

A Conversation with the Artist

LUKE CLANCY

Luke Clancy – For many years, steel and glass have been signature materials of your work. When did your interest in using these substances begin?

Maud Cotter – As a younger woman I needed something like steel. There was a flintiness and an anger in me that only steel could satisfy. I was introduced to steel by John Burke. Steel to me was more like a piece of meat than a hard industrial material – you heated it and it expanded, it flaked when forged, and it groaned when you put it into cold water. It was very organic, like flesh really. I liked the range of usage and the range of softness and hardness that it offered. You could allow it to be heavy and fleshy, but you could then grind it or file it. There is this incredible range of handling in the material and I liked that. This is the approach I brought to glass. Glass has that sort of volatility, that live element of steel that I was connecting with - the liquidity, the hardness, but also the ability for it to be quite a mercurial medium and have an aptitude for change.

I assume there's a sort of affinity between the materials you use and the issues with which you want to deal, so I wonder to what extent, say, your interest in steel as a material leads you towards a certain territory?

Well, to be honest, materials are not my first consideration. Obviously the relationship between the materials and the concept is a complex one, but I would see myself as more conceptually driven. It was quite a surprise to me that I became involved in glass, but I was concerned with finding out some thing that glass, in particular, made possible. I've always tried to retain a degree of ruthlessness about my interests. The material serves my investigation into what my mind is projecting. The materials are very much a means to an end. In some instances I worked with what I had to hand, and I think that the current work has been characterised by a kind of opening, an involvement in a wider range of materials.

For one part of your work the topography of Iceland was very important. How did you become interested in that? It seems to be something that has influence right into the present work.

I started off connecting with the Atlantic edges of Ireland and the wildness of that terrain. I had a sense of an undisturbed presence there that hadn't really been tamed in the same way as, say, European landscapes which had an extensive history of habitation. I became more involved in land as a reservoir for human energy. I see energies in landscape, and that was what I was pursuing. I always saw work as a means through which you could pack energy into material. It came to a point where I felt it was the intricacy and narratives of Irish landscape that were holding me back. I felt completely overcomplicated by it. Now, I don't know whether I had worked myself into a state exploring every aspect of the particular goldfish bowl I was in, or whether in fact - and suspect it's the case - it was too rich for me. I needed something harder, something more confrontational. Then I discovered the Icelandic terrain.

You have said that the landscape there allowed you to conceptualise, in some way, the body. How did this come about?

I think eventually that is what happened when I confronted that landscape, having to find some sort of level of dialogue or co-existence. It eventually emerged through my sense of the body in the landscape. I began to identify with the volcanoes in terms of

their chambers or mouths, or the openings in the terrain that spat and gurgled and almost seemed to be saying something throwing these lacy films of calcium, and weaving these extraordinary latticed deposits. I was, in a way, identifying with these things in terms of skin, and I felt them so strongly that they induced a sense of connectedness with my body. It's not something I would take too seriously, I just think that's my sensory connection... But there is that kind of body connection intrinsic to my work, I suppose. How do you find what's true for you to do? How do you find it? My train of knowing is through what my body chooses, a form of psychic and physical recognition, and it is also guided by my need, but if it doesn't connect with me in a physical sense, then it's dead for me.

The approach you're describing involves some precognitive sense, something before an intellectual sense, and that's a bit...

You find it a bit dodgy? Well, I'm full of suspicion, of course. I mean, there's nothing ever set except that I am very interested in consciousness and partial consciousness. Being able to take that very, very tentative element and bring that into a physical state while retaining that very fine connection is what I have found hardest to do. The piece *Plateau* epitomises that part of my work. But for some reason being some sort of sculptural gymnast didn't really satisfy me. I wanted to get down into the underlayers and bring the small little inarticulate things out.

It seems to me that moving to London represented a shift in your practice towards something more linguistic. Because the city is mapped out through the literature of the Romantics, you are faced with a linguistic construction.

The reasons for my coming to London in 1991 were, to a degree, circumstantial and personal. I was in a transitional phase, around the time of the *My Tender Shell* touring show. I needed to move on in my work, and leaving Ireland was one way of doing that. I don't see London exclusively in the constructed or fabricated way that you suggest. I recognise that it has the imprint of centuries of conscious human activity on it, and I enjoy the scale and depth of that, but the city, for me is as much a seething growth as mapped, but I can accept that my work has become more overtly conceptual.

What I've been doing since I came to London is just inhabiting that territory more fully, and I think it's getting more refined and defined, and when I use this up, then I'm going to have to start again. Sometimes I draw myself into new conceptual terrains and then by creating an environment of drawings, I can make objects that inhabit that territory, if you like. So I always see new movements in my work as being different territories.

At what point did you move away from the drawings back towards sculpture? Because obviously you must reach a cut-off point where you feel, 'Well this is the space, now let's go in.'

I think it comes to a point where in some way I get lonely – I just really want to have things in my studio, like I just love the company of my sculptures. They're rather like creating people that are in your life, and at the same time I don't really mind when they leave. So, I began to make these pieces that were modelled with quarter-inch steel bar. I wanted an incredibly dense and compact form, and found myself combining glass with steel in a way that, in some instances, used the glass as a sort of bodily fluid. There's one piece called *Aboriginal Ice*, which was one I learned a lot from. I was very interested in getting a sense of urban liquid that wasn't sea or fresh water, that had no sense of a bodily fluid but had a sense of seeping out. I always feel that in cities, the water and the bad drainage create a feeling of slow seepage and this use of glass became a way of

articulating a sense or a feeling that I had.

Yeats has described the aesthetic source as being an 'Aboriginal Ice'. I always thought this a very sprightly way of describing it, this fresh spring, inspiring water. I didn't really feel that this existed for me any more. I felt it was more of a stagnant sea, an insipid seeping. So, it was one of those pieces where I felt myself connecting, in a different way. Connecting with nature, but also with what was very much an urban sensibility. I think through the work there had emerged this urban-ness. There were other pieces I did around that time. One was *Broken Vowel*, and again it used the notion of liquidity and the notion of mouth. Then there was *Ope*, a very simple little piece; it had a mouthpiece and it was sitting on a piece of glass that was pouring off the shelf. The piece was concerned with the idea of separation, where the liquid would never be part of that orifice. The relationship between mouth and liquid had become irretrievably severed. A distance, or a space began to come between elements in my work and separate them.

Sometimes the sculptures seem to explain why you are not going to continue working in a particular vein, whereas in fact they are the beginning of a particular way of working.

I think what's happening is that every piece you make is a reason not to make that again. Every niche you find is somewhere you could never be again, so there's a constant sense to me of lamenting – loss of self and exploring even more fractured parts of self. If you were to dwell in those happy terrains that you know and inhabit, then you'd stagnate, and so you've no choice. You've no choice but to leave everything.

Still, you don't at all model them as a 'healing'. They are just an identification of that gap. They don't help?

Oh, they do, yeah. That's about the only thing that does help – the actual making. I think that names something not previously named. Once you name something you can then move on.

You seem not simply to move on; you seem to become almost disgusted with something once you've named it.

Not disgusted, not disgusted, no, no. Sometimes you don't really know things you make until maybe a year later, so there isn't a fixed narrative. It's all moving together as a stream. I might work on four or five pieces together, so I'm carried very much in that stream. As I go on, I know parts of it but I never know the full thing until I come to the end, and I never really get there.

Do you think that your work has become more social since you moved to London?

I am very concerned with masses of people that have no voice. I'm concerned with the lack of access that human potential has despite the sophistication, technical sophistication of our era. I think there is a loss. There is a loss of innate connectedness with nature and with self that I'm very concerned about. In that sense, yes, it is political, because it is saying, 'Remember me, I'm part of your body and being. I'm a very fine sense, a very fine filament which tied you to the world.' It's about identity in that sense, and then about finding a way of being your integral self in the face of environmental pressure, political stress and all these things that corrode. In a way I think of my heavy sculptural work as warriors combating this, whereas now I see the new work as rather like a knife that gets under a layer and is just teasing out those layers of encrustation, of falseness, of materialism. They are little bits of things which can implant and quietly

change the way people see things.

There is a strong tradition in the Romantics of seeing London as offering a particularly vivid flashpoint in the advance of industrial society, of the subjugation of a different set of values. Have those kind of ideas had an impact on you?

I suppose that there was a rough model of that in my leaving Ireland. The Irish landscape fed my work and then adjusting to the intensity of the built environment in a place like London, I felt myself choked with the loss of being in contact with nature and the ease of people in Ireland. All the work I have done here has been about that separation. Of course the dialogue with Ireland never stops; I travel back and forth a lot.

Seeing London through Blake's eyes helped me to work here at first, until I built my own aesthetic territory. *Leaf II* is a piece influenced by a William Blake drawing titled *What is Man?*. The drawing depicts a worm on leaf – a piece of organic matter on a horizontal plane. I was attracted to such a fundamental question being asked with two elements in an uncomplicated formal relationship. It is a corner piece of galvanised steel grounded by the weight of a section of compressed copper pipes. The fact that it is pinned to the ground by weight is important. It's like this symbol of human physicality and presence fitted into a corner.

How would you characterise your interest in public art?

I am interested in it to the extent that connection is important to me; sensory connection to the built environment is very much part of my work at the moment. This concern has arisen from the general sense of displacement I felt on leaving Ireland and the crisis of meaning in my work, changing from landscape as a primary force to the city as fabric and its connection to the mind and body.

Richard Sennett talks about the visceral connection of place in his book *Flesh and Stone*, which helped me understand my relationship with Ireland. He goes on to discuss the natural lack of connection in a large city where one is say, travelling in the underground, moving and not committing to objects one sees or places one is passing through. This feeling of being processed by the city is interesting in relation to public art. Though it's not always the case, it poses a question. How do you build sensory connection in a city? What form should public art take? I feel the need to make a more intrinsic connection.

Once you understand that this context of weak commitment is the one in which you are working, then you must respond to that. You need to do something that connects very deeply with the fabric, environmentally and socially, so that it will resonate in that context and so that it will bind in some way, create strands which do give a sense of place and connection.

Artists invariably complain that their work is used as a cosmetic dressing. Sometimes you find that building interiors, never mind building exteriors, are very triumphal and self-fulfilled – lots of panelling and fixtures inside and an impenetrable skin outside – which can make it very difficult to make a mature aesthetic intervention. There is no door left open, only minor gaps.

How would you relate that notion that there is often nothing that an artist can really do if the architect works in a certain manner to your own experiences of public art commissions?

Well, in the case of the piece I made for the Green Building in Temple Bar, I was offered a

period of consultation with the architect. The piece would not have been as it is except for the fact that there was dialogue, which I found stimulating. Its level of intervention has become meshed into the fabric of the building. I like that feeling of the piece becoming very connected with the building. It is a door, a window and a letterbox as well as being a piece in itself.

So is that your preferred model for a public art project, integrating your work with somebody else's work?

That is certainly one avenue, but the extraordinary thing about the whole area is that there are more and more ways of making art in that context. There are temporary artworks, which can have more of an effect, become more of a mental event, because of their transitory nature. The absence of Rachel Whiteread's House is even more stimulating than when it was there! If you walk out the door, how energising is it to walk down your footpath, to stand and wait for a bus? How does your environment connect with you? How does it make you feel? I would like to think public art is about creating an environment that makes that kind of stimulating connection with your body and your mind. That in a way is what art is about, raising levels of perception, creating points of connection. Conceptually, anything I would have to offer would come from the studio work. Keeping that critical is very important to me.

In your work, there seems to be a dialogue about whether labour should be important. In the larger pieces, like Plateau, the labour is huge and it is almost an industrial process. In other pieces it is really compressed, heading toward invisibility.

Yes, *Plateau* was as strange in terms of labour because I was doing it myself, and it was so tedious and so slow that I felt the speed of the process was inhibiting the fluency of decision. When I got somebody to help me, I got it done faster. It needed that drive and fluency and energy to complete itself. Later, I was looking at *Plateau* and wondering, 'Why can't I just throw it at the wall? Why do I have to labour so hard? Why am I like an archaeologist?' I just thought that it was a personality compulsion. I wanted to try and break out of my own compulsive attraction to toil – it seems so primitive.

So I did *Cliff*. It's an angle-iron with a piece of glass just floating – you can see where the glass is connected. This piece is like *Leaf II* in ways. It is intestinal, it has a feeling of matter, you know, of human body. I called it *Cliff* because the sculptural relationships were only barely connecting enough to be a piece. The point of connection of the sculptural relationships was on the edge of nothingness, on the edge of not being a piece: so fine that it was reduced to the fundamental attraction of materials. I felt that if you reduced the relationships further to a finer point of focus then it would become stunningly real. If you could make elements just be together, they would acquire a resonance which, to me, is very much about what it's like to be living in the 20th century. In the recent work, it's like time has become more compressed, telescoped a little, whereas my earlier pieces once inhabited time in a lavish way. Now it's more lucid, less physical, and I think London has done that to me.

When it came to making Shroud, did you decide that you could achieve similar things without putting the physical elements together?

I found this quite peculiar. *Shroud* was very odd for me because it was about the air inside. This is the first time I used a cage but the piece is not about the cage. The object wasn't important to me, it was the fact that the air was held inside. I drew the cloud element in Australia and I couldn't throw it out. It hovered, I mean I put it up in my

studio and there would be this little cloud hovering around, so to speak. I couldn't get rid of it and eventually it was like a question mark. I began to work with the questions that this pursuit posed me. That is how the cage section became a chamber of air.

It is very interesting that a model of the body seems to work better if it's disintegrated. Do you ever look upon it as an anthropomorphic piece?

Yes, because it is a funerary piece. When I wrapped the lower section in finely woven copper mesh, I felt like I was wrapping a piece of a body that had died nameless and never achieved any certainty. While making the piece I was concerned that the cage didn't offer the lower section a protective covering. To maintain the vulnerability of the piece it was necessary to eternally separate the elements.

Would it be true to say that you've become more interested in what's happening in the space between the various components of the work, in opening up those spaces?

Yes, it's like everything else. I found myself going back and forward – it's like I move ahead two steps and move back one.

You have come all the way from using steel and iron to making intensely vulnerable pieces from more delicate materials. Do you see the models of social and physical organisation that you once saw in landscape offered now by these materials? Do we somehow reflect and inflect the materials we create and use?

Well, yes. Reflect and inflect make sense to me, almost like a process of breathing in the city physically, viscerally and intellectually. I think that intimacy with the structures around me was what deepened my connection with what was literally on the studio floor. I felt myself moving towards a molecular vision, rather than a physical form. The card pieces evolved from being in the company of this little piece of card I found in my studio. I used the PVC to cover my pieces to protect them from dust and loved the world that created. So my choices were informed by the intensity of the present. The wall-piece made for the Rubicon show was a metaphor for that process, body as a filter of the city. The chambers of air on either side of that piece were important to me. I found that piece very rewarding as I wanted to find something that encompassed the monumental and the molecular, form and filter. I titled it *In Absence* before made it in the hope that it would gesture to that sensitivity of being with materials in the present moment, but dispersed as well, almost dematerialised, dispersing the connection.

The *In Absence* show for me has been a resolution, an arrival into cohabitation with the structures we build around our bodies. I feel in contact with the fabric of things, not the narrative. I inhabit this new world now in a way that I used to inhabit landscape. I feel indivisible from it.

[interviewed in London, 1997]

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