



*Vox Materia; open, 2018*

*Body and Soul*  
Cristin Leach  
The Sunday Times, Culture Magazine March  
25, 25 March 2018 , pp.18



*Vox Hybrida 1, 2018*

Alice Maher's contorted postures have a spell-binding animal attraction, discovers Cristin Leach

The artist Alice Maher lives and works in Co. Mayo, sharing a purpose-built studio the size of a small warehouse with the painter, Dermot Seymour, her husband. Two separate work spaces, a cosy kitchen in the middle. They don't talk to each other about their work. Ever? "Never". Says Maher. Except of course, when they occasionally do.

Maher's latest exhibition, opening at the Source Arts Centre in Thurles this week, features large woodblock print images and a series of hand-pressed shapes cast in bronze. She had been working with human figures for her previous show, in Dublin. "I wanted to continue that kind of figuration in some way, so I said, "I'll start with myself, my own body, twisting and turning. I got

**Alice Maher**

Dermot with the iPad camera and he took photos of me in all these different, strange positions.”

The result is a series of hand-coloured woodprints, eight of which will be in the exhibition. “I would just keep moving around,” she says, “and he would follow me with the camera.” They ended up with hundreds of images on a tablet that Maher has now lost. “Imagine!” she says, bemused rather than horrified. “Maybe it will turn up.” In reality their loss is irrelevant: the digital snaps have served their purpose. “From those I made drawings in silhouette, of the different positions,” she says.

We are sitting in Maher’s high, bright studio space. She goes to a set of map drawers and pulls out pencil drawings of the silhouettes. “I thought they might become the work, but they weren’t really good enough.”

Maher knows for sure when something isn’t good enough, when an image or object is still just part of the process and not the final work. It’s an instinct honed in the nearly four decades since she took up evening life-drawing classes in the early 1980’s at the Crawford Gallery in Cork, the very building to which this show will travel in September. At the age of 25, Maher quit her job and went back to art college. Turning 62 this year, she is one of Ireland’s most significant artists, deserving of a much bigger, international reputation.

A serendipitous suggestion at Parallel Editions printmakers in Limerick turned the drawings into woodprints. “It was cheap wood, and they were saying, ‘we’re sorry it’s really poor and has all these massive whorls and knots and everything,’” she recalls. “Of course, the minute I saw it I thought, that’s just perfect for me, because they are like orifices, like eyes and vaginas, like interior body, you know. You couldn’t make it up.”

This show is about the body, inside and out. The bronze forms she originally moulded by squeezing hot wax in her hands. They take the form of talismans, “small gods” as Maher puts it, or amulets for your pocket. “I love this one, it looks like a little shit,” she laughs as she picks one up. “Dermot said they look like something that fell off something else, which is pretty cool actually. They kind of do.”

She refers to them alternately as looking like creatures with snouts and tails, and as echoing male and female body parts. Her own satisfaction in them as objects and the physical experience of making them is key, but she’s not interested in elaborating on that. She hesitates to put specific narrative on any of her work, and talks about not wanting to “give people everything”. She’s happy to talk about what they look like, however. “That one has veins. It’s very vaginal looking....that’s

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very penile, but it's also like a person, with the knees, isn't it?" she says, as she picks them up. Arranged in a row in a bespoke glass-topped cabinet, like an elongated coffin at a wake, they resemble reclining figures from one angle, bits of meat or flesh from another. "Tumours," offers Maher, who had cancer a few years back.

Both the prints and these bronzes are artworks that have come directly from Maher's body – her silhouette, her hands. That body has long been a tool she has used to get to the final artwork. She describes the print silhouettes as "monstrous", although they are undeniably beautiful. At the suggestion that they are kind of wanton, these contorted female figures, she nods. "They're all acting out in some way," she agrees. Perhaps monstrosity and beauty are not mutually exclusive? "There you go. That's exactly where the hybrid lives...isn't it?".

The concept of hybridity was the starting point for this work, which began with a visit to 12th-century Kilcooley Abbey in Co. Tipperary, the county where Maher was born and where she grew up. she was interested in the "otherness" of the mermaid, a sea creature carved on a church wall, inland, accompanied by two carved fish. "Dermot said, 'That's a perfect salmon, and that's a carp'".

The mermaid may represent the vice of vanity, as she is holding a mirror and a comb. She is half human, half animal: half woman, half monster. Maher was interested in this duality. Returning to the bronzes, she says: "I think of them almost like words, as an alphabet almost....some kind of iteration of an unknown language, a language a hybrid might speak. You know like blegh (she makes an abrupt cut-off sound), some kind of expression of their voice, the voice that was taken away, cut out." In ancient stories and mythology, the mermaid loses her voice in exchange for human legs. Silence in exchange for autonomy, or the appearance of humanity.

For Maher, such tropes resurface repeatedly. Previous work has featured animal tongues. "The tongue has come back to me as a trope, in terms of the mermaid's tongue being ripped out. Who would have thought?"

Can she see some kind of thread through her work over the years "It's definitely got something – a lot – to do with the body, the female body, and its way of looking, it's way of experiencing. And trying to find a place for it in the world, that traditionally hasn't been there.

I don't think it's uninfluenced by everything that's around me, socially and politically as well," she adds. "The kind of pressure that the female body is under now, and probably always has been, is possibly reflected in the work over the years."

**Alice Maher**

This ties to her involvement in the Artist's Campaign to Repeal the Eight Amendment, of which she is a founder member alongside the artists Cecily Brennan and Eithne Jordan and the poet Paula Meehan. It has grown from an online petition to an artist's movement, which now includes collaborative artworks, the most visible of which are hand-embroidered and painted silk banners, which the group takes on marches and which are being requested for international exhibitions. In April, they will go on display as part of Eva International in Limerick.

Maher sees her body, like the carved image of the mermaid, as a starting point, a type of tool, "something you can use to get to something else, rather than make a picture of something.... I'm thinking of the way the female image has been treated over the centuries in art history and culture generally. It has always been a figure to be projected upon, rather than having its own agency."

The silhouette is just the outside. What is monstrous may be inside. Beauty and horror, attraction and fear – there is duality in everything. When does she know the work is done? When she finds an image that is "not a caricature, an image that reflects its own complexity, the complexity of being".