

THE LEADER INTERVIEW



With Norma Prendiville

Sculptor Cliodhna carves her mark

CLIODHNA Cussen shapes her thoughts almost as carefully as she shapes her sculptures. Like small chips from a great block of limestone, the words peel away slowly. In the autumn sunshine of Howth, she painstakingly sands an almost-finished piece of work. The job is soothing, rhythmic, mesmerising

Girls weren't allowed to do stone carving then," she recalls. A sculpture scholarship to Italy followed and the young Cliodhna set off "into the pure wild, blue yonder. I didn't know any Italian. I didn't know anything about Italy or Florence". She visited Rome, Sienna and Florence where she enrolled in a college of sculpture and practised, practised.



*Sculptor Cliodhna Cussen: If you got accepted by the Art College you could attend classes in the afternoons and a night. That is what I did. You had to follow a course. You had to try out everything. I decided I got a better feeling for sculpture. I really didn't want to be doing anything else

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explaining how she manages time.

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In the autumn sunshine of Howth, she painstakingly sands an almost-finished piece of work. The job is soothing, rhythmic, mesmerising to watch.

It is, she says herself, the least interesting part of the creative process. But there is nonetheless a kind of excitement at being "almost there".

As she works, the words gather pace. She tilts her head, sparrow-like, as if to catch a stray one on the wing. She looks off into the near-distance as if to conjure up the shape a word might have.

"Do you carry songs in your head?", she asks. She does. Her deft hands glide over the new sculpture on its perch outside her garden-studio. It is a formidable, striking piece in which two figures are forever clasped to an oak-stump carved out of the one block of limestone.

Now, as the piece reaches completion, she knows she has kept faith with the stone and it hasn't let her down.

She has kept her pact of silence with herself too. Too many words, she has found, can destroy an idea before it even catches. She learned that a long time ago.

"Maybe it is a piseog. Maybe it is true. You dissipate your energy talking. If you are making something, you have to concentrate on making it," she says.

Cliodhna Cussen's introduction to art began early and with a Dublin-based aunt who used to take her out sketching. "She was great. She brought a great breath of the big world with her," she says.

But it was only later, when she had left Newcastle West and Laurel Hill behind her and was a student in UCD that she found sculpture. And from the very beginning, it seized her.

"Then," she says talking of the late 1950s, "you could do everything. You had a bike. You could go anywhere, do anything. It wasn't like now. You were free."

Being free meant attending morning lectures at UCD and then heading for the Art College. "If you got accepted by the Art College you

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A sculpture scholarship to Italy followed and the young Cliodhna set off "into the pure wild, blue yonder. I didn't know any Italian. I didn't know anything about Italy or Florence".

She visited Rome, Sienna and Florence where she enrolled in a college of sculpture and practised, practised, practised.

"They were quite picky," she recalls now. "First of all you practised classical work and then you went off on your own."

She remembers being somewhat puzzled by all the talk about "planes" and she was conscious of trying to improve her drawing.

"Drawing is the beginning, the middle and end of it. If you can draw you can do anything," she says.

But it was there, in Italy, she had her breakthrough in sculpture.

"I didn't think I could do it but I did," she recalls. She still has that breakthrough piece.

Back again in Dublin, she says: "At that time of your life, you want to explore. You don't want to be tied down to rules and regulations. I didn't even want a job but I needed some money so I did a bit of teaching at Mount Anville."

Because it was necessary, she took her teaching diploma.

"I enjoy teaching. I went on teaching for a long time. I didn't teach sculpture. I taught painting and picture making, later I taught block-printing," she says.

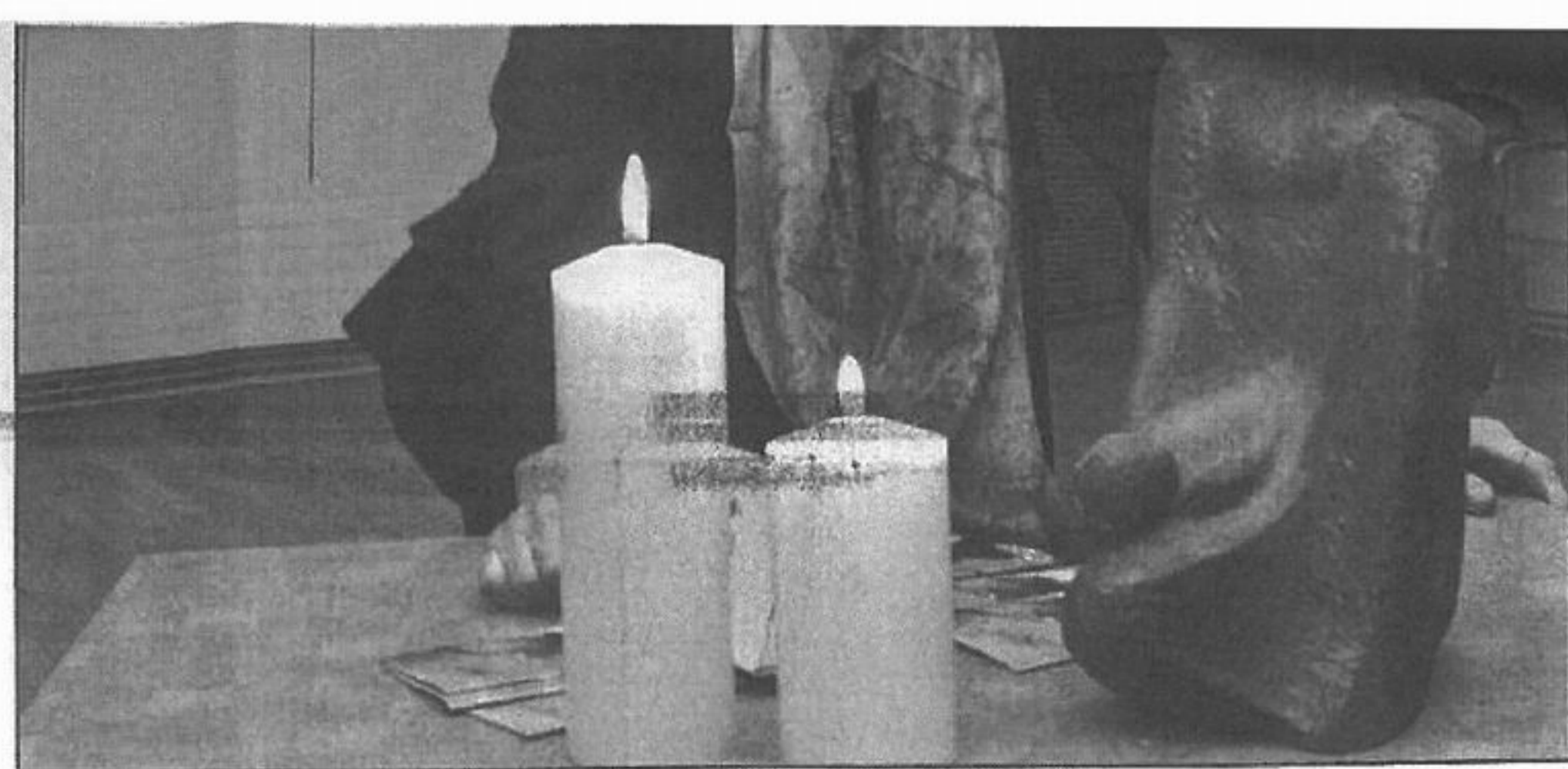
Her first exhibition came, she tries to date it, in 1959 or 1960. It was in Brown Thomas—wood carvings with metal in them like copper.

"I had a studio in Herbert Lane, working away like a lunatic on my own," she recalls.

A lot of her pieces sold, and she was "very pleased."

"But I kept on going to the College of Art. I did metal work classes on Saturday morning and then John Behan and another sculptor opened the Bronze Foundry in the early 1970s and I spent time there and still go in there. I am still learning," says Cliodhna.

She also began getting commissions—and in the early 1970s, she first began working in stone and got a commission to do a stone piece.



The piece was a Madonna and Child, which is "down in Cork somewhere" now.

"I don't feel it was earth-shaking but it was there and I was glad," she says.

Part of what she brings to her sculptures is movement, putting "twists" into a piece. "That first stone carving was very straightforward. I was only learning."

In the years since, Cliodhna Cussen has done many stone-carved pieces, many of them large-scale public works. "In 1980 I did the Dún an Óir sculpture", a piece which commemorates the slaughter of Smerwick Harbour. It is a piece she was, and continues to be, proud of.

Another large scale-piece can be found in Broadford, commemorating the Gaelic poet Dáibhí O'Bruadair.

"I like Dáibhí O'Bruadair and still do. I would like to have met him. He stood out and said to people,

I try not to do work I don't feel something for. I won't go in for a commission if I don't feel I can add something, that what I am doing is not going to make it more interesting or exciting

told people: 'don't get into this rush of English, keep what you have as well as importing the new. Don't throw something away because else comes down the road.'"

The O'Bruadair sculpture for Broadford was so big she had to have an assistant—and a gantry in her back-garden. When it was being moved, it nearly went through the floor of the truck.

"It says a lot about people who they

Otherwise, she says, it is just journeyman work.

But even as Cliodhna was beginning to get to the heart of her work, another new life as a mother was opening up. She had met her husband, Pádraig O'Snodaigh, at a history tutors' party, a man who shared her interest in history and in Irish. The couple settled in Sandymount, long before it became a desirable place to live and they reared a family of six boys.

"Into the 1970s, we had six children under nine," she explains. But despite the calls on her time, she never put aside her creative work.

"I kept at it all the time. My advice to women with young children is: 'Don't give up. Keep tipping away. Have a studio and let them be part of it. Don't think you are going to do great work with small children around.'"

The children were reared as Gaeilge.

"It seemed the most sensible thing to do," she explains.

She also wrote a book of poems as Gaeilge. Irish is a beautiful language to write poetry in, she says. "It kind of slides in." She particularly loves the poetry of Nuala Rua Ni Dhornnail and that of her fellow-artist from Newcastle West, Michael Hartnett who was also inspired by O'Bruadair.

"Michael knew that I knew what he was doing. He was doing it in Gaeilge. I was doing it in English."

"I like good writing," she goes on. As a student, she recalls, she learnt off reams of poetry in English, Irish, French—and they remain with her.

And even today, one yardstick by which she judges a poem is whether it sticks with her or not. "If I can learn it off by heart, it says something about it," she muses. "I think it is to do with music, with the song. Words would come to an idea with a rhythm and if you learn the song, you learn the poems."

A lot of Irish poems, she points out, were sung.

Poetry and music continue to surround Cliodhna Cussen. Her husband, Pádraig, who runs his own publishing company, Coiscéim, for books in Irish, is one of this year's Michael Hartnett Poetry Award winners. And three of her sons, Colm, Ronán and Rossa are members of the band Kila which has its own distinctive traditional sound.

"They are fanatic about music," Cliodhna says, but attributes that less to the family than to the school they all attended.

Some of their songs, she admits, have "gotten into my head". And she is straightforward in her enthusiasm for their passion.

"Look at all that beautiful music. It is a real addition to Ireland," she says.

Another interest is politics although she is not party political. She would not, she explains, support any one political party in all its policies, although she is pleased that another son, Aengus, succeeded in being elected as a Sinn Féin TD in Dublin.

What fascinates her, rather, are the people in politics and what they do, "moving little things and people around".

In the end though, it is her own work, the making, the transforming, which continues to absorb her attention. "I always prepared to do without just to go on doing something that I like," she

explaining how she manages her time.

Other things that must be done, she reserves for the afternoon.

"Everything will conspire to make sure you don't do your art—telephone calls, meetings or so on." In between times, she keeps "little notes and drawings of things I would like to make, things I see, things I think should be a sculpture".

It was a habit she made good use of when her children were small. Since the family has grown, she and her husband have left Sandymount for Howth. There, within a stone's throw of the water, she works in a garden-studio a breath away from a field of cows.

"I love it here, the whole place. This is one of the beauty spots of Ireland," she says with satisfaction, her being responding to the mixed bag of sea, walks and history that is Howth. "It feels like another world."

Her satisfaction is all the more precious in that she initially didn't like Dublin. "I said if I could be out of Dublin for five months of the year, I could survive Dublin."

In a good year now, she says with a trace of a smile, she manages two months away, usually to the Dingle Gaeltacht where, for the past 20 years, they have had a hideaway.

"I think I am a culchie," she laughs.

She likes to travel but would never contemplate living abroad.

"I did emigrate once. I went to London but I only lasted three weeks," she says.

It is here, in Ireland, that she can best tap into the streams of music, poetry, history and language which inform her work. But she isn't too bothered if people don't always see or understand these cultural allusions in her work.

"They might see something else it too," she says.

Sculpture, she believes, has its own language. Not everybody "sees sculpture".

"Some people don't see shape