

Irish Landscape Art and A Sense of
Place: Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan

by

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MAUD COTTER AND CECILY BRENNAN

by

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INTRODUCTION

Every man craves a legend
Every man dreams the dreams
Knowledge is no liberation of the physical
image of painting. It is a possession of
images and a compulsion to paint without
intellectualising or literalising the subject.

Patrick Collins (21)

Within the context of Irish landscape art Patrick Collins could be considered as the artist who best epitomizes a semi-abstract style of painting that emerged during this half of the century and which has become synonymous with the 'landscape'. This genre of painting developed through the work of Patrick Collins, Nano Reid, and later on Camille Souter, Sean MacSweeney, Tony O'Malley, Barrie Cooke and others. It evolved at a time in Irish history when both artists and the public alike became conscious of the lack of an indigenous art form and therefore it became identified as expressing an Irish identity. For the last three decades these artists have continued to work in this manner, Brian O'Doherty describes it as:

Its atmosphere is characterized by a mythical rather than historical sense, an uneasy and restless fix on the unimportant and a reluctance to disclose anything about what is painted, let alone make a positive statement about it. (17)

T.P. Flanagan has stated that:

(Celtic) has come to mean an art form that refuses to accept the strident precisions of the present and rather chooses to continue to comment on a type of behaviour and existence which has no longer any relevance or resonance, and it's always, of course, associated with mist. (11)

These statements may imply that this mode of art is over-romantic, non-confrontational and escapist.

Younger artists who continue to work with the landscape as a foundation have the benefit of exposure to an Irish modernist tradition, however, not only have they inherited the influences of the art itself but they also have acquired the criticism of being artists whose work is non-political, conservative and overly-romantic in a very turbulent contemporary society, as Brian McAvera says:

For long a traditionalist genre, be it Celtic Twilight, populist local representation or the so-called 'poetic landscape' as typified by Patrick Collins, it was inured to the transformations in society..... it has continued to ignore for the most part questions of ecological, environmental, social and political import.
(15,p.18)

Not all contemporary artists who use the landscape in their work are interested in the nature aspect of their subject matter. Artists like Dermot Seymour, Micky Donnelly and, to a certain extent, Locky Morris use the Irish landscape and its cliches to tackle political issues related to the north. The notion of landscape art as being non-confrontational has raised many questions for artists who continue to express its images. Through an analysis of the oeuvre of two artists, Cecily Brennan and Maud Cotter, I will discuss the stereotypes that have been associated with contemporary Irish landscape painting. Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan use their surrounding environment and its

inherent energies as a means of an examination of their 'selves' in a contemporary society.

In the last decade there have been many incidents in Irish society that have challenged the validity of non-issue based art. These events, such as the Abortion and Divorce Referenda, the Anne Lovett incident, the Kerry Babies case, various political and industrial scandals and the seemingly infinite Northern Ireland 'troubles' to name a few, have also made art that deals with the figure a potentially highly political and emotional idiom. Rita Duffy, Brian Maguire, Eithne Jordan, Alice Maher, Gene Lambert and others use the figure in diverse ways for an examination of self and also as a means of commenting on contemporary social issues.

Both Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan use the landscape and nature to express their diverse concerns, therefore they have been categorized as 'landscape artists'. Although their work is by no means removed from the landscape I believe that fundamentally they are 'self-explorers'.

Landscape is defined by G.N. Garmonsway as:

.... rural scenery, ... as seen from a particular view point; painting or photograph, representing this; art of representing scenery. (8,p.431)

However, Cotter and Brennan are not recreating images of a definite site or scene which implies that, strictly speaking, they are not 'landscape artists'. Through the use of

different media and their varied styles they respond to events in nature that correspond to aspects of their personal concerns. Their responses are to nature as a whole and not just to specific sites or locations.

Both of these artists in the past three years have visited and worked from Iceland. Throughout the text I will compare and contrast their styles and approaches to the same subject, the Icelandic environment. Chapter One will discuss the approach these two artists have to nature as a means of self-exploration. Nature and the landscape to them is a tool or an initiation point for a creative process rather than being the fundamental focus of the work.

Within the stereotypical tradition of Irish landscape painting a 'sense of place' has always been a characteristic. In Chapter Two, I will deal with whether or not 'a sense of place' is relevant to their Icelandic work and, if not, how important the nature element is in their work.

According to Joan Fowler, fine art in Ireland is primarily associated with the landscape, oil paint on canvas being the most direct and immediate art form (7,p.6). Through a study of the media used by Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan I will look at how they both break the conventions and stereotypes imposed by their materials. I also believe that their process of creation and method of working is related to the concepts and ideas they are portraying.

Although the two artists I choose to discuss are female,
I do not believe, as Aidan Dunne states:

.... through specifically female experience
women are instinctively closer to nature
than men, that the female sensibility is
more in tune with the natural order than
the male. (3,p.61)

The number of male artists who successfully tackle the
subject of the landscape, Patrick Collins, Sean MacSweeney,
Barrie Cooke, Brian Bourke and Tony O'Malley, to name a
few suggest flaws in Dunne's proposition. However, there
are some issues which I will look at that are specifically
female, such as the relationship to maternity in Cecily
Brennan's Icelandic paintings. Even though I will be
discussing these aspects I do not believe that the work is
essentially gender based.

CHAPTER I

By the very nature of the term 'landscape art', the subject of landscape is the focus of the work. In the art of Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan they use nature as opposed to 'landscape' as a means of analogizing their individual concerns.

Maud Cotter is an artist who works in both two dimensional and sculptural formats. The medium she uses has traditionally been viewed as a decorative art, that of stain glass. Her interests are in the continuous growth, decay and change in organic forms within the landscape. Her concern is not just with the obvious tangible ingredients in nature but also the unseen energies and forces. These have been described as the 'spiritual essence of landscape'. (20,p.44-45)

According to Nicola Gordon-Bowe, Cotter is exploring the tensions in nature created by growth and its continuous cycle(10,p.24-26). She is investigating opposites that occur in the landscape such as the line of the horizon cut by verticals of trees, spaces created by erosion that are filled by new growth, shapes that change with wind, rain or passing clouds or dark, solid rocks beside pools of translucent water. Some of these natural contrasts of light and dark, or solid and transparent, occur in fleeting moments which she also attempts to capture. Cotter explains:

I do portraits of processes in nature.
I'm very conscious of decay and growth
... I like my work to have a sense of
presence and of tension like in that
moment when the thunderstorm passes
and the sun is just about to come out. (10)

The 'spiritual' element in Cotter's work I believe is related to her feelings of being confronted with energies and forces that are totally uncontrollable. The feeling of being unable to influence or govern the elements has always been contentious for the human race. The Greek and Roman nations by way of attempting to understand nature conferred gods, most of them in human forms, onto nature's elements. Any violence bestowed by nature such as earthquakes, volcanoes or famine caused by drought was viewed as an act of retribution by the gods. Therefore, nature was viewed as being governed by human values related to the rewarding of kindness for good deeds or punishment for evil acts. It could be said that destruction from nature's forces is still viewed as being an 'act of God', but in a Christian society instead of numerous gods enforcing the laws of nature, we have only one!

In recent decades, with various serious environmental issues creating questions about our contemporary life-styles, it is now understood that we are a part of nature's cycle and are not detached from it. We are no longer seeking to control or ignore the environment, but instead are attempting to further understand nature, causing as little destruction as possible.

Maud Cotter reflects this new understanding of nature as it being something to learn from as, she sees herself being part of her environment. The still developing Icelandic landscape with its almost primieval weather conditions and constant change through volcanic eruptions and geysers spouting boiling water must be the ultimate challenge for an artist working from nature. Working in this atmosphere places an artist in an extremely vulnerable position, being totally at the mercy of the elements. Maud Cotter has described about working 'en plein air' in Iceland:

I felt a sense of myself literally drawing my way out of a position of vulnerability into a position of mutual existence with the landscape, and being carried by all I saw into a greater depth of drawing and conceptual range! (10,p.24-26)

To feel secure she has viewed herself as an element of her surrounding environment, becoming part of its turmoil or its calmness. Through this awareness she expresses her experiences of being united with a particular place at a particular time.

The drawing Consuming Pool (Fig. 1), which is drawn on board with charcoal, expresses the feeling of continuous movement and the danger of being sucked in by a swirling dark pool. She vigorously drew in charcoal, erased it back into the board and redrew it again. The dark sky above the pool, which seems to be blown furiously by the wind, creates a feeling of energy captured on the worked surface. It is almost as if the whole landscape and sky

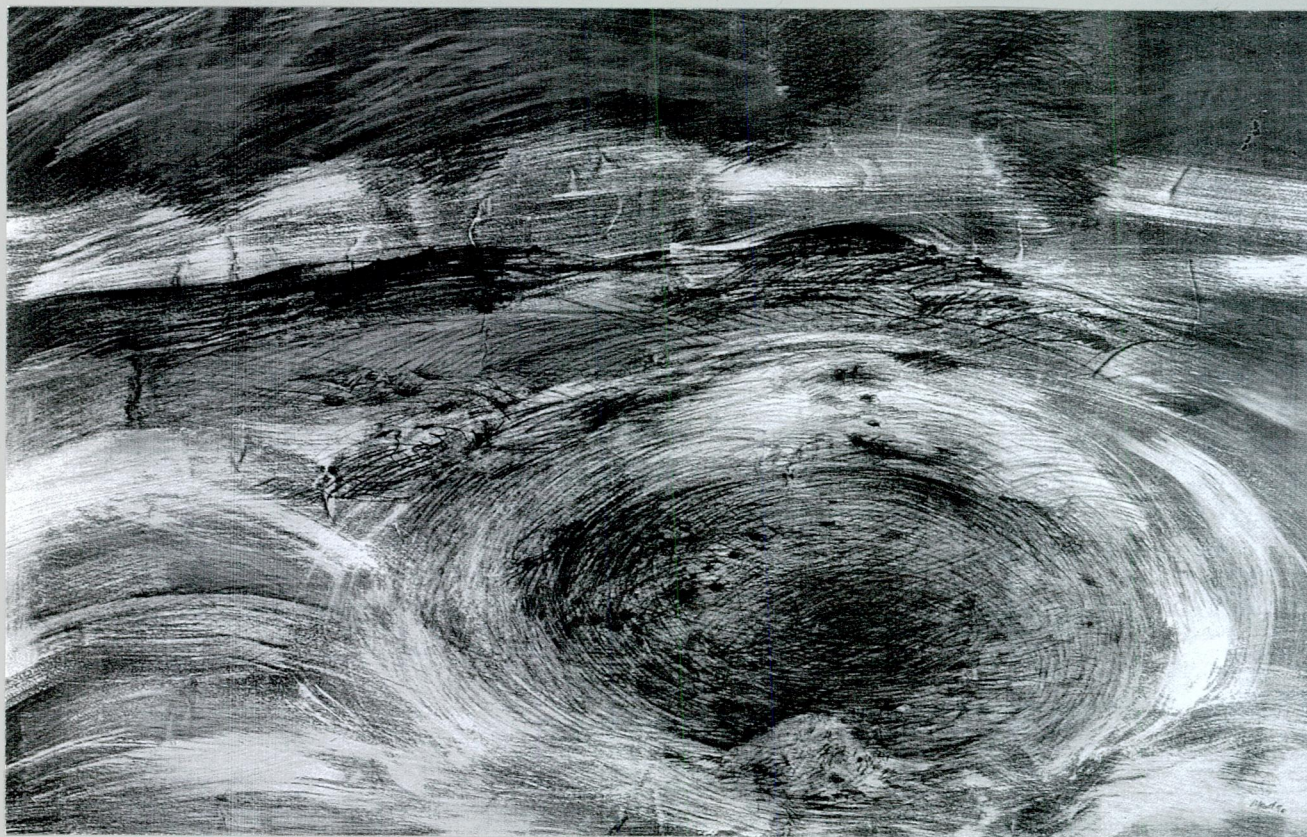


Fig. 1 Maud Cotter Consuming Pool

are about to be devoured by the 'consuming pool'.

In her stained-glass piece 'Bowl of Compassion' (Fig. 2) Cotter contains the energy by use of heavy lead lines. The directions of the lead lines are echoed in the etched marks within the coloured glass, which are almost liquid in appearance. She views energies of nature and the landscape itself as blocks of pure colour. Her images are transparent shapes of energetic movement juxtaposed with opaque lead lines. The heat of a lava stream beside the cool blue of a glacial pool create a tension between hot and cold, one surrounding the other. The pool appears to be calm and soothing as opposed to the swirling mass of lava.

It would seem to me to be almost impossible to perceive 'Bowl of Compassion' as just a landscape image. It is almost akin to NASA videos of Jupiter's ever-changing surface. Maybe this is because of Iceland's youth, an island with a still developmental terrain with all the forces that are commonly subterranean so evidently above the surface. Maud Cotter attempts to understand these forces but not in a way that is alienated from the Icelandic landscape. By working 'en plein air' she became aware of the confrontation between herself and the landscape.

You stare at these presences and they stare back at you. One becomes critically aware of being part of an extraordinary condition which is human, while these great volcanic beasts are named young volcanoes at 12,000 years of age, radiating self-possession and authority in their youth. (10,p.26-28)



Fig. 2 Maud Cotter Bowl of Compassion

Cecily Brennan's interest in nature is related to the tensions between order and chaos, but these are not directly related to the landscape. Similar to Maud Cotter, her work is associated with nature in total and the artist as part of that totality. One of the differences between the two is that Maud Cotter lets herself be enveloped, as much as possible, by a particular environment, being influenced from the outside in. Cecily Brennan, on the other hand, attempts to picture her inward feelings by using nature and its motifs as metaphors for these emotions, in other words, her images come from the inside out. Although this may contradict the artist as a part of nature Brennan sees her emotions as mirrored in particular landscapes which I believe, create a unity between her and her environment.

It is possible to divide the work of Cecily Brennan into three distinct phases: that of the early Wicklow Mountain and Iveagh Garden series; the Rhododendron Gardens in Howth; and finally the pieces from her visit to Iceland. Although the work from these different developmental stages may seem varied, they are all related to her different states of mind and body which are echoed in the landscape.

In her first exhibition, she showed drawings and paintings of the Wicklow Mountains and man's imposed order on its panoramic scale. These were almost aerial views of man-made forests with grid-like paths and fire breaks cut through them, showing the way in which man alters a

landscape for his own use, which Brennan feels

... is a positive activity on the whole. (13)

Three years later, in 1985, she exhibited a series of paintings and drawings which were based on a rhododendron garden in Howth. These images seemed to be more introverted and intimate than the last series. One of the reasons for this could be the very nature of the garden. It is almost impossible to view any part of the garden from a distance as the artist is totally surrounded by the uncontrolled growth of the rhododendrons whose jungular branches create a maze of tunnels that form the whole garden. In Garden Clearing (Fig. 3), there is an almost uneasy sense of being in the garden, maybe because it seems such a private and secretive place belonging to the artist. Because of the interiorized feeling and swirling flame-like forms there were many analogies made with womb-like shapes or ideas to do with sexuality. John Hutchinson wrote they were:

... as luscious as a passion fruit and many of them have clear sexual undertones, be they suggested by lambent, flamboyant shapes or by dark womb-like interiors. (12)

Likewise Brian Fallon has stated:

... the 'organic' forms can so easily be connected with ideas of sex, generation, buds and blossoms, etc. (6)

In an interview with Cecily Brennan I asked her if she agreed with these analogies placed on this series of paintings.

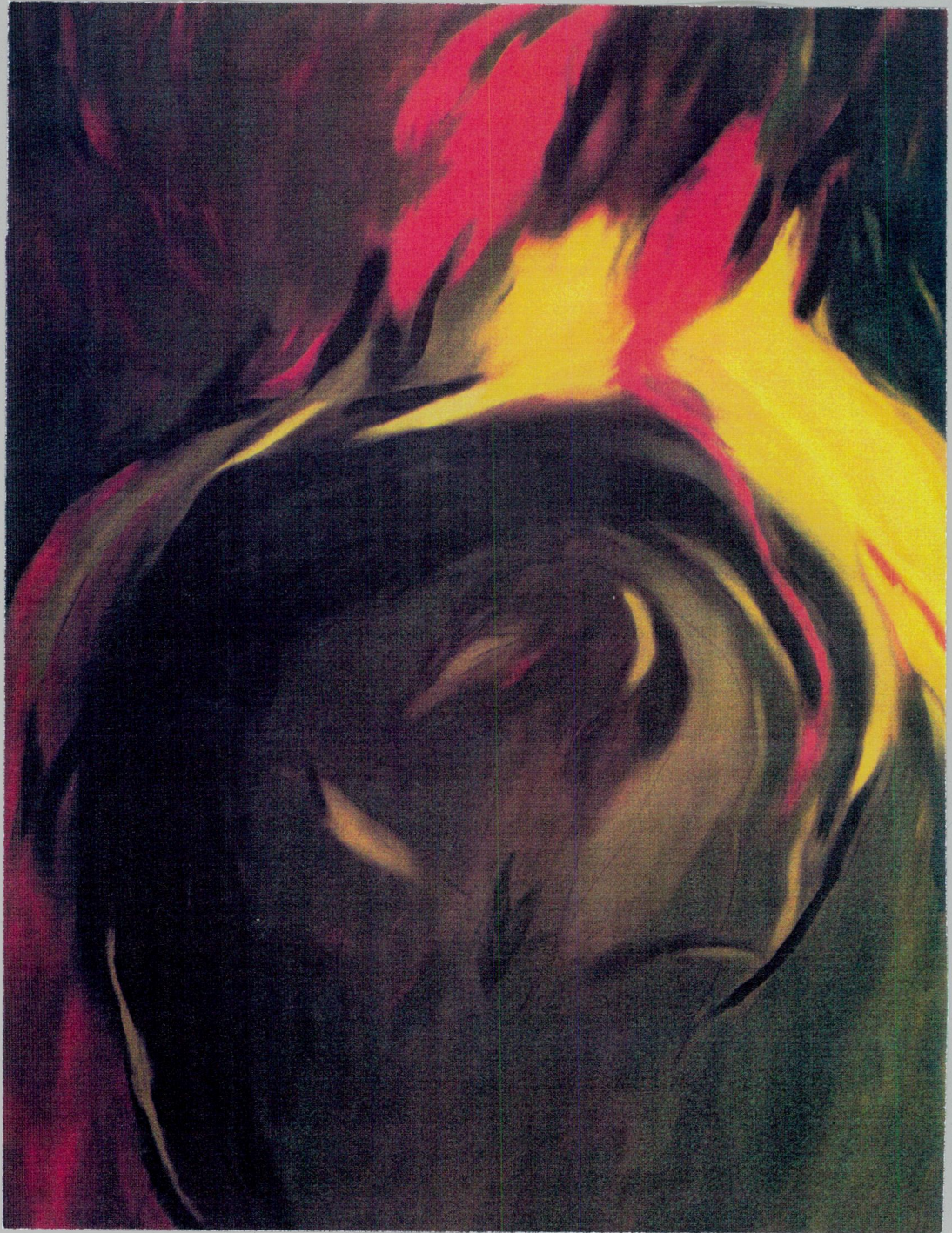


Fig. 3 Cecily Brennan Garden Clearing

... as time goes on I think that it's less valid but I could understand how people could take that. I think they were more a retreat rather than being a return to the womb, a retreat into a more secretive world, an enclosed space... I wonder how much of it was related to the fact I'm a woman. (18)

In an interview with Felicity Woolf she has said that in retrospect she finds these paintings disturbingly secretive. After the success of her previous show she found the thought of exhibiting terrifying and so retreated to the garden, both physically and in her painting (23). The womb-like forms and sexual undertones were not conscious decisions that she made: instead, she explored a place of retreat as an individual painter.

As stated in the introduction, I believe that these two artists' work is not gender based even though Brennan's Icelandic work was partly a response to specific female experiences. She saw herself through various maternal sensations, those of pregnancy, birth and motherhood, as being echoed in the turmoil of the Icelandic landscape. Although they were working from the same environment, these two artists' responses to their experiences were very different. Maud Cotter's concern was with the exterior and spiritual elements of the environment and how she was assimilated by it, whereas Cecily Brennan was concerned with her interior maternal experiences and how she used the landscape to express them. Luke Gibbons has said about Cecily Brennan's Icelandic work:

Bodily experience is not so much expressed as displaced onto the landscape, registering its own inwardness through other centres of existence. (9)

In her painting Geyser (Fig. 4) Brennan depicts a pool of rich blue water exhaling vapours surrounded by a cold almost white terrain. She has said about this piece that she deliberately painted the blue shape in an ambiguous way, which creates a confusion as to whether it is an internal or external form (18). It is almost as if the viewer is looking into a pool's interior which is just an indication of what lies below the surface, or else one could focus on the vapour as a changed state of the water when it comes in contact with the external atmosphere.

This notion of elements changing from one form to the other is also evident in Where Lava Meets the Sea (Fig. 5). As the red hot lava streams down from the shore into the cool sea it is transformed into hard volcanic rock by the water which in turn changes the water to vapour. Through these occurrences in the Icelandic landscape she confronts the issue of her condition, that of being pregnant for nine months when her child is an internal unseen form, to being 'un-pregnant' and having total responsibility for another human being.

The art world for so long has been traditionally criticized and judged by a male-dominated hierarchy, with male values placed on art. Because of this, Brennan believes that the



Fig. 4 Cecily Brennan Geyser



Fig. 5 Cecily Brennan Where Lava Meets The Sea

notion of the 'domestic', with particular reference to childbirth and motherhood, has not been explored fully in a visual format. These male-dominated values are evident in relation to landscape painting, as the concept of the 'sublime' in painting was a male one (9). The artist represented the unrepresentable, these were great natural forces of terror and awe, but protected the viewer by placing the object of fear or wonderment at a safe distance and placing something in between, such as an outcrop of rock. The artist, by confronting his subject matter and the danger it entails, shows a bravery of the eye. In Cecily Brennan's paintings there are no security rails or footholds for the viewer who is confronted with very large images of natural chaos.

Brennan is representing to the public chaotic conditions where matter changes from one form to the other, but privately she is tackling her biological and psychological state of transformation. Luke Gibbons states that:

The sublime is linked to heroism and the public sphere, as if certain forms of (male) self-aggrandisement represent the highest achievements in social progress. (9)

He also points out that Edmund Burke in his book Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757), states the actual experience of pain is detached from the scene and not part of the overall aesthetic, implying that not only is the spectator at a safe distance but also the artist. However, in Brennan's Icelandic paintings she not only confronts the

landscape and its turmoil directly, but uses it to analogise very physical and emotional traumas. Therefore, the notion of the 'sublime' in relation to the detachment of the public and artist from the object of fear or pain is not applicable. The viewer is presented with uncontained images of a chaotic landscape. The artist is expressing metaphorically figurative paintings of a very personal nature.

The subject of pregnancy, childbirth and the relationship between mother and child are very human physical emotions. When asked the reason for expressing these affections through the landscape as opposed to the figure she replied:

Maybe it's got something to do with the fact that the landscape is removed from the body.... it's a potentially more loaded medium because of all the difficulties dealing with the female body and all that it carries with it. Maybe using the landscape is a way of negotiating the same ideas, but not necessarily with all of the problems. (18)

Another reason for not using the figure as an idiom for expression could be that the experience of the emotions of pregnancy would stay strictly a female one. It might possibly be in danger of being alien to the male public who could never directly experience such emotions. By placing these feelings onto recognisable motifs that are universally known, they become asexual, being understood by both sexes. However, she has said that it is not important for the public to know about the maternal metaphors in the work (18). She has confronted a landscape which is extremely chaotic, volatile and with severe opposites,

illustrating a place which echoed her own state of mind and body.

Although Brennan's initial purpose in going to Iceland was to explore the relationship between order and chaos, when she went there she found the landscape reflected her own self. Cotter travelled to Iceland solely to explore her own responses to the nature of Iceland.

CHAPTER II

A 'sense of place' is one of the characteristics of the genre of art that became the stereotypical modern Irish landscape painting, as in the work of Patrick Collins. Instead of directly confronting the subject of landscape and place he attempts to evoke the essence of a place in a semi-abstract way.

... Collins' painting is not specific landscape, but landscape glimpsed or remembered. It is transformed through the artist's vision and memory, painted as if in a remembered light, distilled across time and feeling. (1)

Although in the work of Maud Cotter she represents processes of nature rather than specific locations, place is still important to her. Before her trip to Iceland her work was predominantly informed by the Irish landscape. She explored the prolific organic growth of Ireland and also the impact of time on a landscape.

Geographically Ireland is very old, with few extremes in both weather and terrain. The land has been gradually worn down by denudation and man's efforts to cultivate as much land as possible. Compared to Iceland any other land is tame but especially Ireland, with its subtleties of light, weather and rolling hills. It is almost as if the island's surface is lying dormant after years of being formed by nature and then tamed by its inhabitants. The violence and upheavals that created Ireland and the rest of Europe

millions of years ago are still visible in Iceland. It is one of the youngest islands on the earth's surface, still being created by volcanic eruptions. These forces, that are for most of the earth subterranean, dominate the Icelandic landscape. Because it is energy and force that Cotter records, it was only natural that she visit Iceland where she was:

... at the centre of great developmental
primordeal processes. (4)

In Ireland the landscape is formed by deforestation of our natural woods, reforestation of foreign pine, irrigation of large areas of marshland, layers of peatland being used as turf, plantations of crops, all natural processes for mankind's needs. Some of these are not necessarily good but all are progressions of our culture imposed on the landscape. Because of the nature of the land in Iceland and the small population, approximately 250,000, the human influence on the island is minimal. This seems to contradict the fact that Iceland was one of the first lands in Europe to be permanently inhabited and has the oldest folk tales and rituals in Europe. These details were important to Maud Cotter when she worked there and she has recently started to study the links Ireland and Iceland have through various settlers that the two islands have in common, such as the Vikings in the 10th Century (19). My Tender Shell (Fig. 6) is a free standing conical steel piece with a stained glass base. When one looks inside, it is almost as if one is viewing the interior of a volcano. In ancient

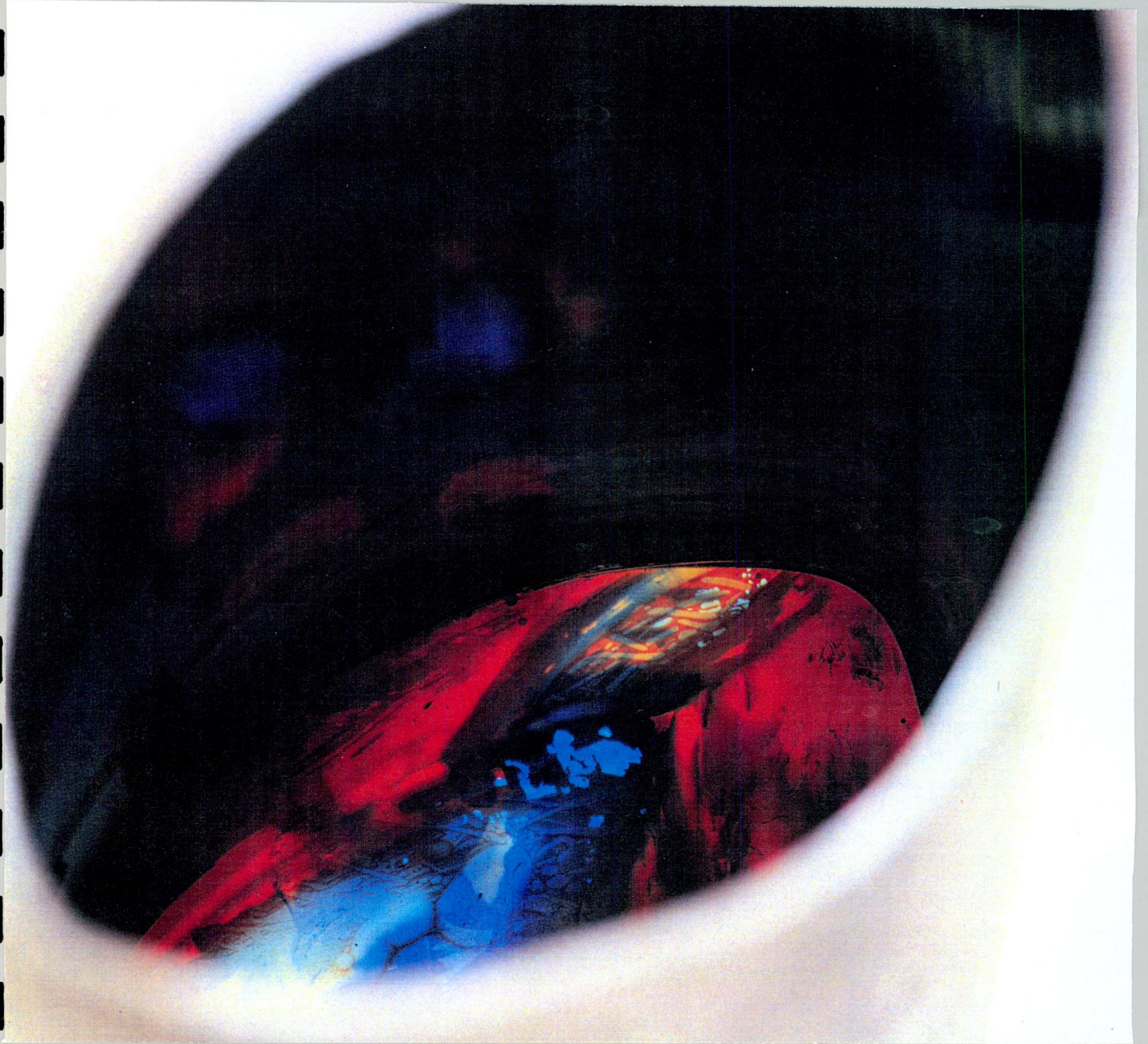


Fig. 6 Maud Cotter My Tender Shell (detail)

Nordic mythology the volcano was interpreted as an opening for human spirits to return to the earth through the heart of the mountain. Through these volcano shapes Maud Cotter also began to perceive herself as a vessel, being constantly filled by the energies around her, which make up the essences of her subject (19).

Place, or a 'sense of place' has never been that vital to Brennan's work. Contrary to Cotter, who sketches 'en plein air', Brennan believes that this may kill an idea before it has time to develop. Because the artist is so aware of physically being in the landscape and the obvious difficulties it may imply, the notion of 'place' becomes all important and takes over the work. Instead, Brennan will photograph a place or take written notes of ideas she has absorbed from a landscape. In her work the idea is fundamental, not the landscape itself (12).

Her method of gathering information is somewhat similar to Patrick Collins. He paints remembered images, colours and feelings as opposed to specific scenes. Although his work is not site specific, he is still attempting to convey the essence of a place, an almost spiritual evocation of a remembered place and time. The method of working may be similar but the intentions of the work are very different. Brennan assimilates and sifts through images of a landscape to express personal ideas which are not landscape related.

Although these ideas may be abstract, such as ideas of order and chaos, emotions of fear and insecurity, she is working from the reality of nature. Before going to Iceland the realities she worked from were chosen almost instinctively. The Wicklow Mountain series were related to an imposed order on nature but also, as Frances Ruane has written,

Cecily shares... what Seamus Heaney has called 'a Celtic love of place', where the artists personal emotion hovers around a locale. (22)

From all of her work the Wicklow series was probably more closely related to 'a sense of place'. The motivation for the work is quite evident but it is also clear that 'place' is important to the final images. At the time she moved to Wicklow for a year and stated:

... I found straight away that my work improved because I was surrounded and enveloped by the landscape. The atmosphere there was strong and evoked, so much feeling - it helped me to capture something bigger than myself... it is absolutely essential to be in the place you're painting. (12)

This attitude to the importance of place in her work has obviously changed as she developed her ideas, which became a stronger influence than the landscape itself.

The conscious decision to leave the Irish landscape and go to Iceland to explore ideas of chaos shows how much more in control she has become. Although I believe that no landscape has caught her by surprise, they did, in a manner

govern her ideas and how she formed them. She has said about the rhododendron paintings that they are not the actual rhododendrons, but her personal reaction to them (2). This particular reaction occurred after visiting the gardens, therefore the place must have influenced her in formulating her ideas in some way.

Iceland was a very different situation as she went there with a very deliberate direction to explore, that of dealing with the chaotic and uncontrollable side of Iceland and not Iceland itself. Maud Cotter, on the other hand, became involved in being part of the landscape and responding not only to the physical activities but to the 'spiritual' ones as well, a much more essentialist response to Iceland. For Maud Cotter's work to reach its full impact it seems to be important to know that she worked from Iceland, particularly as now she is exploring its legends and folk-tales. However Cecily Brennan was not interested in embracing the public with Iceland, or taking them on a journey.

Although it took Brennan a long time to come to terms with the Icelandic scenery, she began to use it as a reflection of her own body's activities. The fact that it took three years from the first visit to Iceland to finishing the show proves how unimportant place was as the distance, both geographically and in time, did not affect the final image of the paintings. Iceland and its land's forces were used as a vehicle for expressing something other than the nature of landscape.

During the three years of creating the paintings she also had to contend with the everyday activities of minding her new-born baby. These, she felt, had a stabilizing effect on her and her work, bringing what she was doing into an everyday context (18). In a way it also had the effect of creating a wider gap between Iceland as a place, and Iceland as an analogy for something else. Waterfall (Fig. 7) is a painting of a cascade of water flowing from the top of the canvas to the bottom without any barriers in its way. This painting Brennan views as a metaphor for the continual life-long responsibility in one's life when a child enters it, an alliance of the mother with her child.

Other than going to Iceland to assimilate ideas of a certain uncontrollability, she also went there to escape the scenic beauty of Ireland. Irish landscape has a preconceived 'pretty' image which is very hard to disregard when expressing it through visual formats. By leaving Ireland behind she attempted also to avoid the attached notions and stereotypes of 'landscape painting' and its 'scenic' implications. For years she has tried to shake off the stereotypes of being a 'landscape painter', and then a 'female painter'. She sees a danger in being stereotyped as anything as it tends to create preconceptions about the work which may not be applicable (18).

Brennan sees herself as an artist sifting through the landscape and assimilating her ideas with what is left, her ideas



Fig. 7 Cecily Brennan Waterfall

being more important than the landscape. However, Maud Cotter derives her ideas from the surrounding landscape, in a way becoming part of its creative progression. The place where she is working is much more important to Cotter than to Brennan, but it is not the sense of place she portrays rather than the essence of a restlessness of a place.

CHAPTER III

For both Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan the inherent qualities of their medium and its use are important to their work. The stereotypical images of stained-glass and paint-on-canvas are very separate but both artists attempt to break the conventions of these media by their technical abilities.

The conventional image of stained-glass was that it was regarded as a decorative idiom which enhanced the environment of stately or religious buildings. In Ireland this opinion changed during this century with the different approach to stained-glass made originally by Wilhelmina Geddes and Evie Hone. They viewed stained-glass as a material which was just as valid as other media such as painting and sculpture, and broke its conventional image as that of mere decoration. The most obvious way that they achieved this was by using the heavy lead lines that were traditionally used to contain areas of coloured glass as a means of expressing drawn lines. Through their developments stained-glass became appreciated for its distinct intrinsic qualities (10,p.28-32).

By the time Maud Cotter started working there were only a few commercial stained-glass studios and artists, the most notable being Patrick Pye and Patrick Pollen, who continued to work with glass. She studied Fine Art in college and instinctively her approach to glass was in a free expressionist style. She approaches the surface of the glass and application of pigment in a similar way to canvas and oil paint, with a

fluidity in her mark making. Not only does she conceive her pigment as being as fluid and easily manoeuvrable as paint, but also her surface:

I think of glass as being a cooled liquid which has retained its sense of moisture with the result that it has always been more alive for me than pigment... I find that my painting adds a more imaginative flair to my stained-glass, prompting me to be more adventurous technically. (20)

In Cotter's free standing Icelandic piece Djinn (Figs. 8 & 9) the technical experimentation is evident in the multiple flashes of colour in three almost conventionally structured panels. In the top panel she has two or three layers of primary colours which create a density of colour. In some parts she has left the glass colourless, substituting colour for light which seeps through. With these free standing pieces she is exploring the spatial and environmental possibilities of glass. This particular piece can be viewed from the reverse side as well, whereas the two-dimensional pieces can only be viewed from the front as they are set in to the wall.

Although in many of her pieces the images on glass seem spontaneous and almost effortless, the long process that creates the finished piece is always in her mind. She has said that she interprets stained-glass and her part in initiating the long process of formation as being similar to the practice of alchemey. By using varied basic materials, opaque lead strips, glass, enamel stains, acid for etching



Fig. 8 Maud Cotter Djinn

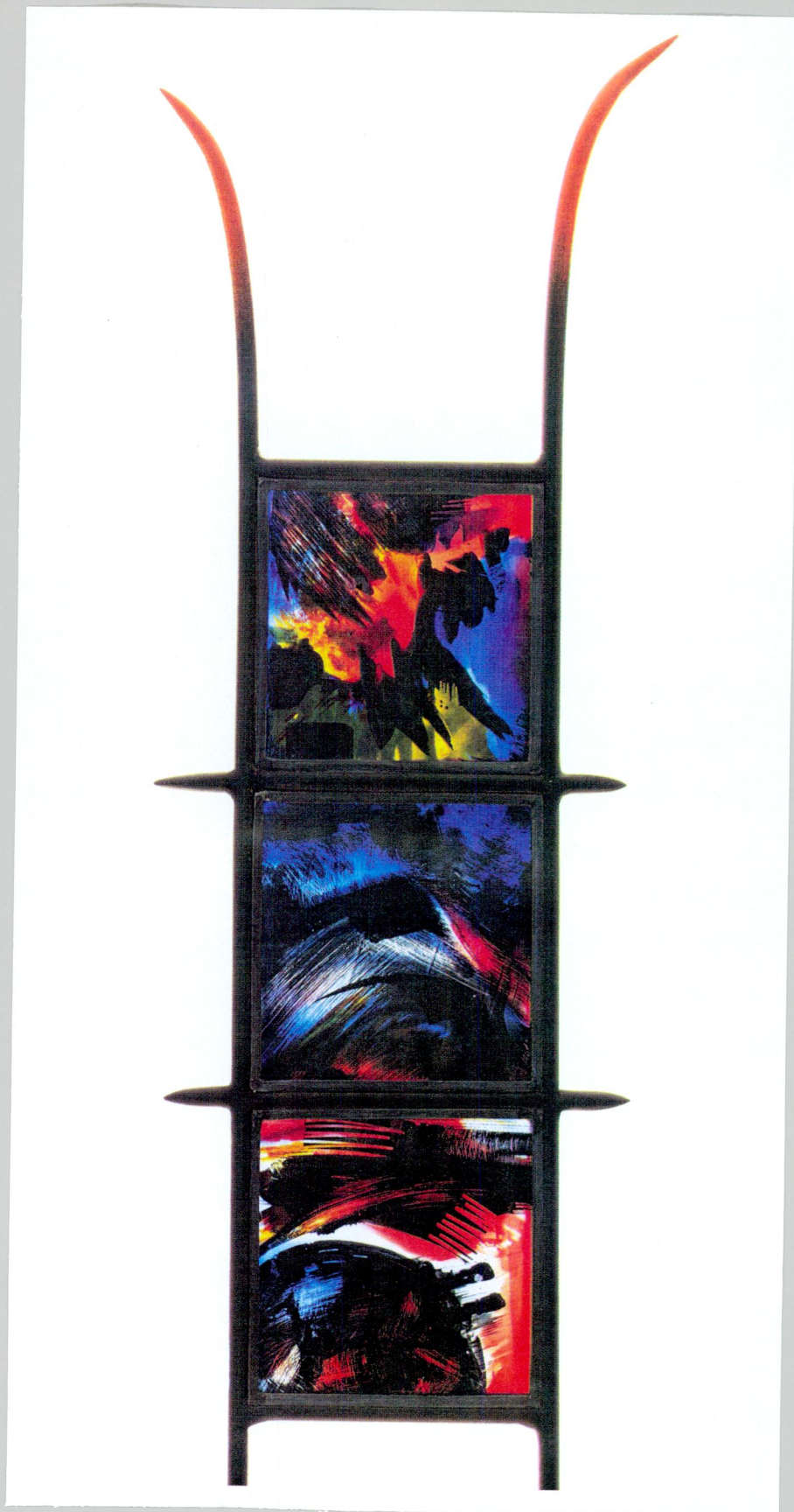


Fig. 9 Maud Cotter Djinn (detail)

onto the surface, Cotter creates images and objects that are removed from their original state (19). Alchemey is defined by G.N. Garmonsway as a

... mysterious or magical transformation (8,p.17)

and although there is very little that is mysterious about the firing of stained-glass there are some things left to chance which are almost magical, such as the fusion of colour onto the glass or the acid converting colours into different tones. Alchemey could also be used to describe the way in which Cotter assimilates and views her subject matter. She looks at an object which to some people would seem very basic but through her own perceptions she transforms and abstracts them into something else, My Tender Shell (Fig. 6).

Nature and its energies and forms, both the obvious and the intangible are represented in Cotter's work by flashes of bright free moving colour which echo the black lead lines and etched paint marks. These opaque lines and marks show how important drawing is in her work and how she is continuing the tradition of Evie Hone and Wilhelmina Geddes by using the lead lines as a drawing tool rather than as a restrictive outline.

By the very nature of stained-glass there is a sense of containment within the heavy frames that are a structural necessity. Maud Cotter takes advantage of these structural limitations and forms images that seem to act as windows into another dimension.

Cecily Brennan also accepts the limitations of her medium. For many painters, past and present, capturing the reality of their subject matter was a vital element in their work. However, like Brennan, many artists of this century approach painting as an illusion on a two-dimensional surface. The attempt to recreate a reality on the surface is a paradox. Although the imagery may not be in a 'realistic' mode, she expresses through this medium very real emotions.

At first glance, considering the flatness of the images and without knowing the motives behind the work, it would be fair to say that the Icelandic paintings could be taken at a purely formalist level. The paintings could survive solely as abstract images painted on canvas. Brennan has stated that she does not believe narrative paintings work as they are dealing with a reality converted into a two-dimensional format (23). Her abstracted images are not dealing with a tangible reality, similar to Maud Cotter, but instead are related to concepts that are removed from the motifs she uses to express them. She paints two-dimensional semi-abstract images with a rich surface texture, but the motifs she uses are analogies for something other than a formalist meaning. The conceptual motive of her work supercedes the formalist side as she is using paint and canvas merely as implements to express her ideas.

Brennan's Waterfall (Plunge Pool) (Fig. 10) can be perceived as a technically well painted image abstracted from the



Fig. 10 Cecily Brennan Waterfall (Plunge Pool)

landscape. It can also be viewed as an image comparable to the artist's concept of change of form and continuity. The frontality of this piece also emphasizes the two-dimensional aspect of her medium: the only depth in the painting is within the details of the textured paint.

For Brennan, technical ability in the use of paint is allied to the development of her different stages. Her Wicklow Mountain pieces were drawn rather than painted. Paint, which was mainly watercolour or acrylic, was used sparingly and the use of line was predominant. In the rhododendron paintings she used oil paint in a much more fundamental way, although drawing underlies the structure of the paintwork. Drawing has always been an important element in her work, not only as a structural framework for paintings but also as finished pieces in their own right. Most of her drawings are black and white, using charcoal and white pastel or else the white of the surface. To some artists drawing is perceived as merely part of a process to help formulate compositions towards the finished piece. However, in Brennan's drawings she uses charcoal and its inherent qualities as a means of expressing things paint cannot. In Steaming Crater (Fig. 11) both the denseness and airiness of charcoal is used to convey the steam rising from the swirling mass of water. Although her paintings are portraying moving images such as waterfalls and lava streams there is a certain feeling of monumental stillness about them. The

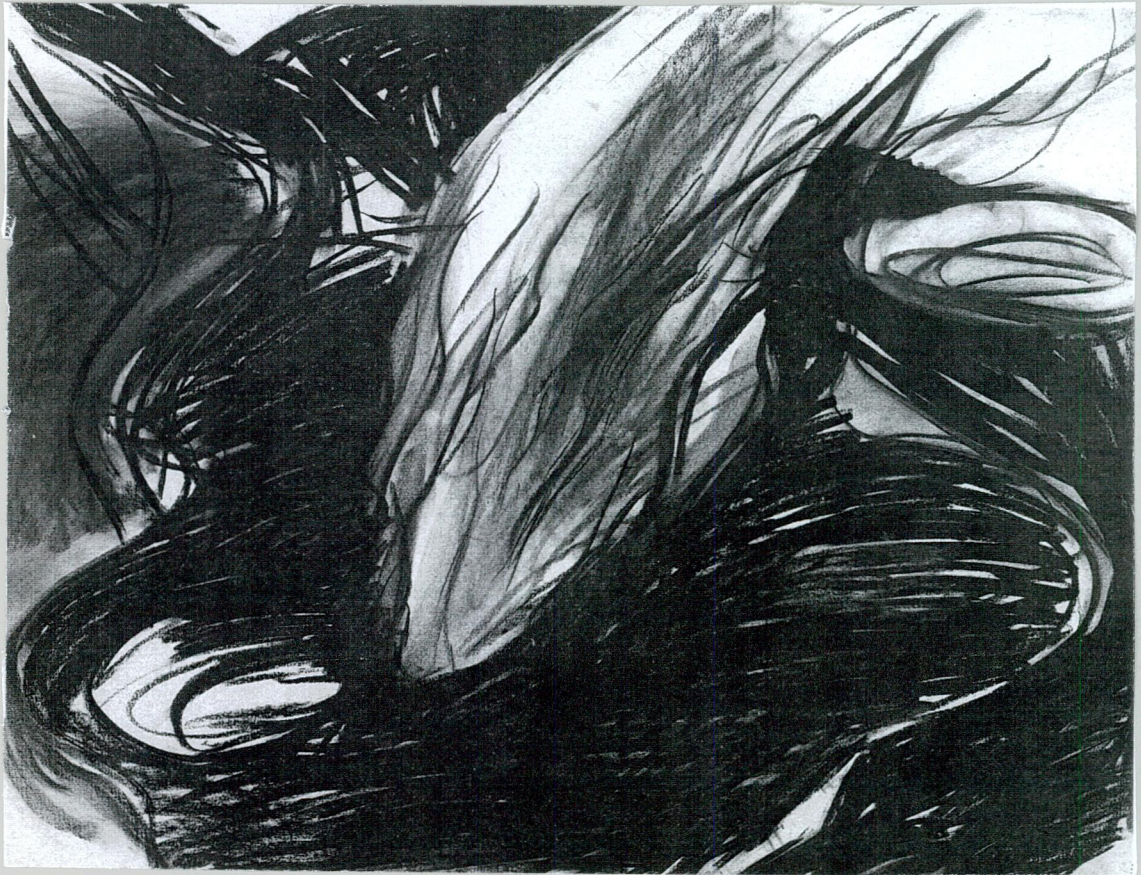


Fig. 11 Cecily Brennan Steaming Crater

charcoal drawings appear to be portraits of movement and studies of directions and form, which are echoed in the paintings. Traditionally painting has been viewed as the end of the process, leaving drawing to serve as 'back-up' studies or 'props' for the paintings. Cecily Brennan's drawings, however, are strong enough to be independent of the paintings.

She has stated about the use of oil paint:

I find that with paint, the fluidity and the actual qualities of paint itself can take over and you can become quite seduced by the medium itself... drawing makes me clarify my thoughts and makes me clarify my compositional structures a lot more. (14)

In the Icelandic work she also used drawing to underlie the paint-work, using layers of compositional studies before actually painting the final piece. This is evident in the paintings: although they seem immediate and spontaneously created, there is also the impression that they are well structured and deliberate. In Waterfall (Plunge Pool) (Fig. 10) the paint is thickly applied as it is dragged down the centre of the canvas, its fall being broken by the heavy black rocks. The texture of the paint around the rocks is reminiscent of mist and foam. To use paint in such a manipulative manner can understandably become seductive as it is luscious and compelling to look at. Hence, the reason for a well structured strategy, the artist knowing exactly what to do before he/she succumbs to the paint's attractiveness. Using intrinsic qualities of materials without a 'plan of action' is not a negative thing. Cotter

lets her materials, in a manner, influence how she will form her ideas: her materials and her ideas having a symbiotic relationship. Maybe this is due to the fact that she is not in total control of the process of creating the final image, as she has to go through certain technical steps that are physically removed from her. Brennan, on the other hand has total control over the surface of the material she uses, nothing distancing her from the final image of the painting.

Scale and the use of architectural space in a gallery is important to the overall image of any artist's work. Brennan acknowledges the importance of this and has always worked towards a show with the exhibition space in her mind.

Because of the size of the Douglas Hyde Gallery, the only gallery in which the show will be exhibited in its entirety, she could afford to make almost monumental sized canvases. But as she states, she does not execute work on grand scales just for the sake of being big but that working big:

provides a physical involvement with
the work that I need. (2)

In this particular show working big also created an installation effect to the overall appearance. This in a way is similar to the approach of Monet and his large Waterlillies which he created to be installed in specific spaces. Cecily Brennan made these paintings with the intention of them hanging together in a specific site. She believes that the exhibition space should not be

conflicting with the work and that the two are attached.

This attachment can also aid the artist at the preparatory stages for an exhibition in relation to how to structure a show. Cotter is also aware of the importance of empathy between the work and its surrounding space.

Despite the very rigid, conventional uses of their media, both these artists through their technical abilities have broken the traditional attitudes of both stained-glass and paint on canvas. Maud Cotter has achieved this through an imaginative sculptural format, seeing stained-glass, which has many structural limitations, as a flexible medium.

Cecily Brennan has produced work on a monumental scale compared to other landscape painters, Camille Souter or Patrick Collins. This contradicts the almost demure stereotype of landscape painting. Brennan also breaks the mould of a landscape painter being solely interested in nature, as she uses nature as a means of displacing the human figure.

CONCLUSION

There are some similarities in the work of both of these artists but also some fundamental diversities. They both attempt to break the stereotypical mould of the notion of 'landscape' painting and also the conventional aspects of their respective materials.

Cecily Brennan utilizes exterior organic motifs to express personal interior feelings. Where she is painting from, or 'place', is not of consequence as it serves a purpose, that of supplying the artist with symbols and images. 'Place', or the nature of the landscape is the starting point for visualizing her ideas and concepts.

Maud Cotter responds to the landscape by becoming almost part of it, empathizing with her surroundings which place her closer to the genre of painting of Patrick Collins' generation.

The opinion that 'landscape' art can be non-confrontational and escapist becomes redundant when discussing these two artists. They confront topics of great personal concern directly which is what ultimately issue-based art is. These interests they saw reflected by the Icelandic landscape.

As John Montague says:

Artists roam the earth as never before
seeking to unleash energies inside, or
confront those outside, an enormous
intuitive effort to understand ourselves
and our world' (16,p.4)

I believe that there can be a danger for any artist working abroad of being seduced by the exotic and the novelty of a foreign landscape and culture, arriving back with visual souvenirs of a place. Out of context these souvenirs may become irrelevant and redundant, serving as nothing other than postcards. Both Maud Cotter and Cecily Brennan went to Iceland for very specific reasons which were not related to recreating Iceland and its culture in a visual format. Iceland as a place was not of interest to Cecily Brennan: she went there as it is a land of continual physical forces and change, which epitomized her ideas of the tensions between order and chaos. Maud Cotter's interest is not in the landscape itself but the overall experience of nature, both in her own body and her responses to it. Because of her interest in the interaction between the human psyche and nature she has become interested in Icelandic folk-tales and rituals which are linked to Ireland's ancient customs. These folk-tales and legends impose a certain perception about Iceland and its characteristic landscape, such as the ancient belief of spirits entering the earth through volcanoes.

Both of these artists are assimilating nature and their experiences rather than 'landscape'. These experiences are directly to do with their own 'selves', becoming reflections of their state of mind and body. Therefore, rather than 'landscape artists' they are 'self-explorers', using the landscape as a vehicle for these explorations.

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