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‘Dorothy Cross: ‘People used to be more afraid of my work. I was even a bit horrified’

Unlikely meetings and venous connections inspired the artist’s latest show. By Aoife Barry, 26 May 2024

The artist Dorothy Cross sits in a white-walled room in the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, eating a croissant that’s oozing a tongue of pale-green pistachio cream. Behind her is a framed monochrome diptych of a man and a woman on board a small boat, with undulating lines of what looks like blood drifting over them. The works are typical of Cross: unsettling yet familiar.

The images are grouped alongside seven others under the title *Bloodlines* as part of *Veins of Other*, her latest exhibition now open at the Kerlin. Exhibited alongside them are 12 sculptures, under the title *Tread*, of feet carved into precious Italian marble plinths.

As one of Ireland’s pre-eminent artists, a new exhibition by Cross is a highly anticipated event. In person she is disarmingly down-to-earth and generous with her insights. Brought up in Montenotte in Cork, she was a teenage competitive swimmer who moved to England, California and Dublin in early adulthood before settling in the wilds of Connemara (“a balm”) in her forties. Now in her late sixties, she began exhibiting in the mid-1980s and has taken her work to the Venice Biennale, Tate Modern and the Irish Museum of Modern Art, among other prestigious locations.

Her art often features the amalgamation of unexpected elements and objects. “A lot of my work is about one thing meeting another. Some conjunction that sparks off something that hopefully presses us to see something in a new way,” she tells me. Indeed: she has gilded the inside of a shark with gold leaf (*Relic*, 2009); cast a crab in bronze with a human penis sticking out of it (*Family*, 2005); and placed a relic of a human heart on board a ship floating in Cork Harbour (*Heartship*, 2019).

The feet in *Tread* were carved into marble blocks from around the world at Studio Carlo Nicoli in Carrara, Italy. “It’s very much about place, and evidence of some kind of existence of the human over time within the geology of that place,” she says of *Tread*. “It’s also about compression of time, and I think it’s about bringing together difference, in terms of the present situation in the world.”

The photographs in *Bloodlines*, meanwhile, are covered with stained glass that she bought years ago in a shop that was closing down. “I thought, isn’t this the most beautiful thing — it looked like blood running through the glass.” The archive images are all sourced from family albums (her father was a dab hand with a camera).

She initially worried about showing the photographs and marble sculptures together. But when she saw them in situ she recognised they connected completely. “Because the veins in the glass are very similar to the veins in the marble, and also connecting to blood, and also connecting to death in a way, in terms of looking at layering of time with my parents [and me].”

How quickly do ideas come to her? “I don’t force it. I have months and weeks of no ideas at all, and less need to find them as I’m getting older, maybe. And yet then I do see a film or something and I think” — she clicks her fingers — “ ‘Oh my God, that sparks something.’ ”

At Studio Carlo Nicoli she felt like “a kid in a candy store”. She was introduced to the studio over a decade ago while visiting friends. “There are other places you can carve marble, but it has the history of Michelangelo, and the purest white marble on the peaks, which is now getting less and less. So I went to visit Francesca Nicoli there, and she drove us up onto this peak in her white Jeep, wearing white clothes on a white peak in the sunshine — it was like going over a glacier.”

Cross doesn’t carve the feet herself, but explains her role in the process: “I make models of moulds of feet. I break them according to how much foot we want to expose, then go and find a block and position the foot where I think I want it. You never know what you’re going to find when you’re digging down into crystallised marble, because you might find nests of crystals where the foot would break off.” The carvers “use the old system of carving, which is like a calliper system, a point system. They have such patience and such dexterity and such sensitivity — it’s just miraculous to watch how they work.”

Has she tried carving marble herself? She nods. “It’s fine for a little bit … but I wouldn’t trust myself. It depends on the hammer and the chisel — if you go too strong, a toe can go flying off in midair, because the little veins create fissures.”

She grew up in a home where “art was in evidence. My parents weren’t art collectors, but there were certain things in the house that were exquisite.” An incident where she accidentally broke a Japanese vase belonging to her mother with a tennis ball haunts her to this day. Yet art was a “safety net” to her as a shy child.

Coming from an academic background, she went to university first and says that an alternative career would have been in science. Her brother is a marine biologist. “One thing I always say to students is that now I have the best of both worlds. I can go dive with sharks in the Galapagos and I can also make a sculpture,” she says. “Being an artist when it works out is the biggest freedom you can have. But you know, I was broke for years and years and years.”

She’s curious about the reach that art can have today, wondering if young students will come into the gallery or just engage with her exhibition on Instagram. “Even years ago, I remember meeting a film-maker friend of mine at an airport carousel. He’d seen my show and he said, ‘I liked your show, but how can you take so much time to do that and so few people see it?’ Which is a really interesting question.” Was that not a bit harsh? She shakes her head. “I love questions like that. It’s so true. One of his movies might be seen by millions of people. But [my art is] not really about that, it might trickle and might filter in a different way.”

A continuing, years-long project is her quest, alongside Mary Hickson, John Fitzgerald and Maeve-Ann Austen, to return the mummified body of a man to Egypt. “This is about restitution. It’s not repatriation,” she says of the project (called *Kinship*). “It’s not really about art. It’s about life.”

In previous years she made a lot of work that disturbed people. “I think it was about trying to scratch, irritate,” she says. During Covid, the Kerlin sold several older pieces of hers. “I think people used to be more afraid of my work,” she says. “I think things have changed in terms of what’s available for people to see. Because when I was making cows’ udders and putting them into knicker gussets or whatever, people were horrified. I was even a bit horrified!” But now, she feels that people have “seen everything”, and her work as a result might seem to be less confrontational. “Are we being inured, are we being numbed? I don’t know.”

Cross has worried in the past if her work was “just repetition”. A chat with her friend the academic Robin Lydenberg sorted her out. “She said it’s about a certain refinement, and I loved that. Even if other people don’t think so. I would hate to repeat. It’s too boring. Life’s too short.”

Dorothy Cross’s exhibition* Veins of Other *is at Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, until July 6

Photographs by Cliodhna Prendergast