
Parachute, 2005
parachute and gannet
dimensions variable
Collection Irish Museum of Modern Art

Medusae, 2000
Dorothy Cross with Professor Tom Cross
video
duration: 30 min
courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin and Dorothy
Cross, 2012

Dorothy Cross Medusae & Parachute

Medusae

Collaborators: artist Dorothy Cross and Professor Tom Cross, zoologist.
Project: research into the life of Irish naturalist Maude Delap (1866–1953) and analysis of the biomechanics of the box jellyfish *Chironex fleckeri*.

In 2001 Dorothy Cross received a SciArt Research and Development Project Award, which enabled her to develop a collaborative project *Medusae* with her brother Tom Cross, Professor in Zoology at University College Cork.

Cross focused her research on the life of a Victorian amateur naturalist, Maude Delap (1866–1953), who succeeded in collecting and breeding jellyfish in captivity on Valentia Island, off the coast of County Kerry. Tom Cross investigated the swimming techniques (biomechanics) of a deadly species of jellyfish known as the *Chironex fleckeri*. Both subjects were not well-known before Dorothy and Tom began this journey of discovery.

They travelled to Australia to net a selection of the jellyfish alive, which they then brought into a science laboratory. They made a number of plexi-glass tanks in which the jellyfish were placed to record their movements using underwater cameras. Tom Cross succeeded in taking the first ever DNA fingerprint of the *Chironex fleckeri*.

The resulting 30-minute film, titled *Medusae* (the Latin term for jellyfish), captures the movements of the jellyfish, interspersed with graphs, notes, drawings and charts of Delap's historical experiments. The visual style of the film changes between the art and science-based sections. In the artistic segments, the camera zooms in on the jellyfish accompanied by the eerie sounds of the glass harmonica. Then the camera pans out for the laboratory-science shots, including segments with the scientists coaxing the lethal box jellyfish to perform for the underwater camera in the laboratory pool. Narration of their respective art and science sections by Dorothy and Tom lend the piece a documentary feel, yet the central sequence of Fiona Shaw's reading of Delap's research notes, accompanied by the flickering eerie movements of the jellyfish, unites *Medusae's* art/science divide.

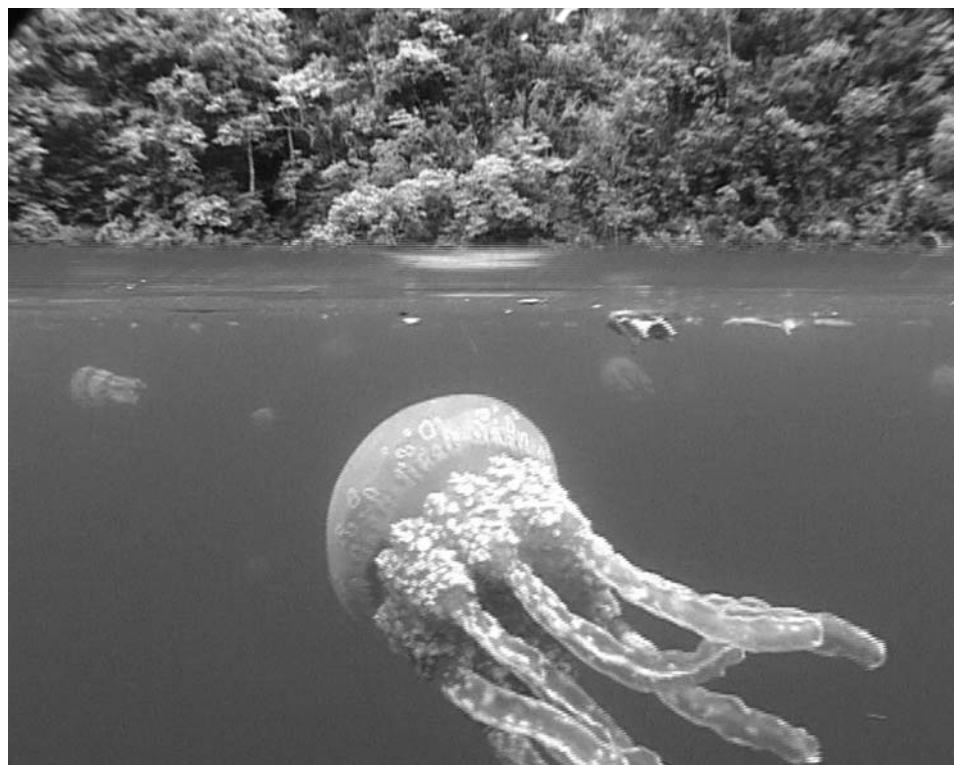
Parachute

This work was made in response to a gannet found on the seashore, which Cross subsequently had preserved by a taxidermist. The gannet is attached to a blue parachute (the army use blue parachutes because they are invisible during flight on a clear day) and his beak is pointed downwards, just inches from the floor. In this work, Cross explores the territory of flight and human entrapment – the collision between our inability to fly in relation to the flight of birds.

Dorothy Cross

b.1956 Cork, lives and works in Connemara, Ireland

Dorothy Cross received a BA from Leicester Polytechnic, England in 1979 and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, California in 1982. Solo exhibitions include: *Stalactite*, Frith Street Gallery, London (2011); *Comma*, Bloomberg Space, London (2009); *Antarctica*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2008); *Land Scape*, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin (2008); *Sapiens*, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin (2007); and *Dorothy Cross*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2005). Selected group exhibitions include: *Underwater*, Towner Gallery, Eastbourne (2010); *POOL*, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin (2010); *Boule To Braic*: Curated by Richard Wentworth, Lisson Gallery, London (2009); and *A Duck for Mr Darwin*, The Baltic, Gateshead (2009). She is represented by the Kerlin Gallery in Dublin and Frith Street Gallery in London. Awards include the SciArt Project Award for a collaborative project *Medusae* with her brother Tom Cross in 2005 and the Gulbenkian Galapagos Award in 2008.



Background to Dorothy Cross' process

'Making strange' is a term that Dorothy Cross often uses to describe her practice, stating that 'the value of art making should be in its very "strangeness" in order to engage fully with an audience'.¹ This notion of the 'strange' or the *uncanny* has historical precedence in contemporary art practice from Dada (1916–1922) to Surrealism (from the 1920s) and in the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1839), who founded the discipline of psychoanalysis. These combined literary and visual practices experimented with the unconscious mind through new modes of expression in response to the social and political affairs at that time. They introduced a range of new techniques such as *frottage* (rubblings of textured surfaces on paper), *automatism* (spontaneous activities such as painting, drawing and writing without conscious thought or intention), and the *readymade* (the use of everyday and common objects, such as an iron or a shovel, which challenged conventional art making). The most famous example of the *readymade* is Marcel Duchamp's (1887–1968) *Fountain* (1917), which was a porcelain urinal signed under the fictional persona of R. Mutt.

These practices attempted to challenge the prevailing order or 'world view' of conventional reasoning and logic. This is called a *paradigm* – which can mean that we take as a given certain cultural beliefs, values and behaviours as 'true' and the 'norm'.² 'Making strange' is a creative and philosophical strategy that Cross applies to her practice which comprises a range of media, including sculpture, photography, video, installation, musical performances and public work. Her practice involves the manipulation of materials through different kinds of processes, such as casting and the re-use of 'found' objects, be they personal (family heirlooms), domestic (tables) or even things she finds washed up at sea, all of which are transfigured into new contexts. Her motivation lies in the belief that objects can hold more than one meaning and that these meanings change over time and/or in combination with other objects.

Bricolage is a term used to describe this process, whereby works constructed from a combination of various materials can inspire new meanings. For example, during the 1990s, Cross produced two extended series of sculptural works, using cured cowhide and stuffed snakes, which drew on these animals' rich store of symbolic associations across cultures, to investigate the construction of sexuality and subjectivity. More recently, she has developed large-scale public events and

projects, most memorably *Ghostship* (1998), which was a commission of the Nissan Art Project in association with the Irish Museum of Modern Art. For a number of weeks, a decommissioned light-ship, moored off Scotsman's Bay, was illuminated through the use of phosphorus paint.

Since Cross' move to Connemara in 2007, the sea and its inhabitants – such as sharks, sea-birds, whales and jellyfish – provide much inspiration. These aquatic creatures are creatively juxtaposed with human beings, which has the effect of crossing social and political boundaries between nature and culture by ascribing new meaning to things we overlook or take for granted. In this respect, many of Cross' works take on an ecological role by creating a platform that examines the place of human beings within the natural world.

Some questions to consider

What are your immediate reactions to the film *Medusae*?

Is it shot in colour or black and white?

How does the soundtrack relate to the visual imagery?

What sorts of film techniques does the artist use (e.g. close-up views, awkward angles, slowing down the frames, dramatic lighting)?

How long is the film?

What do you think this film is about?

What particular issues is the artist concerned with?

What does the work make you think about the sea and jellyfish?

How does the work *Parachute* make you feel?

Is there a relationship between the actual parachute and the bird?

What is the role of colour in this installation?

For discussion

Medusae and *Parachute* are very different works, partly because of the materials that they are composed of. They do, however, share a thematic link – that of the sea and our connection and/or disconnection with nature.

How do these works draw out such ideas and what role does the material, both man-made and natural, play in these works?

How do you feel about animals as material used in an arts context?

Do you think this is art?

Remembering the early discussion on Cross' practice in relation to the 'uncanny' and the 'strange', what do you think about manipulating dead material into an art object?

Dorothy Cross describes her art objects as characters – animate (filmed jellyfish) and inanimate (dead birds). The term character is suggestive of a play. These characters/objects she uses are acting out a different kind of story in relation to us.

What do you think the artist is trying to communicate to us in relation to nature and our role in and with nature?

Do we have a role?

Parachute is a good example of *bricolage* in practice: an artwork composed of different and unusual materials, materials that may be considered old, useless, devalued and of no particular value. Why does Cross overturn these conventions by reclaiming the useless and creating unusual juxtapositions of objects in new and different ways?

What ideas do you think the artist is trying to communicate to us in relation to the animal kingdom?

Do you think there is a connection between us and them?

Are there other themes or elements in these works that Cross explores?

How does Cross draw from history in relation to Maude Delap and the materials she uses to construct her works?

Having viewed *Medusae* do you think that there is a relationship between science and art?

Art, like science, can be about revealing new thoughts, ideas or researching the unknown. This suggests that image making can also generate new knowledge. What have these works revealed to you that you may not have known before?

Can collaboration increase and/or strengthen the work of an artist?

Key words

AUTOMATISM

A term appropriated from psychiatry by the Surrealist artists to describe a technique to access the unconscious, which involved automatic actions and involuntary gestures to produce spontaneous drawings, writings and/or paintings.

BRICOLAGE

A technique where a variety of materials (found objects, waste materials, etc.) are combined to construct an artwork.

CHIRONEX FLECKERI BOX JELLYFISH

A venomous species of jellyfish found in the south eastern Indian ocean.

CYANOTYPE

A form of photogram which produces a cyan-blue colour due to the chemicals used. This process was favoured in the production of technical, architectural and engineering drawings, also known as 'blue prints'.

FROTTAGE

A technique which involves taking rubbings of textured surfaces on paper using materials such as pencil, charcoal, crayon or pastel.

MEDUSAE

Plural for Medusa, this is the Latin term for jellyfish and refers to a form of jellyfish, also known as cnidarian, which is characterised by an umbrella-shaped body. In Greek mythology, Medusa is one of three Gorgon sisters. She had snakes for hair and anyone who looked at her was turned to stone.

PARADIGM

A pattern, model or framework to understand experience.

PHOTOGRAM

A process of photographic printmaking without the use of a camera by placing an object on light-sensitive paper and exposing it to direct light.

READYMADE

A term used in manufacturing to distinguish between handmade and manufactured goods, appropriated by French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) to describe the selection and modification of a manufactured object by an artist to create an artwork.

UNCANNY

A term associated with Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and the discipline of psychoanalysis (Ger. 'Das Unheimliche' – unhomely) to describe how something familiar can simultaneously appear strange.

Activities

Walking the landscape

Although Dorothy Cross travels to far and exotic places, her connection to the place she lives provides the background and stimulus to much of her work. As a starting point, and by way of familiarising oneself with the methods and tools that Cross applies in her practice, specifically her relationship to the landscape she inhabits, consider taking a walk in your locale – whether that be in a street, on the seashore, by a river or in a forest. Bring a bag and collect a range of materials that you find en route – both natural and man-made materials. Take these home and look at each object one at a time. While looking at these objects – consider their size, texture, what they are made of, colour and possible use. Use these materials as they are and construct a three-dimensional object (or character) by combining/attaching these materials together, using glue, string or nails. Alternatively, if you would prefer to work on a flat sheet of card/paper (this is technically called a collage), arrange the various objects that are suggestive of the place where you have been.

Printing, and drawing 'characters' from the landscape

As discussed previously in relation to Cross' practice, many of her projects develop from and expand on existing works. For example, she made a series of prints from jellyfish by laying these characters on linen. An interesting way of making prints directly from the objects that you have collected is to develop a series of sun prints. This involves using paper which has been coated with light sensitive materials.³ When this paper has been exposed to the sun it produces an imprint of the object that is placed on the paper. This particular process is technically called cyanotype or photogram. It was developed in the early nineteenth century by the English scientist and astronomer, Sir John Herschel; however, it was the botanist Anna Atkins who introduced this technique to photography. She created a limited series of cyanotype books that documented ferns and other plant life from her extensive seaweed collection. The procedure works in the following way: specimens/objects are placed on top of the coated paper and exposed to sunlight, where the exposure to the sunlight creates a blue silhouette effect on the paper. You will know when it is ready because the paper will change to an odd, dull grey colour. Bring the print inside and wash it in a bath of cold water. Place the print between sheets of paper with a heavy object to hold it in place so that it dries flat. Alternatively, why not use vegetable and fruit matter to create a series of prints? To achieve this, slice some tomatoes, onions, pears, etc., in half and lay these down on sheets of paper for a short period of time.

Frottage

Using the same material that you found on your walk, consider drawing these objects using the frottage method as discussed in relation to Dada and Surrealism. Frottage is a method whereby you place a sheet of paper over the object and, using a 3B graphite pencil or darker, you rub the pencil directly over the paper which covers the object. Alternatively, wrap the object in paper and make rubbings of the object. Unfold the sheet – does your drawing resemble the object? Experiment with different paper and drawing materials. On your next walk bring some sheets of paper and take rubbings of the various objects you encounter on route. Consider texture and try to make as many rubbings as possible of the textures you find in your environment.

Water pools and jars

Although most of us do not have access to underwater camera equipment, this should not prevent us from exploring water, water pools, rock pools, rivers and the sea. And, if city-bound, fill jam jars with tap water. Place different objects in these jars. How do these objects appear? Are they stretched or do they look smaller than normal? Does the colour of the object change? Place a variety of objects in jars with water and take photographs of these things or, if you have access to a video camera, record how the light falls and animates both natural and man-made materials.

Historical, domestic and human artefacts

Maude Delap proved to be a fascinating and rich character who inspired Cross to make a variety of work in response to her life, her work and her research on jellyfish. Perhaps there is a historical character or even a person in your family history that inspires you or someone you would like to know more about. For a family member, ask relatives for information, photographs or materials associated with this person. The Internet, public libraries and National Cultural Institutions, such as the History Museum and the National Archives, are good sources of historical information. Questions that will prompt further investigation may include: Is the person male/female? What century did they live in? What was going on at that time? Where did they live? Construct a story for this person using both visual and textual information that you will have gathered. This could be a group activity – whether with family, friends or school mates. Use your local library as it may have information related to the person you are investigating or specific to the time this person lived. Another approach would be to find a disused/abandoned building in your locale in order to discover who may have lived there and what kinds of activities were carried out in this place in the past.

Further Explorations

Dorothy Cross tends to develop work as a series of related productions expanding on a theme or idea. In this respect the sea, its creatures and, in particular, the jellyfish have inspired a range of other works combining different media. One of the first videos that she made in relation to the sea was *Teacup* (1996). Using a family heirloom, in this case a teacup from her grandmother's collection, Cross borrowed footage from the Robert Flaherty film *Man of Aran* (1934). This film was an ethnographic study of fishermen and the local community surviving on the Aran Islands. Cross selected three minutes of footage from the original film, which showed the fishermen in a currach boat crashing against the waves in a storm. She projected the footage inside the teacup so that it appears as if the men are rowing against the inside of the cup. In this respect, she juxtaposed raw footage of survival against the civility of a domestic object – the teacup – and its association with British colonialism.

Chiasm (1999) was an ambitious multi-media performance work sited in two disused handball courts. Cross recorded video footage from Poll na bPéist (The Worm Hole), discovered at the base of the terraced cliffs off Inis Mór. This rectangular pool periodically fills and empties with water in response to the tidal system. Film footage of this rare phenomenon was projected onto the floor of the handball alleys accompanied by the live performance of two opera singers, one in each handball court. The music they sang comprised phrases from operas that focus on love, loss and unrequited relationships.

Jellyfish Lake (2001) is a short film of Cross swimming in a lake in Palau, Micronesia, with hundreds of jellyfish. An underwater camera records the movements of swimmer and jellyfish united in their physical experience of being at sea together. *Drying Jellyfish* (2003), *Jellyfish Drawings* (2003) and *Jellyfish Pillowcase* (2004) are the physical manifestations of jellyfish that Cross made by collecting compass jellyfish and laying their remains on linen sheets and napkins belonging to her grandmother. She describes these works as 'nature drawing itself'.

In 2001, while visiting the derelict house of Maude Delap (1866-1953) on Valentia Island, Cross discovered a grotto containing statues of the Virgin Mary and Saint Bernadette and also a remote slate quarry. In collaboration with James Conway from Opera Theatre Company, she developed the work *Stabat Mater* (2005), as a live performance of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's seventeenth century arrangement of the *Stabat Mater* (about the Sorrows of Mary). The work

constitutes a live performance of two opera singers and a baroque chamber orchestra, costumed in dirty overalls and safety helmets. The combination of nature, industry and religion amplify complex connections with living and inert material by reconnecting history and memory to the present day.

¹ MIT, MA, Guestbook Lecture: Dorothy Cross, April 29, 2009 – access: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQqZenW6rvY>

² Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, Thames and Hudson, 1991.

³ See www.sunprints.org for further information.

Further reading

publications

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Robin Lydenberg, *Gone: Site-specific Work by Dorothy Cross*, University of Chicago Press, 2005

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www.kerlin.ie/artists

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www.frithstreetgallery.com/artists

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AN, Artists Talking: exposing contemporary artists' practice 'Dorothy Cross' by Rosemary Shirley, www.a-n.co.uk/artists_talking/artists_stories/single/59521

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