

**Alice Maher***Vox Materia: Alice Maher*

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Alice Maher: Vox Materia. The Source Arts Centre, Thurles, Tipperary (29th March – 5th May, 2018), Curated by Pluck Projects.

Alice Maher is one of Ireland's most established, important and influential artists and yet despite the long familiarity of her work she hasn't lost the ability to surprise and unsettle. Her art is always mutating, fresh and dynamic. This new installation, Vox Materia, continues her sustained interrogation into the aesthetic potential of hybrid forms. Maher claims that her work is "not declamatory" but instead driven by a desire to "extend figuration into other realms" and offer a haptic as well as visual poetics of form. It includes a series of hand-made sculptural forms and large-scale prints on paper. In common with a lot of her well-known work Maher began with a figure drawn from mythology and folklore. In this case it was a 12th century carving of a Mermaid from the neighbouring Kilcooly Abbey.

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Maher describes the mermaid as a “hybrid creature that transgresses boundaries between human and animal” making it an exemplary figure for embodying many of the themes and motifs that frequently appear throughout her rich and exquisite oeuvre. As a site for projecting both human desire and fear the mermaid offers the promise that the body can become reconsidered and reconstituted through relationships with unfamiliar forms. It also serves as a powerful political and ethical metaphor for the general ways in which identities can be subsumed. In particular it refers to the contemporary conditions of female identity and the possibilities offered the female voice. It also reminds us that erotics and aesthetics are often inseparable.

Central to the installation is a sequence of 20 or so little bronze sculptures in a 14 foot long cabinet. They appear to bear the imprint of a hand and demonstrate Maher’s claim that “grasping is a form of vision”. Their mottled, burnished surfaces seem both natural and artificial. Yet, for all that they give the impression of being organic, they betray the processes and material of their construction. This is perhaps an alphabet, or maybe some sort of genetic sequence. Maybe they are utterances or the physical evocation of sounds we can’t hear but only see or grip. Or maybe they are things made by a body or that may live inside its warm, internal spaces. It’s unclear if these would be welcome insertions into a body or something to be expelled (organs, cancers, faeces or other lives). Are these alive or dead? Should they provoke delight or disgust? They are alien but jut into our world of everyday human affairs eliciting a haptic erogeneity; an erotics of touch.

More bodies appear in the woodcut, watercolour prints which recall silhouetted figures contorted to their limits. The tactile qualities of the wood have clearly dictated the forms of the images through a working process in which the artist hasn’t lost control but rather entered into a collaboration with the vegetal matter. The grains and knots evoke skin and orifices such as eyes, mouths, sphincters and other holes that act as interfaces between the inside and outside of bodies and, in doing so, become sources of pain and pleasure offering both threats and joys.

In one version of the story the mermaid is a figure who in an act of love becomes mute and loses their voice in order to gain a soul and become mortal. But what’s at stake here is not a whimsical preoccupation with fantasy. Instead Maher presents something much more sturdy and with greater weight both literally and metaphorically. As she says of the work; “It is as much about materialism as it is about myth.” On the one hand in both the relatively large scale of the prints and the brief glimpses of bronze that are visible in the sculpture the work declares its assertive presence in the world.

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And on the other hand the metaphor of a hybrid, female, creature undergoing a change to their body speaks directly to vital and contemporary debates regarding how the identity and agency of bodies might be regulated by society, technology, gender and choice.

Like the mermaid Maher beckons viewers with the promise of a dangerous perhaps even repulsive allure. Her works seduce and seem to pull us beneath the froth and foam of everyday life into another liquid world of mutated and hybrid beauty.

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