

The Voice of the Beehive

LUKE CLANCY

For her 1998 Dublin show, Maud Cotter built a wall five metres wide by three metres high. It closed off nearly one-third of the Rubicon Gallery, a whitewashed space on the first floor of a Georgian building overlooking St Stephen's Green. Like all good walls, Cotter's seemed to invite destruction. In this case, however, the vulnerability of the slender vertical was not an illusion. Instead of being built of drystone or brick or plasterboard, this wall was made up of six panels of a honeycomb of steel and card, saturated with a microskin of white plaster. The touch of a finger, never mind the blow of a sledgehammer, would leave an unerasable imprint here. Even the soft light entering from the rear of the gallery passed through the structure, lending a faint glow to the mass of minute card triangles, as though what visitors looked on might be the head of an immense fibre-optic cable, a frenetic passageway rich with interlaced information, rather than an obstruction.

The work is very typical in the way it elaborates themes which have begun in recent times to animate the artist's work, themes related to Cotter's growing awareness of the interaction of social spaces – particularly those of the city – and the body. *In Absence*, the gleaming wall that lent its title to the exhibition, seems a kind of calling card for this dawning awareness. It offers a flickering image of a barrier, but also intermittently of what is hidden. The wall may separate the body from its desire, from free movement, but it also offers an image of the body, an organisation of cells so intense that it gives rise to something else, something of which each individual cell can, by definition, not begin to contemplate. It is a model of the body as city and of the city as body.

In her essay 'Bodies-Cities', Elizabeth Grosz talks about the body as 'organically / biologically / naturally incomplete; it is indeterminate, amorphous, a series of uncoordinated potentialities which require social triggering, ordering and long-term "administration" regulated in each culture and epoch by what Foucault has called "the microtechnologies of power".¹ How this administration functions, how it comes to constitute the body, and in turn the gendered body, relate not simply to culture and epoch, but to landscape and the social organization produced by the interaction of the body and landscape. The body as constituted in terms of the city is not the same one constituted in other environments, and it is this realization that has opened up a new area in Maud Cotter's mercurial practice.

For a large part of the 1990s, Cotter lived and worked in London. While the decision to leave Ireland was informed by several factors, the artist herself always sees the move in terms of what it has meant for her work. In London, Cotter worked at Delfina Studios, a multiple studio space that housed a large community of artists, and the place at which the accompanying interviews were conducted. Those who worked there ate together in a large refectory, a well ordered space that gave the whole building a focused sense of purpose.

If inside the studio had the serious calm of a workshop, outside in the small streets the atmosphere was akin to a busy hospital. Huge lengths of Bermondsey Street were lined with hoardings, pedestrians were guided into new, narrower routes by temporary railings and plastic tape. All around, the tin signs of contractors apologised for various inconveniences. Roads throughout the neighbourhood had been split and gutted, coils of fibre-optic cable lay waiting beside them, and there was the undeniable sense that the city was undergoing surgery of the most invasive kind. Traditional vessels, familiar flows could be sacrificed without fear; the new capillaries would without doubt out

perform the old, leave no room for nostalgia.

In her studio, Cotter had been working on a wall-mounted piece. Two elongated forms in a sour, buttery colour were fixed to the studio wall about four feet from the ground. They might have been a pair of lungs. They were at least honeycombed with passages through which air might move, but they were now beyond use, at least for moving air.

The objects were, in fact, two small loaves of bread Cotter had take from the canteen and drenched in wax. Occasionally, Cotter's work is every bit as simple as that. At one time the artist had asked herself why her sculptures had to be so much work, why they had to involve the accrual of so much weighty matter over so many months. She says that this idea came into focus during the making of *Plateau* in 1994. The piece involved working with lengths of steel held together with bold, graphic welds, which came to form a bubbly, almost molten surface. These tiny details, moving like a swarm over the entire object fostered a sense that immense forces were in the process of rupturing the fabric of the piece. But alongside this sensation or pressure of a tectonic order, *Plateau* also had a subtler, almost labial identity. Somewhere between these two senses of enfolding, the work sat heavily, squatting its space.

Successful in many ways, the work nevertheless struck a failure of economy. The idea of cells, of repetition, of structures that arrive and exist through aggregation of minute orchestrated parts is central to many strands of the artist's work, but after *Plateau*, Cotter began exploring alternative ways of representing these ideas. She sought alternatives that might offer similar visual possibilities to the heavyweight and more traditional media with which she had previously worked but which would also allow her to close the enormous gaps that could open up between the artist and the completed work.

In her work, Cotter has often chosen to use materials such as steel and glass which might allow her to represent fluids, but with which struggle the battle to dominate the material must always mark the final work. In *The Heart Asks Pleasure*, for example, Cotter was able to make a foil of silver take on the appearance of a flowing, semeniferous substance.² But this kind of work must always operate through deception. The deception, the business of hiding one material behind the physicality of another, is, of course, near the heart of representation of all image-making. It can happen, nonetheless, that this game begins to become wearing, that the pleasure begins to wain.

Maud Cotter is exceptionally sensitive to the moment when this transformation takes place, to the spot when, for some reason connected with a topology we cannot readily perceive, a river seems to slow. Cotter ruthlessly finds the end of a body of work, and quietly slips into another, apparently untroubled with what this means in some grander picture of her art.

The artist who produced *Tempered* (1991) a floor-standing frame of sinuous dark steel from which was suspended a Calder-esque crescent-shaped mobile, alarazin-coloured – ought to be quiet different from the one responsible for the two incarnations of *From Mouth to Air*, two pieces in which jaundiced wax is fixed to the wall, packed in a PVC wrapper. Just as the Cotter who emerged from the Crawford School of Art in 1978 and began exploring the medium of stained-glass (and was even identified by Nicola Gordon Bowe as a direct descendant of Evie Hone) is a very different artist from the one who in 1995 produced works such as the calamious shrug of *Cliff*, these days there is another Cotter.

If there are links to be established between all these people, they are rarely enough to

do with the physical presence of the sculptural objects. If when writing for the catalogue for Cotter's 1991 touring show, *My Tender Shell*, Nicola Gordon Brown could refer to continued evidence of the artist's 'deep fascination with the ever-fluctuating Life Force, which governs all creative impulse...', it is hard to be so unequivocal now.³ For as the work moves through its spectrum of forms, it no longer seems possible that there is anything so unified, so monotonous as a single force which animates the work, unless of course that force is a force of transformation, of mutation, of disruption.

There is, of course, more than a journey towards more rapid sculptural expression behind Cotter's evolving forms.

Earlier in her career, Cotter's journey to Iceland had powerful effects on her work. She tends to explain the move as a desire to find a landscape that was somehow less worked over, needed less excavation, less disentanglement from the texts that had been written over it. Or as the poet John Montague wrote:

Maud Cotter felt compelled to scrape her psyche clear by confronting the nude interior of Iceland, where the forces that make the earth still tremble the air, distort, shape and thrust the crust of the emerging earth. It is this journey into an always shifting interior, this persistent pagan restlessness mixing sky and earth, which has inspired her latest work, and will continue to underlie it, the primordial disputing our more settled realm, bubbling chaos against the calmer legacy of a centre of culture like Chartres.⁴

Could those kinds of attitudes, those kinds of desires, ever be reconciled with working in an urban environment, in a place where the sense of an unwritten world should be absent? The answer has to do with how closely you look. The pilgrimage is always a subjective journey. The centre of belief is pretty much where you conceive it to be. So if it is simply possible to meet materials with this idea in mind, anything may be possible.

If one sculptor may find the narrative flattened into isthmus rock conducive, another may find that man-made materials might have an unexpected story to tell. It may seem an extravagant claim, but Cotter is the only artist I can think of who has this particular relationship to her material. Others sculptors may like to call in the psychic energy of ancient limestone when dealing with the urban landscape, but Cotter has travelled down a path which sees her uncovering the same energies in synthetic material. It is as though as fossils of ancient existence might crop up in stone, so the spoor of our own may show up in the raw materials we invent. Could the light that passes through a sheet of PVC be so different to that entering Chartres cathedral through the rose window? Something with which we are faced daily may also be, paradoxically, an unexplored place, an untouched set of ideas. The only way to find out is to dismiss familiar values and experiment. This dismissal is a constant feature in Cotter's work.

Even so, the artist's journey has, interestingly and productively, not been a journey towards ever greater notions of essence, or purity and rare refinement. Quite the opposite in fact. Cotter maintains a powerful interest in landscape, but her work has more and more begun to frame landscape in terms of the forces that police our perception of it. Her work has, for many years, explored landscape as both a metaphor for and an extension of the body. What she has achieved recently, however, is to switch her attention away from the depopulated landscapes of Ireland or Iceland towards the urban environment.

Cotter is an uncommon artist in that she has achieved a type of celebration of the urban

environment that is neither utopian nor sentimental nor ironic. By examining plastic or polymers, she seems able to give the sort of reading a geologist might with a core sample. What might only be visible in the layers of compressed dust, dirt and stone, Cotter has begun to find in substances such as corrugated paper. The artist sees this development as contiguous with work that she had previously made, work in which she began to feel out a connection between the body and landscape. As she says in the accompanying interview: '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...'

The difference in her work is that now, rather than seeking out a space in which to recreate or to recover a broken relationship with the landscape, Cotter is uncovering a new one. It is making visible, in a way that is palpably optimistic, that a sense of alienation is not a pre-given in city life. If, as Cotter's work now seems to suggest, there are very real connections between the body and the urban landscape and the minutiae of the urban landscape, then it may be possible to make art about urban experience that moves beyond the ironic buckshot to what amounts to a spiritual relationship with the technological environment. The work that achieves this is quiet and still, but undeniably anxious, tightly structured but with a sense of organic, stochastic development rather than of rigid planning.

Italian manufactured tri-wall card appeared several times in the work in Cotter's recent Rubicon show, most grandly in *In Absence* – the artist's own building site project – but also notably in a far smaller, ostensibly more modest form in *Mundus*, a low, tapered septagon, comprised of layer upon layer of corrugated cardboard punctured at its apex by a small ocular opening, calling to mind the Pantheon, the great navel of Hadrian's Rome. Cotter makes reference to the 'hell hole' traditionally dug to mark the beginning of a Roman city. But where a mundus in ancient Rome may have, according to Richard Sennett,⁵ been the point where the Romans thought the city was connected to the gods interred in the earth and the gods of light in the sky, Cotter's *Mundus* always seems to undermine any sense of a power superior to that expressed in the honeycomb of little spaces that the card creates. This mundus exists because of the life that forms around it, rather than the other way around.

In *The Eye of the City*, Cotter moves into the territory of museums, methods of investigation and categorisation. Akin to many of the works in Cotter's Rubicon show, the piece uses small cells of card as its basic unit, again multiplying to reach a sort of critical mass. Small square sections of thin, sharply cut corrugated card are layered into a tall, slender stack, held together by synthetic microcrystalline wax. The miniature building is then placed inside a specially cast bell jar, as though it were a specimen of a hive created by a swarm of high-modernist bees. The suggestion of bees (which the artist prefers not to emphasise) helps to underline a sense that the piece is as much a rich set of relationships, a coded integration of individuals, a network, as it is a stand-alone structure. Scale in the piece always seems under stress, as the elements that support integrity struggled with those that point to the individuality of each tiny unit. All of this is presented, through the bell jar, as a scientific specimen, a finished judgement about what is the master form of this object. But the work constantly slips away from offering even the most elliptical of facts, providing if anything a darkly humorous homily on the crumbling architectures of knowledge, a reading that is helped by the disarmingly miniaturised scale of the work.

One Way of Containing Air performs a similar feat of disorientation. The human-scaled sculpture stands on the floor, but suggests a structure that should not be contained by the gallery instead it seems as though the work itself might, somewhere at the core of its

intense networked structured, play home to a hundred galleries. One again, the structure is built of corrugated card, but here the three-dimensionality of the piece encourages an even more focussed notion of a model of social space, of physical integration. But once more, this is balanced with a sense of discrete cells finally reaching a potential. Like an artist's body of work in which pieces gradually move together, not always at the same speed or in the same direction, but always for the same reason. Works are finding each other constantly, until they achieve a critical mass and they begin to mean, to have the power to say things together that were always just beyond their grasp when they stood alone. And though this is a cruder statement of what is at stake than one might ever find in the work, this does seem to be the territory that Maud Cotter has begun to explore.

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Footnotes

- 1 Elizabeth Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities', *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton Architectural Press, 1992)
- 2 In the case of *The Heart Asks Pleasure*, the deception was effective. The suggestion that the flowing shape into which the silver had been worked was a matter of gravity worked rather too well. The work was destroyed when, following an exhibition in Europe, the silver leaf was rolled up and packed alongside the rigid elements of the work.
- 3 *Maud Cotter – My Tender Shell*, essay by Nicola Gordon Bowe, intro by John Montague (Gandon Editions, 1991)
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone* (WW Norton, New York, 1994)

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