

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

ALICE MAHER

April 03, 2018 • Alice Maher on her work and the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment



Alice Maher, *Vox Materia*, 2018, patinated bronze, 1 ½ x 2 x 4". Photo: Michael McLoughlin.

*The Irish artist Alice Maher's work is, by turns, a powerful call to action and a persuasive invitation for reflection. Her solo exhibition "Vox Materia" at Source Arts Centre in Tipperary, Ireland, which she discusses below, is on view through May 5, 2018. Here, she also talks about her work in the next EVA International, which will run from April 14 through July 8, 2018. Additionally, Maher's new film, *The Sixth**

Skin (2018), made in collaboration with artist Aideen Barry, will premiere at the Cork Film Festival this fall.

YOU MIGHT THINK WOMEN come out pretty negatively in myths and history, but that depends on how you process myth and how you interpret history. After the Citizens' Assembly advocated for a change to the article in the Irish Constitution that prohibits abortion, a group of artists—called the Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment—got together to help further the cause for reform. Inspired by trade union and suffragette banners of the past, Rachel Fallon, Breda Mayock, Sarah Cullen, Áine Phillips, and I sewed and painted our own artists' banners, which we use at marches and gatherings.

Stitching is seen as an indoor domestic art, but we had a great time making it into a political act. When it came to deciding on the imagery, we looked at what has represented us traditionally and thought about how we want to be represented today. I painted a young woman beheading a dragon, referencing and reclaiming Orazio Gentileschi's *David and Goliath* from our National Gallery. She is slashing at the monstrous law that seeks to control and devour her.

The Artists' Campaign to Repeal the Eighth Amendment has been selected by curator Inti Guerrero to participate in EVA International 2018. All of our material archive will be there: badges, posters, films, banners, testimonies—everything from our founding in 2015 by Cecily Brennan. We will also be choreographing a procession through the streets. It's an active, living campaign, as the referendum is due to take place during the run of the exhibition. As Irish artists, we hope to reclaim our original historic place as agitators for social change through cultural means.

In the midst of this, I was working on my exhibition "Vox Materia." The large woodcuts and hand-size bronze pieces in the show are all part of a developing language through which I seek to make images of femaleness in new ways. I often deploy mythological sources, bringing together ancient and contemporary narratives so that they overlap and revitalize each other.

The show makes reference to a medieval sculpture of a chained mermaid at Kilcooley Abbey near Thurles, where the exhibition takes place. The motif of this mermaid has become a means to explore ideas of language and autonomy in the show. In the original fairy tale, the mermaid has to give up her voice in order to become fully human. She forsakes her hybrid state by having her tongue cut out. Placing her image at a church doorway surely served as a warning to Christians of the dangers of the monstrous state of female otherness.

In my 2012 film, *Cassandra's Necklace*, the mythic woman, whom no one believed, wears a necklace of tongues as she searches her universe in silence. My own practice itself seems to express hybridity; it's like I am searching for that alternative voice through film, print, sculpture, drawing, photography, everything. Today, I see these twenty-three new sculptural pieces for "Vox Materia" as a continuation of that search. Squeezed through my hands as soft wax initially, they became transformed into heavy amoebic metal forms in the foundry, a kind of lost language—a weird illegible alphabet of the unspeakable!

— *As told to Gemma Tipton*

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