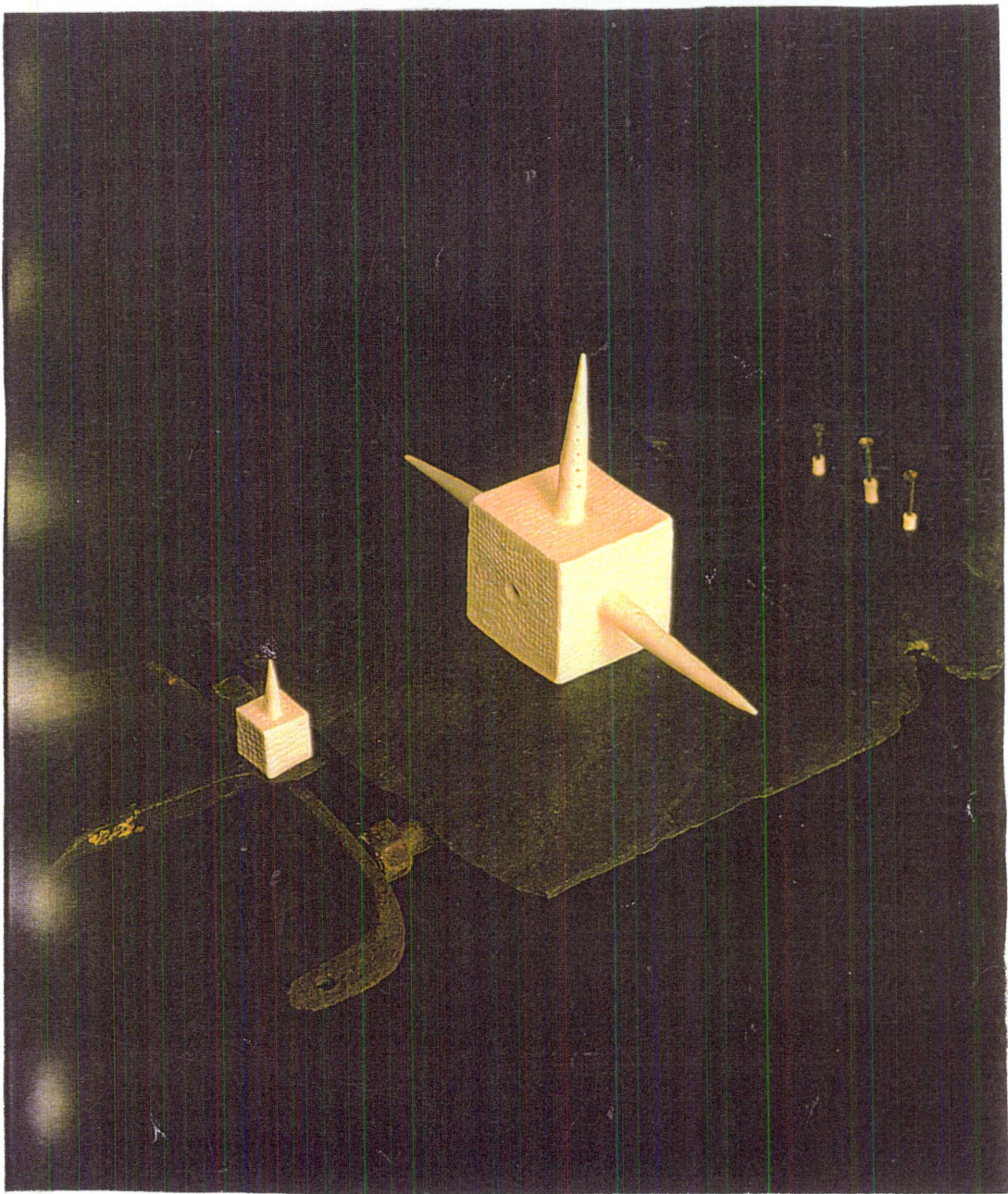


Fig. 35 "The Way and the Disciple" 1993

260mm wide 480mm long

Slate, metal and porcelain.



Fig. 12. The first and last pages of the manuscript.
The first page is a blank page and the last page is a blank page.

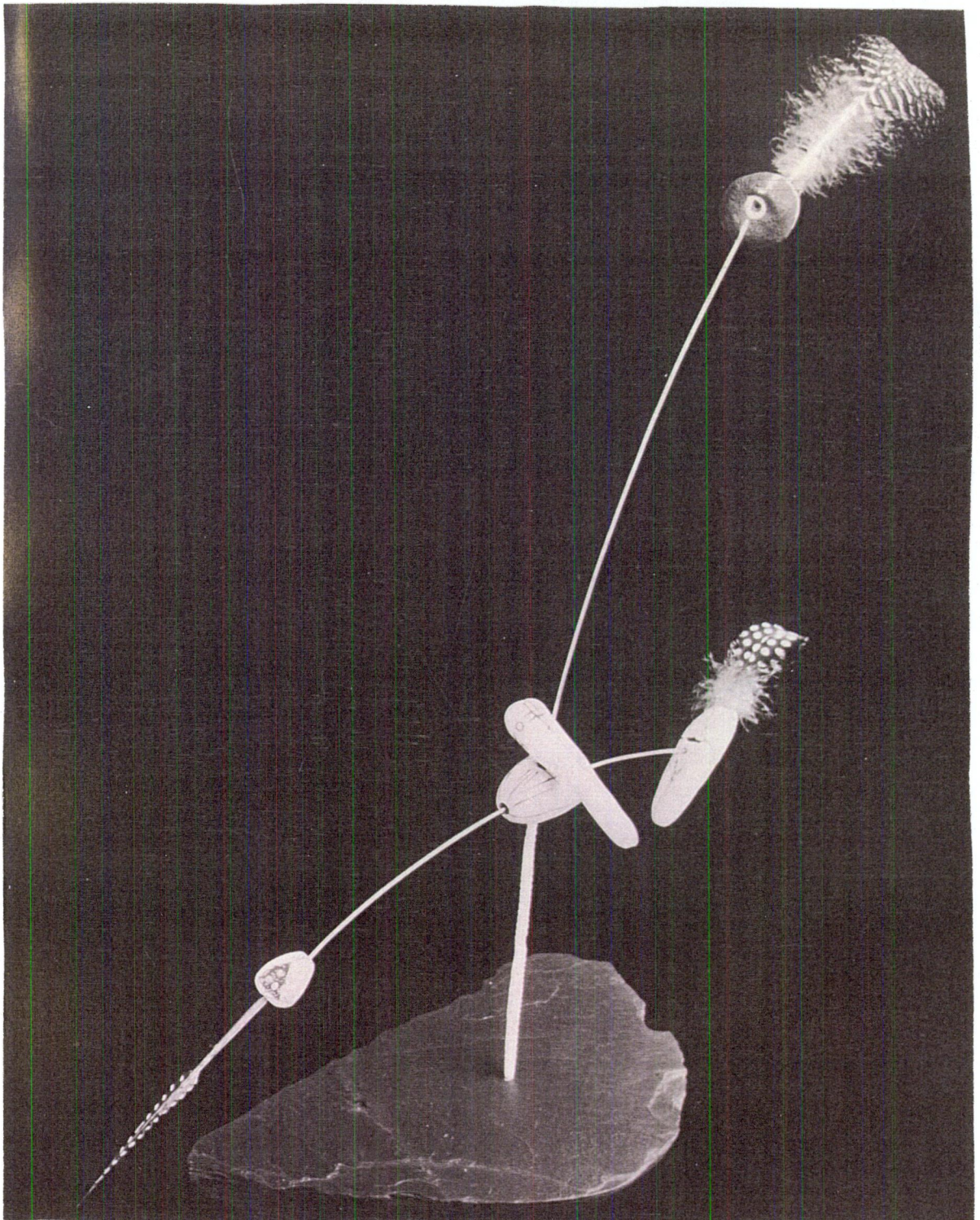


Fig. 36 "Stone Map"

550mm high and 350mm long 1989.

The source of pattern, texture and form in Foley's work is the natural world. Her work is richly laced with natural detail and pattern. Although she is hugely indebted to the natural world, she uses this primary source to create work which is uniquely her own, that has a life of its own, a sense of completeness.

Recent Work

The theme which pervades Marie Foley's current work is that of birth-fertility, creativity, sexuality and the vitality of the natural universe - as well as the spirituality inherent in human existence. Her work has not changed dramatically but rather grown in confidence and in breadth of reference, drawing in her wide area of reading and her personal relation to nature and the spiritual as grist to her mill.

"Language of Lines", 1992 (fig. 37) refers to the ancient Chinese wisdom of the I Ching-female and Male, yin and yang, where we are seen as living in the tension of polarity and not in the harmony of movement. A stick which has two ends, when broken, becomes two sticks, each of which has two ends. A new layer of reality has been created, a new pattern of polarities. "Language of Lines" is about horizontals and verticals. It is about polarities and balance, harmony and symmetry. In the centre of the piece, seated on the one unbroken line of slate is a Mother Earth symbol in the form of a seed/pod. It signifies a receptacle and seated within it is a tiny receptacle. The fruit bears its own fruit.

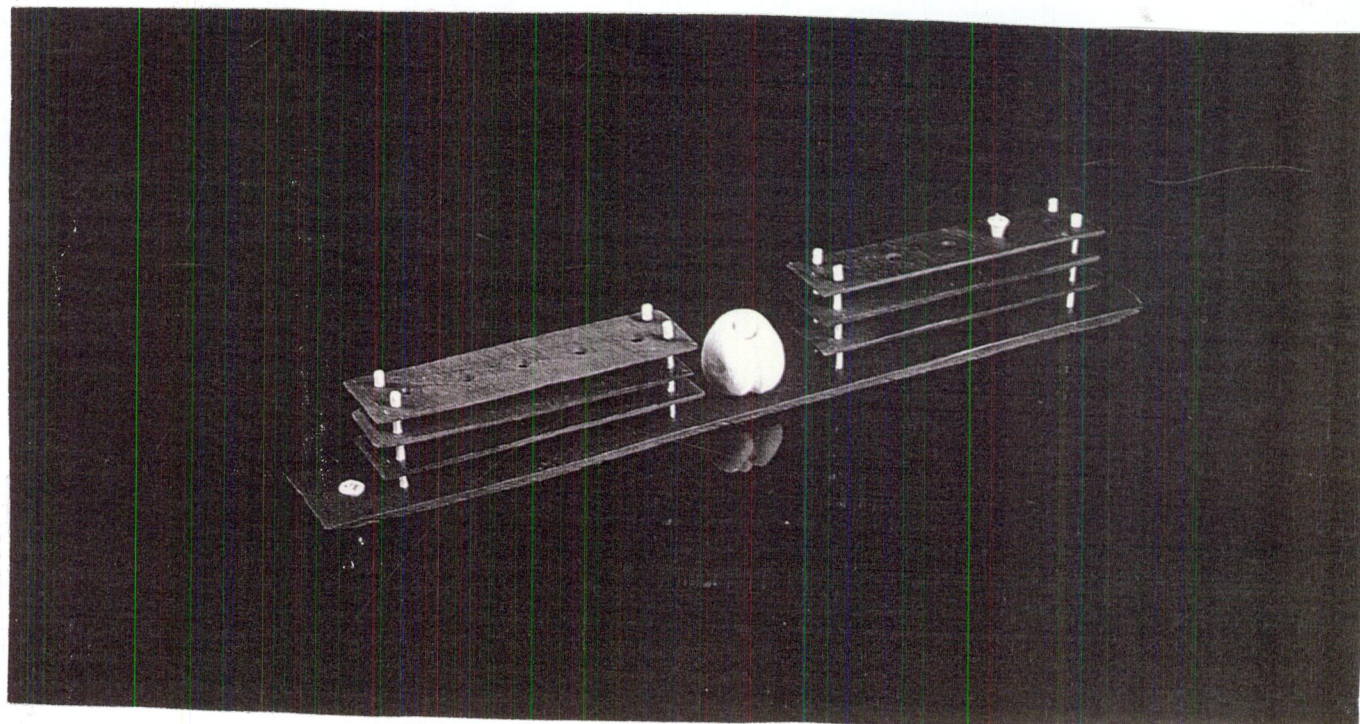


Fig. 37 "Language of Lines"

900mm long 100mm wide 120 mm high

Slate, porcelain, 1992.

The fertility forms, such as the Mother Earth, Seed vessel form in "Language of Lines", have their origins in a tree at Coole Park in County Galway. This aged tree, knarled and marked, became a personal symbol for the artist of fertility and creativity. Foley first used a fertility form in "Prima Matter" 1992. It is similar to a thumb mark and it is also present in the bog oak of "Genesis" 1993 (fig.38) . The tree in Coole Park has been responsible for a stream of excellent work and there is no sign that its influence has been exhausted.

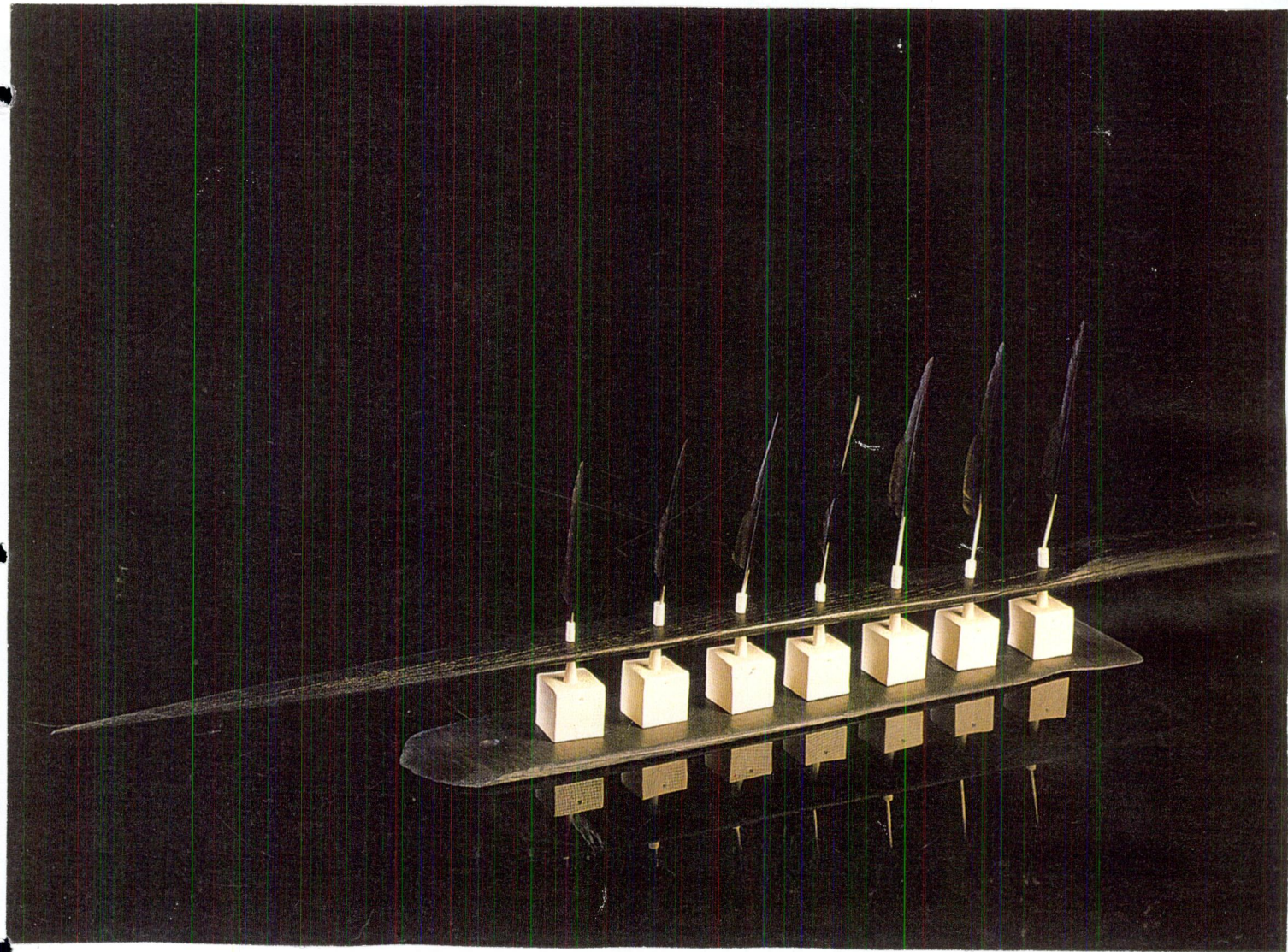


Fig. 38 "Genesis"

1430mm long, 150mm wide, 400 mm high
bog oak, slate, porcelain, crow feathers, 1993.

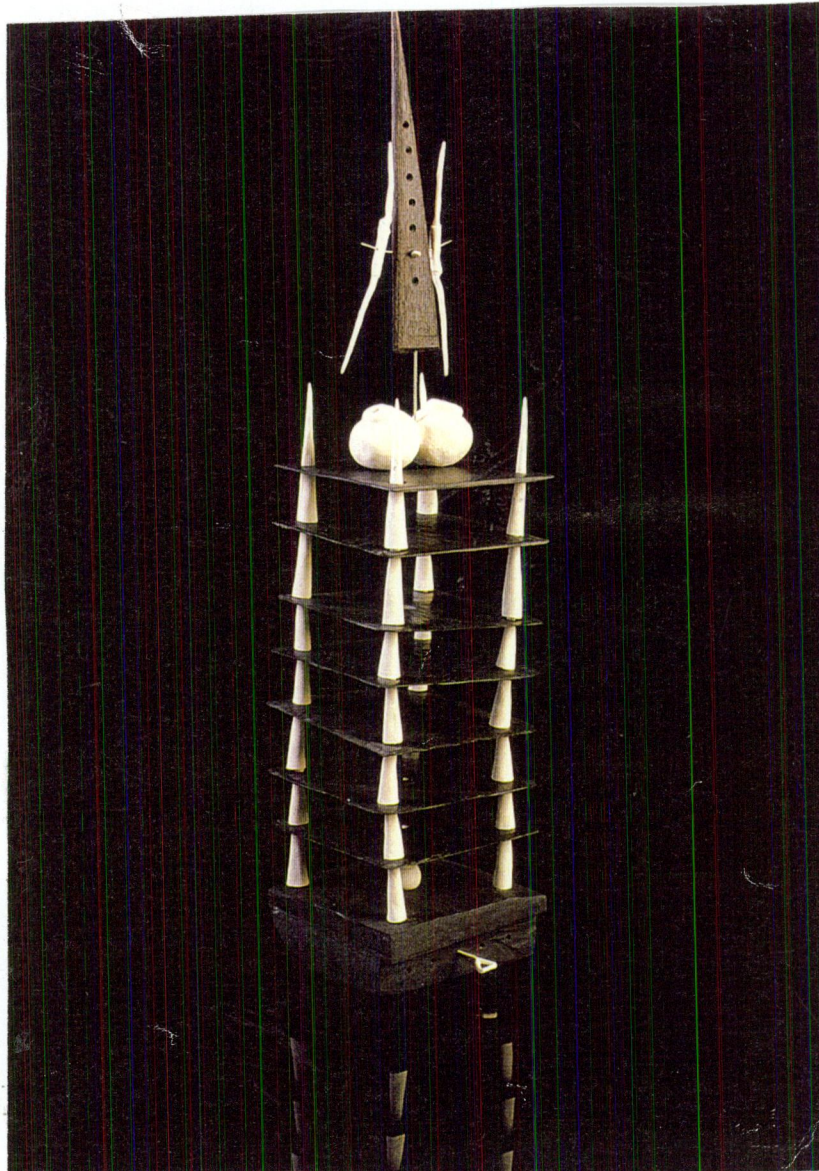


Fig.39 "Prayer of Creation"

160mm wide, 180mm long, 750 mm high
Slate, porcelain, bog oak, metal 1993.



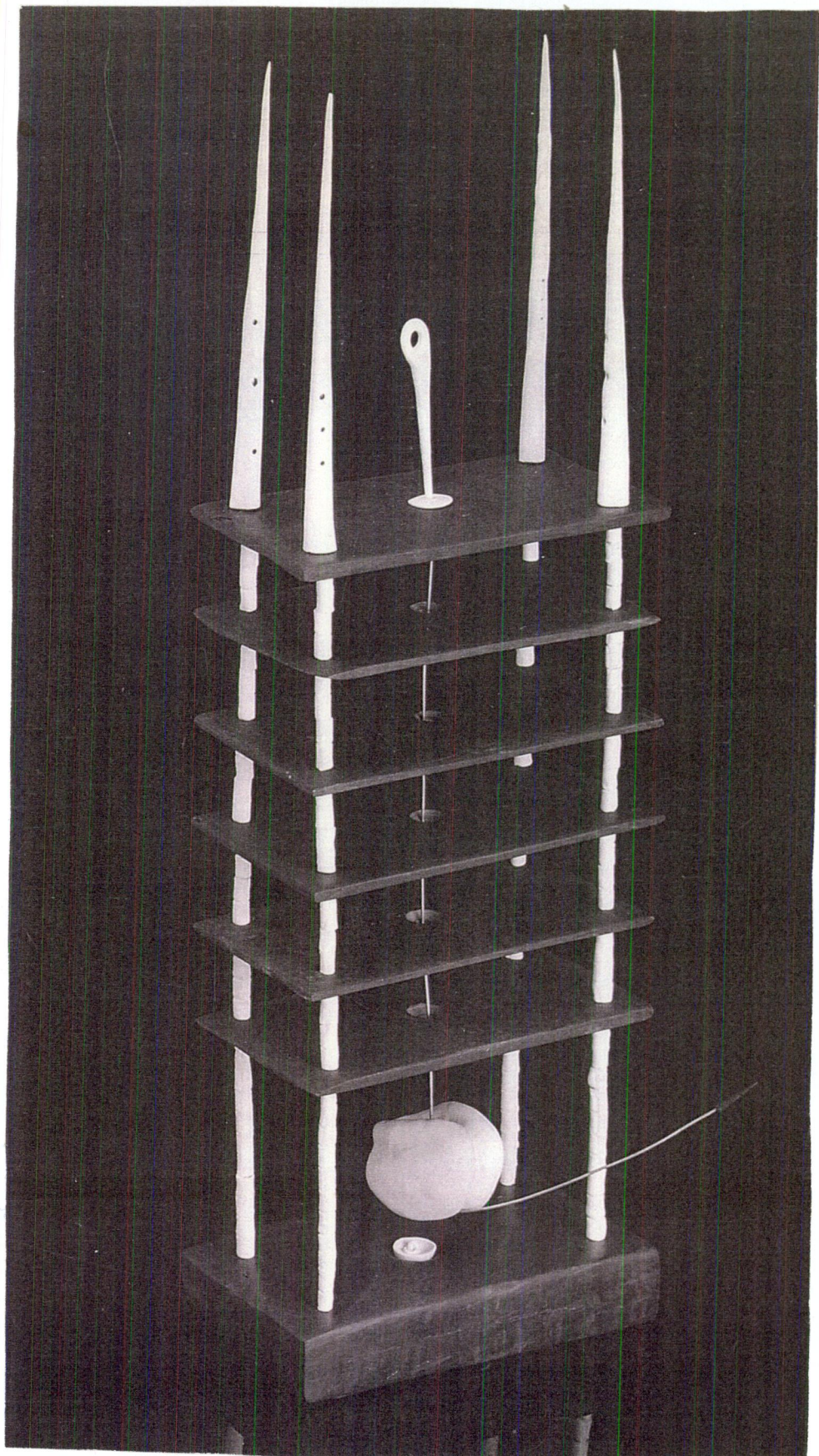


Fig. 40 "Thread of Life"

220mm wide, 220mm long

Slate, porcelain, metal 1992.

Marie Foley also uses the symbol of the tower, investing it with layers of meaning. it is thrust vertically towards the heavens, rooted in the ground, in the Underworld.

"Prayer of Creation", 1993 (fig. 39) "Thread of Life", 1992 (Fig 40) and "To Sound the Ocean", 1993 also belong to her tower series.

The towers in "Prayer of Creation" and "Thread of Life" have seven storeys, evoking the seven days of creation. The tower is a lighthouse, a campanile, a telecommunications mast, sending out signals of light, sound or radio waves. The tower serves as a defensive structure and an early warning device from which the enemy can be seen from a distance. The wire which holds the tower together provides a connecting fabric and a sense of energy, an electrical current which generates power.

(Kennedy 1993,p.9).

The titles Foley gives to each work are heavily symbolic and provide generous clues to the thought patterns which have given rise to each piece. They are essential to the work but they do not distract the viewer: they provide a guide to the meaning of the work. They are stepping stones into the work. These titles indicate the huge well-spring of inner life which stimulates the creation of the work.

Marie Foley's drawings are hieroglyphic - like in their perceptions, taking bird bones and skeletons, seed cases, or the embryo of a frog, to explore and strengthen her interest and belief in the contemporary nature of life and death. These drawings make up some of her most penetrating work. They contain illuminating notes which reveal the direction of her thoughts and shed light on the sources of her images.

Through her sculpture, Marie Foley remains loyal to her religious beliefs, her understanding of the natural world and her faith in the creator. The nature of the materials she uses and the nature of the artist herself come together to create:

"There is something really beautiful about the power of nature. It makes you feel how unimportant you are, yet how protected we are by this great force".

Marie Foley in Fitzgerald (20-5-90)

A contemplative aura surrounds her work. It is about sending messages The, I Ching oracle states that:

“The simple only appears when the complex is exhausted”.

(Kennedy 1993, p.17)

Once Marie Foley's sign language is decoded, her work has the capacity to be profoundly simple. She has shown a totally original approach to the spiritual and psychological ideas that absorb her. Perhaps there is a sense in which her sculptures put others in touch with their own life-force:

“I think my pieces help people to slow down.
They're meditative pieces. If you move on to
that level of thinking, you're in tune with other things,
whether you like it or not”.

Marie Foley in Fitzgerald (20-5- 90)

Conclusion

Without nature we are literally no where and nothing. Nature provides us with the essential metaphors for life and some understanding of our existence.

Catherine Harper, Aileen McKeogh, Alanna O'Kelly and Marie Foley all work in a very direct way with nature. Nature is the material from with which they create their art. They have created work informed by personal experiences, but also consistent with universal themes.

Like women artists throughout the world, Irish women are exploring bodily experience, sexuality, motherhood and personal relationships.

Although the themes of their work continue to change and develop, nature and the environment remains a vital part of their sculpture. They share a sense of intimacy with nature and their deep sensitivity and understanding of nature and natural materials are clearly evident in their work.

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