

‘How do you know?’

Alice Maher

In conversation with Emily Mark FitzGerald, 7 June 2007

EMILY MARK FITZGERALD *You might start by telling me about the process you underwent with the Snail Chronicles, as they’re quite unusual?*

ALICE MAHER That was a collaboration with a number of snails! I was interested in the snail at the time for many different reasons—I was actually using snail shells to make sculpture. I often work in two and three dimensions simultaneously, and one feeds the other. Because I had the snails around I began to look at the way they were moving. They leave this trail after them that is like a drawn or painted line. A snail, or an animal: every trail they leave is perfect, they never make a bad mark like a human can. We’re the only people who make judgements about our line, standing back and rubbing it out and so on. I started feeding them with vegetable dyes so the trails they left would have colours.

How did you know that would work, feeding them the dye?

I didn’t! Sometimes I would sit them in it and they would trail off. You have to leave them alone because they only really come out at night; I would have a whole bunch of them in the studio in a cardboard box and cover the box up nice and tight so they would do all of their drawing, as it were, at night. They did it on this kind of transparent photographic paper—if you put them on actual paper they eat it because it’s organic. So they did their drawings on this special paper, and I took the drawings to Stoney Road Press who made an image of them and then we chose what colours to use. By using a number of plates I made images to accompany the snail trails.

Are the colours of the prints reflective of the actual snail trails?

Yes, they are... they’re fairly organic colours. You wouldn’t know to look at it, that it was a snail, that big swirl of a nebula. I always find that the smallest thing, a small insect, a tiny thing—the kind of marks they make reflect the gigantesse of the cosmos. So that swirl looks like a star system. The smallest thing in the universe reflects the largest. That’s a subject in my work I’ve often had an interest in—from the gigantic to the minuscule. I’m not really an in-between kind of person. Something like a snail, in all its tininess, its perfect world with its home and its soft body fitting perfectly inside. It reflects a universe.

Stoney Road helped me put them together as images. I did an installation at the Green on Red Gallery last year called *Rood*; because of the way snails crawl up the windows I wanted to use their trails on the window and diffuse the light coming in. So the Stoney Road Press made prints for me of the snail trails, and I had them printed onto

a type of acetate that went straight onto the window. They had this gleam to them, changing the atmosphere in the gallery into a kind of undergrowth place; their drawings from a distance could look like an expressionist painting, from someone like de Kooning.

Snails are amazing animals, they're hermaphrodites. I didn't know that before... this so often happens to me, once I start working on or studying something I find out more and more about it that makes it richer and richer. They're hermaphrodites but they can't activate their sexuality unless they meet another hermaphrodite, they can't just mate themselves. They do have to meet another snail!

They still need relationships, even though they're self-contained...

I've read a lot since then about snails by philosophers like Bachelard and other theorists, what the snail means to the shell, the relationship of the house to the body...

It's evocative when you look at the spiral of a snail shell, as you go into microscopic detail you see the same kinds of natural forms that you see in the visible world replicated in the invisible world.

Every single snail shell in the universe is different. That's hard to get your mind around, not one of those marks is the same. It is quite astonishing that nature can recreate itself as different, all the time different. What interests me about the snails is their viscerality, this soft inner body—this sexual and inner core, their body when it comes out, which fits so perfectly into its shell. I'm interested in that notion of inner and outer body, which you might see reflected as well in the collar of hearts (*Collar*, 2003), trying to do it another way. But the snail has all of that in itself—and pattern, and armour, all those things I'm interested in. It's the perfect being, it lives and is all within itself, not outside itself, it's 'full of itself' in the best sense.

Your work seems less interested in the rhetorical, formal aspects of art-making and more focused on engaging the poetic. Since you work across such diverse media, I was wondering how you find that process of shifting across one or the other.

I love it. It has a multifarious effect on me. I find it very fruitful to go from glass to leaves to etching, drawing, photography and back: to put a subject through a number of materials as a way of solving an idea. I really like to do that, and I've always printed actually, and etched and made drawings. I've worked with people from many different disciplines, from refrigeration experts when I made the ice-bed [*Mnemosyne*, 2002], to engineers, bee-keepers, glass-blowers. I always find interesting the interlocking of craft and art, science and art, engineering and art—it's a very fruitful place, and this engagement goes both ways. The art world can be like a closed, non-porous world where nothing gets in except other art expertise. This way of working keeps me interested in finding out new things.

The image of the ice bed was very striking for me, and its title Mnemosyne—the Greek goddess of memory. Much of your work deals with issues of memory.

Yes, ironically we've totally forgotten the Greek goddess of memory! Memory is a porous thing—we think that memory is a fact but of course it isn't. Lots of memories are either made up or associated with collective ideas. They could be suggested memories—two people never remember the same events. Even after today we won't remember this meeting exactly the same as each other. It is an eternally fascinating subject.

So many today are obsessed by the idea of memory, and the encapsulation of memory within objects. There has always been the tradition of the souvenir, a possession which reminded you of an experience or event. Now the process of memory is underlined with anxiety, while it has simultaneously become more institutionalised. We try to manage our memories today, even from a technical or administrative point of view. How do we manipulate things so they continue to have meaning for us? We begin to create collections out of what was once personal, individual and ephemeral gestures of memory. So memories move from being individual or interior to institutional.

Even artworks become like that. This came up in the last number of months with me in terms of one of my pieces called the *Berry Dress*, in the collection of the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The *Berry Dress* needed conservation work, so I had a number of conversations with them about how to do that. It's an extremely delicate piece, and when I made it I had no notion of it living beyond that time, I didn't think I was making it for a future as a collected object. The question came up as to whether I'd be willing to make another *Berry Dress*, and make it so it would last. I had to have a good debate about that. But of course it's completely different to make a *Berry Dress* in 2007 than it was to make it in 1994; the context has changed completely. The country has changed, I have changed; the significance of a child's dress and what it was. To make the piece in a particular time is very important, and I don't think you can repeat that. You can copy it, but then it can only ever be said to be a copy, it can't be the *Berry Dress*. Things live in their time, for their time. There can be a documentation of that but you can't make them again.

I came up against this again in the last couple of weeks... I was in Dublin and had a whole new set of pencil drawings for a new show that I'm doing. I got into a taxi at Heuston Station to get them to the RHA, and when I got out of the taxi I left them behind. These drawings disappeared, and I was left... I couldn't remember the taxi driver, I couldn't remember anything, nothing—I couldn't even remember the drawings! When I sat down that evening and tried to remember what they were I could not remember one single image, it was amazing. By pure luck I got them back, from the wonderful taxi driver. It really showed me that once they're made, they're made, it's not possible to remake them. That's the difference with print, in that you can actually remake something from a plate.

Of course that's also one of the reasons why print has often been devalued as an artistic form, because of this idea they can be reproduced, they don't have the same aura as the original object.

Which can be lost in a taxi!

You'll never escape that entirely with prints, but they are also an interesting complement to the other works artists do. It may not be their primary mode of practice, but as you say they can be a way of working out ideas, another form of expression.

I think so. It was the only way to solve this problem of how I was going to work with the snails, to pull together my drawing with their drawing. Print was the exact medium for that.

You seem to welcome the technological challenges that accompany much of your work.

I have no problem with different technologies or media, I'm always interested in new methods that come up. I don't seek it out, however. I think it comes up within the work itself. It's usually down to human contact, another person who says, 'I know someone down the road who can help you with that'... and off I go!

Back to this idea you were speaking about, the original and the conservation problem you were facing. Do you think this impacts the way you are producing work now? Do you have an eye cocked towards the future?

It would definitely have an impact, I'm conscious of it. When I was younger I just belt-ed ahead... your vision is to the future. You're just concentrated on getting the work made, it's not about the life of the work and how it will live beyond you. As you get older and your work becomes a commodity or collectible, people ask you these questions.

I would be conscious of it but I would try not to let it influence choices of material or what I might do. It seems everything I do involves some kind of fragility and I can't seem to help that! Even the new drawings I'm doing at the moment, they're charcoal drawings and the surface of them is so fragile they could just fall apart. That's part and parcel of what I do and I've accepted that now.

You are very keyed in to the lineage of the images you select, whether it's the Victorian painting referenced by Mnemosyne, or this new work with silhouettes, as a historical form.

I believe there are multiple veins going in to the work and coming out of it as well. I don't think there's such a thing as an isolated object, there are multiple meanings and influences. Certainly the history of image-making and object-making over the centuries is of great interest to me, and I think that's a porous history as well. Whoever wrote it down, that's how we read it. But they keep finding out things from the past which are astonishing, things we know now we didn't ten years ago.

And the canon changes of course, especially nowadays. There's so much interest in various aspects of cultural production that might not have been seen as important in the past, now people are doing college courses in Madonna and crisp packets and all sorts of things! Everything's elevated for our attention as opposed to an elite group of objects. When I saw the silhouettes that's what I began to think of... they reminded me of Kara Walker's exploration of the same form. It's very different from what you're doing, but it's a very powerful art.

You can't help but acknowledge her... hers are cut-outs, which was a particular practice as well. Her work is amazing, the subject matter it explores in terms of African-American history and imagery. I would be coming at it from the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish notion of the portrait, and inspired as well by a wonderful collection of silhouettes I came across in Malahide Castle, one of these hidden gems of Ireland. The silhouettes led to these huge black and white drawings I'm doing now in which I actually invert the silhouette, so the white space becomes the object. The silhouette and the black are on the outside. Everything feeds into each other... You are always looking to the past, to the future, to your own past and art history, and someone you met in the street... I'm influenced by what I hear, what I see, every-day activity, what passes me by.

The silhouette has been attractive particularly to women artists; it's interesting as well that the act of tracing someone's image was often thought to have a feminine origin. The Greek myth that refers to the first image making has to do with a woman tracing the profile of her lover on the wall of a cave, in the lamplight, in order to remember him after his departure.

Who knows, maybe it came from that... everything has its origin and end in myth as well. Myths are continually recreating and rewriting themselves. They all seem to come back to the same myth in the end. Why women would be attracted to silhouette in particular, I have no idea, except that shadows and shade are a particular interest to me. It's like a second world. In general I would be attracted to 'vernacular' subjects as it were, the 'despised' and the things that have been looked down on or overlooked.

Can you tell me about the three-dimensional piece you were working on with Stoney Road?

It was David or James who mentioned it to me... they're great, at times they just ask you a little question or put a thought in your head that you hadn't considered before. That's good management in a certain way, because they're giving you ideas about how you could develop your work, and they'll support it. They said to me one day, 'Would you think of making a sculptural work related to your set of prints you did with us, the *Snail Chronicles*?' They suggested this image, of the little sick boy with the thorn bush growing out of his bed. They planted that seed of idea in my head, so off I went, and I did indeed make a little limited edition sculpture. I made a wax model and showed them and they really liked it, so we had it cast in bronze and silver-plated. It has a silver surface, quite precious looking. One thing leads to another, you see what I mean? Like when a disease takes off... viral! It seems like a bad word but it's a good word in terms of ideas. There's a viral quality when I work with different people and different media, and one thing leads to another.

Another strand prevalent in your work is that of repetition... for Freud and others it's such a strong symptom of disturbance, not necessarily a traumatic disturbance, but an expression resulting from displacement.

That's exactly how I would be thinking. I'm more interested for instance in the Middle Ages than the Renaissance—in the anti-ideal. In my piece the *Daughters of Uranus* there's 15 figures, all made from the same mould—the work is related to birth from water, the birth of Venus. When you look at the painting by Botticelli it's the ideal feminine beauty rising out of the waves, she's young and beautiful. So if you make multiples of her you're immediately breaking up that myth of the ideal beauty. Multiplicity is the turning of the myth of ideal on its head. I like to break up the idea of the great artwork, the singular artwork.

At one point one of the heads from *Daughters of Uranus* was stolen; a couple of days later it was found in the local marketplace being used as a centrepiece display in a vegetable stall! It looks like a big pumpkin, and of course I never thought of this—the pumpkin colour—but I was delighted. The organisers got the head back but no one got into any trouble or anything. There's a sense of humour in the work as well, which is not to be forgotten. It's subversive but there are little digs going on all the time, using humour to upend things.

You don't seem interested in presenting the authoritative image, do you?

No, no... that would be part of the whole thing about multiples, and the materials as well. That way it doesn't become 'your oeuvre'. It's not being pinned down... you're following many different paths, which mirrors the way people think! People think in multiples and in layers. Even while they're talking they're planning something else.

Individual uniqueness is probably overstated in one's own mind, and behaviours as well. Seen externally so much of human behaviour on a global scale boils down to repetition.

It's there in the mythology of the human race, it's repeated over and over in children's stories and film. It's not in the past, it's now and in the future. I think porous is a nice word for it—the past, present and future—this porous notion that your memory could be a memory of the future. How do you know?