

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY: **MS LINDA O'SHEA FARREN** on 3 December 2012 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Fine Art *honoris causa*, on **ALICE MAHER**

A Sheansaileir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle,

Alice Maher is one of Ireland's foremost contemporary artists, producing some of the most iconic images of art on the national and international stage.

Born in Kilmoyler, County Tipperary in 1956, Alice had a warm rural upbringing on the family farm with her sister Christine and brothers Lowry, Patrick and Eddie.



Their father Larry was cattle dealer, drover, butcher, baker and merrymaker, all rolled into one, and their mother Kitty plied everything she did with her true sense of the aesthetic. Like too many strong capable women of her time, Kitty felt 'confined' to domestic life by church and state and she was determined that her children would have more choices in their lives.

It is no surprise therefore that, while Alice's work is outwardly inspired by the beauty and power of nature to which she was so close as a child, it contains - within - deep resonances of philosophical ideas encouraged around the table at home.

She is married to Belfast artist Dermot Seymour and they live in Mayo.

Alice was educated at Ballydrehid National School and Coláiste Chríost Rí in Cahir, where her interest in art was encouraged by the nuns - but as a pastime, not a career.

Not having any real exposure to the life that an artist might live, she first studied European Studies in the University of Limerick.

And, at age 26, she enrolled at Crawford College of Art & Design in Cork, graduating in 1985. At Crawford, she was greatly influenced by Vera Ryan and Hilary Pyle, both of whom taught her history of art and encouraged her particular interest in medieval art.

She continued her art studies in the University of Ulster under the tutorship of Professor Alastair MacLennan, graduating with a Master's Degree in Fine Art in 1986.

Upon graduation, she was awarded a prestigious Fulbright Scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute and this triggered a life-long association with the United States - an association that was copper-fastened when Alice later met the renowned French-American artist Louise Bourgeois, who proved to be a giant at her shoulder.

Significantly, in 1994, only seven years after leaving art college, Alice was chosen to represent Ireland at the 22nd Bienal de Sao Paulo in Brazil. Shortly thereafter, she presented a major solo exhibition *Familiar* at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin, bursting - fully formed - onto both the Irish and international art scenes simultaneously.

She lived in Paris during 'L'Imaginaire Irlandais' of 1996 and she continues her relationship with France through exhibitions in Poitiers, Paris and Rouen.

Elected to Aosdána in 1996, Alice shows regularly at the Green on Red Gallery in Dublin and her works can be seen in public collections at home and abroad, including The British Museum in London; Centre Pompidou in Paris; Deutsches Historische Museum in Berlin; The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; The Hammond Museum in Los Angeles; The Irish Museum of Modern Art; Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane; The Galway Arts Centre; the RHA; the Lewis Glucksman Gallery at UCC; The Arts Councils of Ireland and Northern Ireland; and many more.

Alice is of that powerful wave of Irish women artists who emerged in the eighties, blowing away the cobwebs of historic art forms and welcoming with open arms the new, the technological, the untried. Her works span all of the art forms, including painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, photography, film and video animation, and she elevates craft out of the margins and into high art.

Her interest in space led to her pioneering the use of installation art in Ireland as an art form and all of her exhibitions are carefully designed to create an all-immersive environment -- where the atmosphere, the light, the sound and not solely the art objects, allow the viewers to bring all of their senses into play in a true coming together of audience and art work.

Each one of Alice's works is deeply thought-through in intelligent communion with life, with people and, most of all, with lived reality. She eschews 'drawing from the model' or 'still life', describing it as '*death drawing*'. Instead, she draws 'from the inside out' using her imagination to tell her what is true and her own body as a scale reference.

Certain themes run through her work – themes such as the passage of time, memory, ephemerality, transformation, scale, balance and the repelled. Her work is embedded in cultural history, myths and fairy tales as a means of linking human narrative. All stories are linked for her; all materials carry within themselves the history of their meaning and use their very ordinariness to open up poetic imaginative space.

Time is a constant theme in her work and her use of many ephemeral materials - such as nettles, berries and ice - are testimony to her belief that not just the material, but the meaning of art itself, is ever in flux. She is not interested in making work that lasts forever because the only constant is change.

Her seminal piece 'Cell', a gigantic ball of thorns made in Kilmainham Gaol in 1991, is still crouched in its place there, drying up, collapsing in upon itself, embodying the theme of imprisonment as it slowly turns to dust. Seeing this piece soon after his release, former hostage Brian Keenan said he felt he had '*walked into a poem. The perfect ... mirror of a time [he had] passed through and found incredibly difficult to write about.*'

Alice's practice has always included inter-disciplinary collaborations with people from all kinds of fields, including photographer Kate Horgan, topiary artist Mary McLoughlin, film maker Vivienne Dick, composer Trevor Knight, lighting designer Aedin Cosgrove - even fridge engineer Tom O'Dowd, whom she found through the Yellow Pages and with whom she collaborated to make her ice sculpture Mnemosyne, which is at the centre of her current mid-career retrospective *Becoming* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art.

Housed at IMMA's new space at Earlsfort Terrace, this retrospective is a testament to Alice's place in the national and international art world.

'Cassandra's Necklace', a new film work inspired by a script sent to Alice by author Anne Enright, features a necklace of lambs' tongues signifying the truth-teller of ancient Troy who was shunned and whom Alice rescues from the margins, a recurring theme in her work.

Of particular interest to today's honorary conferring is the site-specific installation entitled *L'Universite*, which Alice created for the old lecture theatre at Earlsfort Terrace. 120 items of graffiti, carved by UCD students on the wooden benches, were selected by Alice and highlighted by low-hanging spotlights, including '*The girl's a fool, she broke the rule*'.

Alice Maher certainly breaks the rules. And, in doing so, her work has contributed greatly to the history of contemporary art in Ireland and inspires young artists to stretch the boundaries.

It is a privilege for the National University of Ireland to award its highest honour to Alice Maher.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hanc meam filiam, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus Optimis, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.