

An Introduction to the Work of Maud Cotter

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Maud Cotter's recent incursions into the Icelandic landscape should come as no surprise to those of you have followed her work over the past ten years ten or so years. Her visits to Iceland in the last two years have compounded and provoked her growing fascination with the interpretation of an energised surface, with whirling, bisecting lines piercing and defining spaces as she explores the processes of decay and emergence; and her desire to pierce and penetrate exterior facades of ancient mystery so as to strike up new formal structures and planes of greater depth and inferred resonance.

This is a continuation of the concern with the relationship between land mass and weight and its articulation and mood within the landscape, where obtrusion and recession in their implied energy coax her to explore fresh ambiguities and inter-spatial definitions beyond her long-held biodynamic preoccupations. A notable aspect of the richness of her work hitherto has been her sculptural approach, building layer upon layer. The legacies of Turner, Ruskin and Cézanne are clear in her intimate approach to the structure of landscape- even Constable, in a mixed media mood drawing like *Vagrant Sky*; in her intensely personal response to the awesome Icelandic interior through a series of prismatically coloured graphic studies with poignant titles, she recalls Goya, not least for the phrases she uses to denote each image. The influences of Miro, Klee, Kandinsky and Ernst are now more relevant to her free-standing sculptural pieces, although Marc and the 13th century French and English stained glass are still a force in her stained glass panels. The intensity which has always marked her work is an intrinsic part of her search for ways of extending her clearly substantiated responses into glass, bringing a rare dynamic thrust to her painted surfaces and lead lines, as she confronts, excavates and strives to free her materials from preconceived notions.

Rhythmical analogies, another long-standing preoccupation (e.g. in *Absolute jellies make singing sounds* (1980) and *Measured Sounds* (1985)) with its notion of a music box revealing hidden musically sensations are continued on in *My Tender Shell*, a fishtail cone whose epicentre reveals a vulnerably palpitating roe-like form in veined blue and blooded ruby. Another continuing preoccupation, Cotter's search for non-figurative but essential symbols of communication has led her to study a range of hieroglyphs, calligraphy, carpet pages and symbolic iconography. *Letter from Iceland*, with its ice floe surface and cursory swishes, is intended to emphasise the never-static, continually changing essence of all life, a free-standing shorthand note compared with her richly coloured language tree window. *That sound meets sense* (1989), for Dublin Castle's new conference centre. The small flickering marks she has carefully synthesised demarcate an increasingly sculptural and adventurous range of pieces, usually incorporating glass if it is three-dimensional.

Her impeccable craftsmanship and prodigious output have not slackened. The mounting and installation of the pieces has always been an important part of the work exhibited – from her ash-framed and brass-supported *Candid Pink* (1982) and *Tensile Myriads* (1983) stained glass structures to the grey-washed chestnut frames and lime-washed ash mounts of her recent wall pieces. This interest in materials, which augurs well for her co-founding involvement and co-directorship since 1989 of the National Sculpture Factory in Cork, has triggered off a more purely sculptural use of glass (e.g. in *I do not think that they will sing to me* (1990/1), painted bronze and copper sandwiching a thin, undisturbed slab of clear glass, her

free-standing sliced totemic pieces like *Sentinel*, or suspended mobile glass configurations like the large *Hybrid* (1987) in the children's library at Ballyroan, Co. Dublin). She takes great care that effect and intention are not inhibited by process and tries to follow Ernst Gombrich's dictum that there must be a link between ease of construction and ease of perception. This is increasingly evident in her work, where her shapes have been pared down; in the beguiling *Djinn*, inspired by ancient ritualistic customs and calligraphic expression, a note of humour is subtly introduced in the seeming red-hot feet and totemic horns of the wrought-iron figure set with three exquisite but conventional stained glass panels.

Those who have been attracted by 'the potency and visual richness of colour' which have informed Cotter's stained glass ever since her first small panel for a Cork restaurant in 1978 should recall her perception of glass as 'a cooled liquid which has retained its sense of moisture', as an 'emotive potent environmental' force – what Ruskin described as the 'glow of controlled fire'. This element is brought into play in her *Bowl of Compassion* and *Burning Heart* panels which capture the hypnotic, molten-liquid force of glass, where dynamic flow is emphasised by matt black lead calmes and swirling painted lines. These she had used, but less concentratedly, in her Triskel Arts Centre *Route Impeller* keyhole-shaped window of 1985, an image of churning cyclical force, designed to imply harnessed energy.

As soon as she had worked through a self-directed four-year apprenticeship, learning what she could in Ireland and through travel of the craft and technique of stained glass after a formal training in painting and sculpture at the Cork School of Art, her desire to find ways of expressing, rather than representing descriptively what she calls 'the molecular spiritual'. This refers to her deep fascination with the essential, ever-fluctuating Life Force, which governs all creative impulse – from the tiniest microbic organism to the erupting volcano. Right from the beginning of her artistic career, she has made stained glass panels which relate to pencil or watercolour studies exploring biomorphic rhythms and the fundamental, biological and organic nature of the landscape; she is intrigued by their echo in tension, gravity, the balance set up between horizontal and vertical and by positive and negative charges, through spaces and on planes defined by key outlines, torn shapes and fragments, split lines and centrifugal forces. Notions of fluidity, fluctuating temperature, the juxtaposition and dialogue between opposing and complimentary currents constitute part of her response both to the materials she chooses and to the natural forms which attract her – energy and force rather than resolution. She has stated earlier this year:

'The Irish landscape has always informed my work and has been central to my aesthetic concerns. Ireland's prolific natural growth, subtle changes of light, and the evidence of the impact on time on landscape provide a focus through which I can explore my personal vision of the relationship between natural energies and the human psyche. Recent visits to Ireland, a country with an aboriginal landscape still in the process of being shaped by elemental forces of nature, vividly exposed these natural energies.' *

The photographs of activated geological surfaces and structures indicated her excitement at 'the strange and prophetic interactions between earth and sky in Iceland, its geographically extravagant landscape, volcanically active, set with craters, fissures and hot springs'. Just as in Ireland her boundless curiosity and commitment led her to take up mountaineering for first-hand experience, in true Ruskinian fashion, in Iceland, she was sliding down the insides of old volcanoes, climbing to the top of waterfalls and sitting on hot rocks, fired by the landscape's broody, animated, 'inhabited aura'. Now she could pit her

own relentless energy against the infinite reservoirs contained in volcanoes termed young at 12,000 years old, 'radiating self-possession and authority in their youth'. These evoked a curiously affectionate sense of kinship in her (viz. her strangely affecting drawing, *My Young Volcano*), in great vessels, 'reservoirs of energy, symbols of containment which speak', with latently explosive orifices, devouring Earth Mothers. For an artist whose immediate inspiration had ranged from the embryonic excursions of microscopic organisms (*Little Blue Piece*, 1982), a 260 million year old, three inch trilobite safely cased in the fossil collection of the National Museum of Ireland, or 'the engaging intricate nature' of the abundant Irish landscape (e.g. her earthy *Tellurian*, thorny *Thicket Eaters* and lush *Jungular Upscape* panels with their themes of decay feeding growth), she was unprepared for the bleak and uninhabited Icelandic interior. This she found possessed by 'gigantic glaciers', lying 'unchallenged like huge black and white whales with weathered backs, or like teeth, irretrievably set into the responsive and yielding tundra. The black rivers which run from them, so called because of the large quantities of dark silt which they carry, have ice beds in their deeper portions and eat the soft terrain mercilessly'. She found that:

'drawing such a landscape is confrontational. 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 ... In moments of rest one was aware of being allowed, like the other minutiae in the desert, such as bits of weathered roots, and small stones, to witness extraordinary mood changes and moments of clarity when the earth and sky fused into a powerful unit ... Pieces with titles such as *Perfect Vessel*, *The removed sound of a great fish*, *Consuming Pool*, *Singing Volcano* and *The melting of palatable waters* emerged. 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'.

Such empathy is not new in Maud Cotter's work. The preparatory drawings she developed from studies of the Boyne Valley in her *Upland*, *Vidimus*, and *Jungular Upscape* series show clearly how dynamically she can transfix the abstracted essence out of her response to the landscape, through collaged drawing on wood, charcoal and paint on paper and lead with glass. It is no surprise that these newly discovered mountainous forms have unleashed an intensely personal response from her but there is no doubt their potentially explosive, unpredictable volcanic masses have provoked a new depth and structure in her work. Timeless, figureless drawings on paper, strongly and appositely framed in carefully prepared chestnut, they show her desire to penetrate the ancient surfaces of primeval mystery whose formidable structures are in themselves an inextricable, atavistic homage to the spirit of the Earth. In her mixed media monochromatic or barely coloured studies, in stained glass panels like *Burning Heart* and free-standing sculptural glass and steel pieces like *Out of the Ground*, a dowsing fork pinning down bronze entrails, she has been able to suggest the sinister primeval force of ancient, Nordic myth. Viking settlers in 10th century Iceland and Ireland were linked through their veneration of Thor, god of thunder and the Celts and Norse settlers shared a number of parallel legends; these have been a source of recent study for Cotter. In this rooted sense of the Celtic past, her architectonic awareness and painterly, dynamic, non-representational treatment of glass, the work of her older French contemporary Jean-Dominique Fleury comes to mind.

Otherwise, her work does not readily fit into one particular school or cultural context. Based in Cork, she and her former colleague, James Scanlon, have, through their application and commitment to stained

glass, reached an international audience, their work appreciated for its inherent value, rather than merely as decorative or religious glazing. This is more or less what glass had become in Ireland by the time they were born, in the middle 1950s, when Wilhelmina Geddes and Evie Hone died and, except for the studios, only Patrick Pollen and Patrick Pye were working as artists in glass. In glass, Cotter found a uniquely 'live' element which she could effectively enrich through her increasingly proficient use of paint and other traditionally based techniques. She is the direct descendant of Geddes and Hone, outstanding Irish women artists earlier this century, who in their commitment to stained glass as a medium for their art made a major contribution to the creative revival of stained glass, which by then had fallen prey to the decorative glazing of Art Nouveau and post-Victorian mass-production, with all too few notable exceptions. Cotter, like them, saw the lead line traditionally used to contain and define each piece of glass as a graphic extension rather than as a structural inhibition. Both Cotter and Scanlon gradually evolved a symbolic and technically inspired, independent treatment of glass based on observation and their 'fine art' experience. Their *Cork Glass Art* exhibition, shown in London in 1986 during the extensive 'Glass in the Environment' symposium ensured their work was seen by a large international cross-section of those involved in glass.

Since then Cotter's work has been shown in America, Japan, Germany, France, Iceland as well as Ireland. The German exhibition of the work of 36 international women glass artists in 1989 provided an interesting opportunity to see her work in a context which confirmed how aptly if diversely the female psyche is adapted to glass. Her independence from the main schools of development in Germany, England and America have enabled her to retain a spirit which many find refreshing. Her most important architectural commission has been for a memorial window to the Rev Michael Scott, in the 14th century parish church of St Pancras, Kingston, near Lewes in Sussex. She based the 6' by 1' 5" single-light window on lines from T S Eliot's *Four Quartets* and a poem by Scott (lines from Eliot would subsequently trigger off her slab glass sculpture, *I do not think that they will sing to me*). The window is a free, abstracted interpretation of striving, unfettered passion, a philosophical Benedictine orchestrated in sonorous, jewelled rubies and blues.

Cotter's love of words, their onomatopoeic, symbolic and evocative value has long been evident. It is good to see her being given the opportunity to respond to them as well as baptise her self-germinated creations with titles designed to suggest rather than define. It is also good to see her being given the chance to work with challenging, sympathetic architectural framework, to which she has been predictably sensitive. The great care she takes over even the smallest installation would equip her for larger scale exploits. She has sustained impressively uncompromising and articulate flow or work, while playing a vital role in the current direction of contemporary Irish art.

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My Tender Shell

Triskel Arts Centre, Cork, October 1991

*'Black Rivers Bite Deep' by Maud Cotter, *Stet* literary magazine (Cork, March 1991)