

Frieze

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Alice Maher



BY BRIAN CURTIN

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Alice Maher, 'Becoming', 2012, installation view

This selection of works by Alice Maher, stretching from when she emerged in the late 1980s to today, was not a standard retrospective as such. Instead, the exhibition figured new relationships within the artist's oeuvre, a rationale that was made clear by its title, 'Becoming'. Maher's interest in capturing the material qualities of transformation and the capacity of images and objects to register beguiling, resonant interest is not conducive to a historic or academic overview. Furthermore, as curator Sean Kissane notes in his accompanying essay, 'Becoming' contributes to the ongoing narrative of IMMA's temporary space at the historic Earlsfort Terrace (which, among other uses, was the premises of University College Dublin for more than 100 years). One could, however, also argue that the significance of Maher's career for contemporary art in Ireland over the last 20 years is not reducible to the details of its parts.

In the first instance, the Mayo- and Dublin-based artist's works often lend themselves to lateral, associative and enigmatic display: from a correspondence between her early expressionist drawings and recent animations to a recurring trope of appropriating objects and methods (the diversity of her forms claim wide-ranging influences) and a general interest in folkloric and mythological motifs. The installations in two series of rooms alternated between spot-lit works on grey-painted walls and

white-washed spaces, encouraging a sense of the reverential that was all the more compelling because of the lack of a guiding context. The sculpture *Mnemosyne* (2002) was installed in the corridor that separates the two galleries, and comprises a bed-shaped structure that captures moisture to create an icy, repellent surface.

A play with scale was a notable aspect of the show: works were hung high in groups, and moved sharply between paintings, drawings and objects. *Familiar* (1994), for instance, juxtaposes a large painting with hair-like flax and was positioned across from *Gorget* (2001), a circle of small, silver-coloured heads in a display case. A selection of drawings from the series 'The Thicket' (1991) was preceded by *The Hedge of Experience* (1997) and one of the globes of snail shells from *The Four Directions* (2004–05). The drawings depict young girls in aggressive states of play which complements the powerful sense of oneself that can be gained from the small, surmountable threshold of hand-crafted leaves; and the contemplation of the minute details of an otherwise epic, planet-like symbol.

Cell (1991/2012) was outstanding: a large ball of brambles re-created from its original context in Kilmainham Gaol, now a museum. Here it occupied a darkened, narrow room and carried a terrible sense of the animistic, appearing to be almost breathing due to lighting affects and the surprising variation of colours. Bristling, uncomfortable and threatening, *Cell* carries great implications for Maher's concerns more generally: a jarring aesthetic; the suggestion of primitive energies; and the implication of ritualistic use.

The six essays in the accompanying monograph are reflective of Maher's interests rather than seeking to elucidate them in terms of broad significance. While this, of course, fits the curatorial framework, the texts are sometimes repetitive in their mapping of the minutiae of the artist's works. And the references used – from colour-field painting to the writing of Luce Irigaray – function as props rather than identifying a specific context for her practice. This is all the more noteworthy because, when Maher emerged in the 1980s, she was one of a number of female artists (including Louise Walsh, Marie Barrett and Kathy Prendergast) who, if not at the centre of the Irish art world, were certainly producing the edgiest work. The essays don't address this context. Further, her early engagement with the long-standing tradition of Expressionism in Ireland (and its 1980s manifestation as Neo-Expressionism) extended its canonical interest in terms of critical images of the female body. (Kissane's remark that Maher's work was 'anathema', because of scale and subject, to '80s Irish Expressionism is misleading.) And Maher's longstanding use of found imagery and interest in refiguring historical precedents (most recently, Hieronymous Bosch) links her to a substantial critical context for contemporary art. Finally, she notably embraced drawing just prior to its renaissance in Irish and British art schools in the 1990s.

These are rich points of elaboration that need not distract from the layered interest of the works themselves, and their absence did complicate the exhibition's intention of not reducing Maher to mere autobiographical interest. One might worry that IMMA's encouragement that we engage with Maher's oeuvre in a 'pure' or essential way missed an opportunity to trace the impact of an exceptional career.

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