



Alice Maher: Becoming

5 October 2012 – 3 February 2013

IMMA @ NCH at Earlsfort Terrace

Exhibition Notes for Primary School Teachers

General Information

Becoming is a mid-career retrospective of the work of Alice Maher, one of Ireland's foremost contemporary artists. Born in 1956, Alice Maher studied at the University of Limerick and the Crawford College of Art, Cork. She was awarded a Master's degree in Fine Art from the University of Ulster and a Fulbright Scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute. Maher has exhibited widely in Ireland, England and the United States, and she represented Ireland in the 22nd São Paulo Biennial in 1994. Her work is included in many national and international collections including the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; the British Museum, London; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Hammond Museum, Los Angeles.

Alice Maher: Becoming includes painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and animation. Insisting on non-linearity, the exhibition mingling styles, media and periods. *Becoming* was conceived around the notion that nothing is solid or permanent. The exhibition title emphasises the artist's preoccupation with change, transformation and continual flux.

Lighting is an important element in Maher's work, and she engaged lighting designer Aedín Cosgrove of Pan Pan Theatre Company with whom she has worked previously to design the lighting for *Becoming*. Each room is painted and lit specifically to lead the viewer through the labyrinth of rooms and corridors and back to the beginning again.

As in a maze, viewers will wander through the exhibition often crossing paths with themselves. The exhibition is laid out in fourteen gallery spaces, and while each artwork is intended to be viewed independently, some overarching themes emerge including change, time, ephemerality, memory, transformation, myths and stories.

Maher is interested in art's relationship with popular culture and everyday life. She is also curious about the audience's experience and keen to engage viewers both physically and psychologically. Maher believes that the history and feelings of viewers inform their experience of the artworks and that artists can learn from this. In her own words, 'People's stories feed the work.'

Alice Maher: Becoming includes the premier of a major new commission, *Cassandra's Necklace* (2012), a two-screen film installation inspired by a short script by Anne Enright and made in collaboration with film maker Vivienne Dick and composer Trevor Knight, another artist with whom Maher has collaborated before. *L'Université* (2012) is a new site-specific work, while *Cell* is a reconstruction of a work of the same name first made for Kilmainham Gaol in 1991.

As part of the talks and lectures programme, IMMA will invite artists, curators and academics to reflect on the Alice Maher exhibition in the context of the many and varied themes the artist continually draws on.

Becoming is curated by Seán Kissane, Curator: Exhibitions, IMMA.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated publication with texts by Penelope Curtis, Director of Tate Britain, London; Anne Enright, Author; Ed Krčma, Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art, UCC; David Lloyd, Professor of English at the University of Southern California; and Curator Seán Kissane.

The exhibition is sponsored by *The Irish Times*.

The IMMA Primary School Programme will focus on the *Alice Maher: Becoming* exhibition from 9 October 2012 until early February 2013.

List of Artworks

Please note that a number of the following artworks may be visited during a guided tour of the *Alice Maher: Becoming* exhibition. However, the particular artworks visited will vary according to circumstance on the day, and additional artworks which are not covered here may be included. The list below contains both background information for teachers and viewing suggestions for children.

Andromeda, 1999

Background Information for Teachers

This is a large format charcoal on paper drawing (152.5 x 350 cm). Human hair generally is important in Maher's work. Unlike in other works by the artist, here the hair is merely represented but still creates ambivalence: living, abundant hair is attractive and sensuous, but once it is cut or falls out, it is immediately tarnished. Hair and what we do with it is surrounded by cultural taboos and significations.

The beautiful princess Andromeda of Greek mythology has been frequently represented in art, and her story has been the subject of tragedy in classical and modern times and has even inspired an opera. The ancients named a constellation after her, and in more recent times, the nearest spiral galaxy to our Milky Way was named for her.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Have you heard of Andromeda? In Greek mythology, she was the daughter of an Aethiopian king. Her mother Cassiopeia, the queen, boasted that she was more beautiful than the Nereids, the nymph-daughters of Nereus who were frequent companions of Poseidon, god of the sea. To punish the queen for her arrogance, Poseidon sent a sea monster named Cetus to plunder the coast of Aethiopia including the kingdom of Cassiopeia. The desperate king consulted the Oracle of Apollo, who announced that there would be no end to the destruction until the king sacrificed his daughter Andromeda to the monster. Andromeda was chained naked to a rock on the coast. It was the Greek hero Perseus (noticing her 'waving tresses'!) who managed to kill the sea monster and free Andromeda.

Andromeda chained to the rocks has been popular in art since classical times. Why do you think might this be? How would you draw or paint the scene?

Euripides wrote a tragedy about Andromeda's fate in 412 BCE according to which the goddess Athena placed Andromeda among the constellations in the northern sky, near Perseus and Cassiopeia. There is also a spiral galaxy called Andromeda which is so bright that you can see it with your naked eye. Do you know any other constellations with names from Greek mythology? Why would stars be given mythological names?

Do you know any biblical stories, myths or fairy tales in which hair plays a crucial part? Is it the hair of a female or male figure? Is it long or short, and what colour is it? Why do you think might hair be important to a story? Does the coiled hair in Maher's *Andromeda* remind you of a Celtic knot or interlace?

Mnemosyne, 2002

Background Information for Teachers

In [Greek mythology](#), Mnemosyne was the goddess of [memory](#). She was the daughter of [Gaia](#) and [Uranus](#) and, by [Zeus](#), the mother of the nine [Muses](#). Mnemosyne also presided over a fountain in [Hades](#), counterpart to the river [Lethe](#).

Maher's artwork investigates the meaning of memory through the action of freezing. Mnemosyne evokes such themes as memory, sleep, becoming and transformation. The sculpture is made of stainless steel, copper piping, a condensing unit and corian refrigeration gas.

The artist regularly engages in interdisciplinary collaborations with other artists and scientists. All her 'video drawings', for example, are set to soundtracks by composer Trevor Knight, and she has repeatedly worked with lighting designer Aedín Cosgrove.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

This piece is an ice bed. It is so large that it needs a room to itself, and in this exhibition, it takes pride of place in the atrium. Mnemosyne is right at the centre of the maze-like exhibition. Does it seem a strange artwork to you? Would you like to know what it feels like to lie on a bed of ice? And does it seem to you abandoned forever or rather, perhaps, ready for somebody to return?

The artwork is made of copper piping attached to a bed with a refrigerating unit underneath: it's like a freezer turned inside out. A layer of frost builds on the bed until it is turned off at night and melts. What do you think of the fact that the work remakes itself each day?

This artwork is interactive: it responds to its environment. Mnemosyne needs moisture to create itself, and the body heat of viewers affects its surface. Did you expect the room to be chilly? And is it? Do you find it hard to resist the temptation to touch the glistening smoothness?

The title of Maher's artwork gives us an important clue. Mnemosyne was the goddess of [memory](#) in [Greek mythology](#). She was the daughter of [Gaia](#) and [Uranus](#) and, by [Zeus](#), the mother of the nine [Muses](#). According to some stories, Mnemosyne also controlled a fountain in Hades, the underworld and kingdom of the dead. Dead souls would usually drink from the river Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, and forget their past lives. However, some souls were encouraged to drink from Mnemosyne's fountain instead in order to remember and go on to live forever.

What might the notion of memory and the actions of freezing and thawing have in common? Why do you think that memory and forgetting might be associated with water in the old stories?

Staircase of Thorns, 1997

Background Information for Teachers

This beautifully crafted staircase was made of rosethorns. The work seems bizarre, unsettling, even hostile, with the steps completely covered in thorns; a staircase one would tread with fear and stinging pain.

Maher's practice includes sculpture, painting, drawing, photography and film animation. She constantly explores and experiments with materials both traditional and unconventional, often in one work. Among the traditional materials she uses are chalk, bronze, charcoal, acrylic; the unconventional ones include rose thorns, berries, brambles, snails, ostrich eggs and human hair. The kinds of titles the artist uses vary too, some seeming straightforward, some indicating possible reference points or influences, others challenging the viewer.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Look closely at this staircase. It is a wooden structure carefully covered with rows of rosethorns. Note the beautiful symmetrical lines. Do you find it strange that such fierce thorns are found in nature among fragrant blooms and fruit?

Why do you think are the steps in Maher's artwork completely covered in thorns? What does this staircase make you think of, and how does it make you feel?

Do you know any fairy tales with castles surrounded by brambles and thorns? Are the brambles and thorns there to keep the inhabitants in or other people out? There are myths and stories, buildings and gardens all over the world containing labyrinths, and this exhibition is laid out rather like a labyrinth. What would you say is the difference between a 'wall' of brambles or thorns and a labyrinth?

Have you ever heard of a crown of thorns? Why would somebody be made to wear such a crown?

Cell, 1991/2012

Background Information for Teachers

This work was originally created for the exhibition *In a State* at Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin in 1991. The brambles used in the work had been sourced both in Maher's home place in Tipperary, around the Gaol and in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, which was being refurbished prior to the opening of

the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 1991. Maher's original work was situated in one of the cells in the Gaol where it is still in place, though it has shrunk overtime and is considerably smaller than when it was first installed.

This new work, also entitled *Cell*, has been re-imagined and created specifically for *Becoming*. The brambles were woven manually into a core and gradually built into to a large circular form.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

This work is made of brambles. The canes are gathered green, and when they wither, they release a curious smell. Maher remembers the bitter plant smell of the brambles as she shaped them. Can you smell the brambles, too?

The title of this work is *Cell*. There are different kinds of cells. Can you think of examples? A cell is the smallest unit of life, a kind of a building block. The word comes from Latin meaning a 'small room'. You may have heard of or seen a monk's cell in a monastery. What does it look like, and why would monks live like that? Why do you think prisoners are made to live in cells? Actually, the artist originally created this work to be exhibited in a prison cell in Kilmainham Gaol which was a real prison for decades but nowadays is a museum.

How does this work make you feel? The artist uses thorns in both *House of Thorns* and *Cell*. How are they used differently, and what difference does it make?

Bestiary Drawings, 2007

Background Information for Teachers

Maher's charcoal and pencil drawings were inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* of which she made a careful study. Bosch's triptych depicts the history of the world and the progression of sin, and its central panel abounds with scenes of enchanted carnal pleasure. The profiles of Maher's 'Bestiary' figures – a bestiary is a medieval book of illustrations and descriptions of often fanciful animals and birds, usually accompanied by a moral lesson – have been taken from amalgamated sets of animals, birds, fruit and human groupings found in Bosch's painting. Maher says that she was influenced by the excessiveness of mood emanating from the phantasmagorical *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

The artist then used decorative motifs from such diverse sources as Pompeian panels, eighteenth century wallpaper and contemporary head scarves to fill in the negative spaces created by her beasts.

Viewing Suggestions for Children

Maher is interested in scale. In fairy tales, there are giant beanstalks and thumb-sized children living among regular people. Do you know any examples from the Bible, Greek or Roman myths or Irish legends of giants or little people?

The artist is concerned with all kinds of exaggeration as it occurs for example in dreams. It also explains her delight in medieval art. There, perspectives are often distorted, and figures are not to scale: saints, for example, are often much bigger than ordinary people. Why would saints be shown like that?

It is for the same reason that she loves the work of the 15th century painter Hieronymus Bosch with all its fantastic detail. Maher's *Bestiary Drawings* are based on Bosch's painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The painting shows a world in which humans, fruits, birds and bizarre creatures exist on kind of a mad topsy-turvy scale, as if in a fairy tale. A bestiary is a medieval book of fables based on real and imaginary beasts.

The drawings contain silhouettes. A silhouette is the image of a person or an object represented as a solid shape. The shape has a single colour, usually black. The interior of a silhouette is usually featureless. Is that what Maher's silhouettes are like? Can you see any symmetrical (mirrored) shapes within the silhouettes, and if so, what do they represent?

Suggested Preparatory Activities and Practical Uses in the Classroom

Read classical myths and fairytales with the children, for example Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Grimm's *Fairy Tales*. Note how characters there enjoy the capacity to move between human, animal, vegetable and mineral states. Try to locate some of the topics found in Alice Maher's exhibition *Becoming* and discuss by branching out into history, literature and art, geography, astronomy, psychology.

Give examples of how things are often not what they seem. Talk about different kinds of transformation or metamorphosis, from biological examples (caterpillar to butterfly, tadpole to frog) to cosmetic surgery, to how stories can change when they are handed down orally. Consider various religions: this life, previous lives, the next life or reincarnation. Talk about how in mythology and fairy tales, gods become humans for a while and humans are transformed into animals and back. Discuss notions of instability and deception including half-truths and lies. Read native American stories or Aesop's Fables and talk about how they ascribe human traits to animals, and why.

Give the children different art materials to illustrate the stories you have read. Show them classical book illustrations of these tales and paintings of these subjects.

Discuss some of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus' sayings about change, for example, 'Nothing endures but change' or 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.' Talk about the work of glaciers or wind erosion, or how the body and mind changes as people get older.

Talk to the children about Alice Maher collecting berries, brambles, thorns, nettles and snail shells as art materials. Point out that many of her artworks are made of organic matter and are still subject to decomposition: the artworks change considerably over time (eg, colour, size). Ask the children what else they might collect to make art with?

Explore with the children how Maher blends art and nature. Mention that there is a moral to fairy tales and ask whether the children think Maher's works are teaching a lesson?

Show the children some Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of mythological figures, for example Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Mnemosyne* (1881), and compare the way the hair is painted with Maher's charcoal drawing *Andromeda*. Investigate the importance of hair in different cultures and religions and through the centuries. Tell the story of Medusa, the terrible monster who once was a beautiful maiden whose chief glory was her hair. When she dared to compete in beauty with Minerva, however, the goddess deprived Medusa of her charms and changed her beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents.