

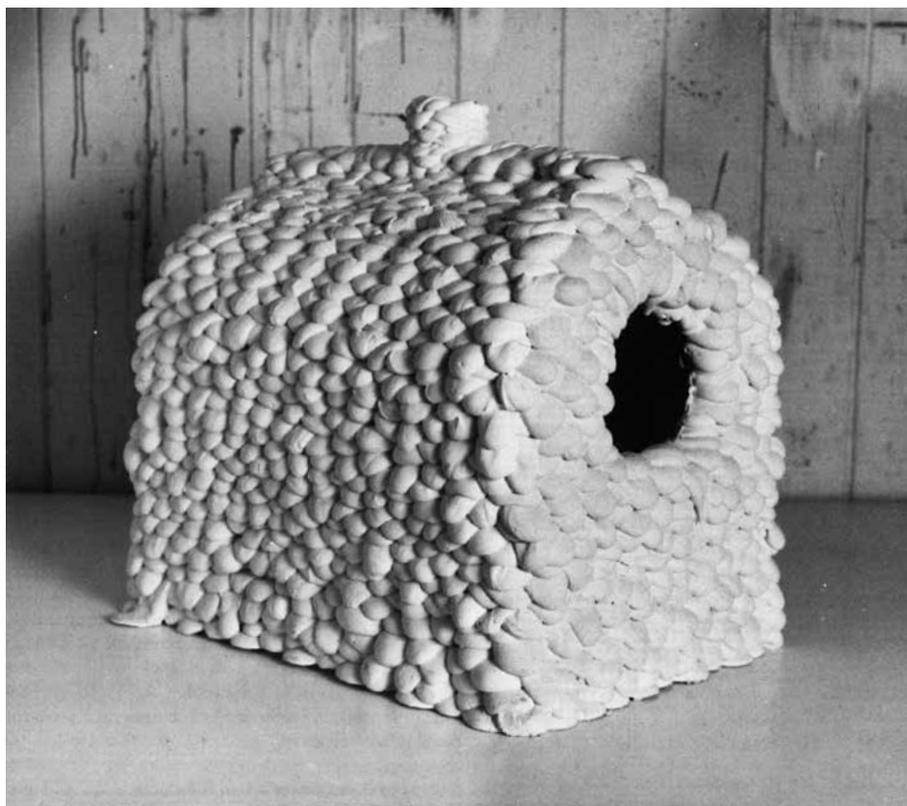
– to the Pantheon, for example – lend resonance, but, as with much of O’Connell’s work, it can be read, according to taste, as narrow, literal and derivative, or as intellectual, allusive and ideologically aware.

Some critics, particularly with reference to the *Hinterland* exhibition (Orchard Gallery, Derry, 1996) see O’Connell’s work as being preoccupied with notions of identity, power, culture and change. But this is surely too heavy a weight to place on an artist whose reactions to place, be it London, Belfast, Rome, or the New York of *Hinterland*, are primarily formal, in regard to her interest in shape and mark-making. It is an imagined geography, in the sense that ‘place’ seems more a stimulation for a somewhat po-faced, formal play, as opposed to any serious exploration of locale. In some ways O’Connell is close to sculptors such as Maud Cotter (in her mixed-media work) or early Finola Jones (qqv) (in work like *Eyrie Builds*, 1991).

The New York work, as in the above-mentioned *Hinterland*, shifts into a different register, being reminiscent of young, ‘scavenger’ New British sculptors, like Bill Woodrow or Julian Opie (see for example her *Reservoir*, 1995, which is seven casts of water containers, covered with wax patination, laid out in a row and connected by funnels to rubber hoses, or *Appalachian Spring*, 1996) as well as of ‘Land’ sculptors like Richard Long (see O’Connell’s *Point of Observation*, 1995, which is a domed structure in plaster, covered with rust, sitting upon a mound of large stones). BRIAN MCAVERA

226. Deirdre O’Connell, *Edifice I*, 1989, plaster, from *Deirdre O’Connell: Insula peninsula* (Belfast, 1990)

SELECTED READING Joan Fowler, Extracts from interviews with Deirdre O’Connell in *Deirdre O’Connell: insula peninsula*, ACNI exh. cat., Belfast, 1990; Bernard McKenna, ‘Hinterland’ in *Hinterland*, exh. cat., Orchard Gallery, Derry, 1996.



O’CONNELL, EILÍS (b. 1953). O’Connell’s *Space Emptied Out* (1994) encapsulated several of her sculptural concerns. Consisting of three large metal cone or funnel shapes, six metres high, it employs stainless steel, cor-ten steel and bronze to evoke the forms of both nature and the manufactured world, past and present: the swelling shapes of the gourds the artist has always collected and admired are rendered on a large scale; farming vessels and equipment; artisanal basketwork; ancient monuments; and the chimneys and buildings of heavy industry. Her careful use of materials suggests a complex interaction between handicraft and industrial processes, especially in the woven stainless steel fibres, where traditional female and male forms of labour are elided, their separation challenged. This work was commissioned by the Cass Sculpture Foundation at Goodwood, Sussex, and is one of a number of outdoor sculptures, and commissions, both public and private, that O’Connell has received and produced throughout her career.

Eilís O’Connell was born in Derry, but lived as a child in rural County Donegal, and influences of this upbringing stayed with her in later life. At the age of ten her family moved to Cork, and between 1970 and 1977 she attended the Crawford School of Art there, including a year spent at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston (1974/75). In Cork she was taught by John Burke, who had studied at St Martins College of Art and Design in London and who had been inspired by the work and teaching of Anthony Caro. It was Burke who introduced O’Connell to working with steel. While in the United States she became aware of the work of David Smith. The new possibilities offered to sculpture by industrial materials and by found and fabricated metal forms were highly significant in the development of her work.

In early pieces, steel is folded, assembled and painted to make earth-bound forms (*Untitled*, 1972), or combined with other materials, such as slate in columns (*Slate Wedge*, 1980). At the Paris Biennale in 1982, O’Connell showed an installation that included tent-like structures in hand-made paper (*Turfing it down to its slender quarry*, 1982), turning to paper experiments because she found herself without her steel work equipment. In 1985 she was selected for the São Paulo Bienal, where she exhibited small, fetishistic, wall-based sculptures made of paper and steel (*Inuit Bay*, 1985; *Zuni Waters*, 1985). But the artist was also involved in large-scale works: an untitled painted steel sculpture for the Brown Boveri engineering company factory in Tallaght, Dublin (1979); and *The Wind Column* (1982), a commission from Derry City Council to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the first solo transatlantic flight of Amelia Earhart in 1932. In 1983 O’Connell received a Fellowship from ACNI to study in Rome, and in 1986 her work was shown at DHG in the solo exhibition *Steel Quarry*. Following a two-year residency at the Delfina Studios in London, she was permanently based there until 2001, when she returned to live in Ireland.

In the late 1980s, ACI and Kinsale Urban District Council commissioned O’Connell to produce an outdoor public sculpture for the fishing town of Kinsale. The result, *The Great Wall of Kinsale*, 1988 [227], constructed of cor-ten steel and teak and measuring 5.5 × 12.2 × 54.8 metres, was at the time the largest public sculpture in Ireland or Britain. Incorporating areas in



which to shelter under tent-like steel forms, reminiscent of giant opened books, and a winding low wall that could be used as seating, O'Connell's work had a public function, but had a chequered afterlife. Kinsale UDC decided to paint the steel, which was not weathering well, and to add ornamental ponds and another wall to its site. O'Connell repeated the process of collaborating with architects and engineers in later projects, most notably the creation of *Pero's Bridge*, a 54-metre bascule bridge sited in St Augustine's Reach, Bristol Harbour, made in conjunction with Ove Arup engineers and opened in 1999. This pedestrian draw-bridge, with its reference to an eighteenth-century Caribbean slave brought to Bristol, and its large steel conical shapes, earning it the nickname the 'Horned Bridge', was a more successful example of a public artwork than *The Great Wall of Kinsale*.

Other public works O'Connell made in the 1990s tended to be less interactive, although they sometimes shared the same industrial and waterside locations. They particularly referred to the forms of industrial architecture, something that has always intrigued and inspired her. *Secret Station* (1992), commissioned by the Cardiff Bay Art Trust for the eastern entrance to Cardiff Bay in Wales, takes the form of two bronze cones about ten metres high, lit up at night by fibre optic lights and periodically emitting steam. In an interview, the artist described the inspiration for this work: 'I saw an old painting of Cardiff, and the bay was alive with steam ships. They swarmed around like insects, like living things in the waters puffing steam. Then they became redundant, and the bay became dilapidated, ignored' (Ruane, p. 13).

The image of industrial ruin evoked in this statement also resonates with O'Connell's interest in archaeology. She recalls the impact on her in childhood of the Grianán of Aileach, a sixth- or seventh-century ring fort located on a hilltop in County Donegal. In *Vowel of Earth Dreaming its Root* [228], sited at Marsh Wall on the Isle of Dogs, London, and commissioned by the London Docklands Development Corporation, Kilkenny limestone is used to evoke something ancient, worn by the elements, in a modern setting. As in *Secret Station*, whose title derives from the poem 'The Diviner', *Vowel of Earth Dreaming its Root* also quotes from the poetry of Seamus Heaney (*Kinship*, 1975). The archaeological metaphor is also present in works like *From a Place no Longer Imagined* (1995, HL), with its reference to standing stones made ultra modern, and in the imagery of fossilized baskets in O'Connell's woven steel cable sculptures (*Deep Skirt*, 1994; *Sharp/Back*, 1997).

In several of these woven steel sculptures, O'Connell appears to play with scale, creating large objects which look as if they have been folded and twisted by hand, such as *Unfold* (2002), sent by the Cass Sculpture Foundation to the Venice Biennale that year. *Carapace* (1999) exists as a large steel sculpture, 250 × 230 × 230 cm, but also as a small maquette (1998, 19 × 21 × 19 cm), where its shell-like qualities are much more apparent and its woven steel cable becomes intricate and delicate. The tactile nature of these works points to the artist's interest in objects themselves, in textures and materials, and to her practice of drawing as a complement to her sculpture practice. As she

227. Eilís O'Connell, *The Great Wall of Kinsale*, 1988, Corten steel, teak, Kinsale, Co. Cork

claimed in the 1997 interview: 'I do my thinking through drawing, and through physically interacting with the materials' (Ruane, p. 15).

Towards the end of the 1990s, O'Connell's work was shown in a series of exhibitions in Britain: in a retrospective at the Arnolfini, Bristol (1999); at Roche Court, Wiltshire (1999); at Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall (2000); and Southampton City Art Gallery (2000). In 1998 she was awarded the Royal Society of Arts Award. In 2001, however, the artist returned to Ireland, where she set up a studio north-west of Cork. While she has continued to produce public works over the last decade or so (such as *Ever Changing*, 2005, in Grainger Town, Newcastle upon Tyne, and commissions for Lismore Castle in Waterford), her work has also developed new themes and taken up new materials. For the series *Biomorphia 1-8* (2008), for the Cass Sculpture Foundation, O'Connell had the opportunity to work with carbon fibre and epoxy resin, materials similar to those used in boat-building, to create large-scale organic forms, some of whose titles referred explicitly to natural shapes and objects (*Wingblade*, 2009; *Stem*, 2009). Her interest in the ways in which natural, found objects were formed was also apparent in the RHA exhibition *Haptic* (2011), where a series of works with the title *Found/Given* showed natural growths and formations encased in clear resin: a piece of red coral, a bird's nest, a vulture's

feather. Instead of imitating the forms of nature, the artist presents them as they are: casting a huge gunnera leaf in plaster and fibreglass (*Reverse Gunnera*). Her drawings and sculptures of this period have focused on the molecular make-up of found natural objects seen under a microscope.

O'Connell is a member of the RHA and of Aosdána, and a former member of ACL. Her works are held in public and private collections in Ireland, the UK and internationally, including IMMA; NSPC, Limerick; TCD; Ferens Art Gallery, Hull; Sandviken Konsthallen, Sweden; and Otso Gallery, Espoo, Finland. JON WOOD

SELECTED READING Conor Joyce, 'Steel Quarry: The Sculpture of Eilís O'Connell, an essay', *Steel Quarry*, DHG, 1986; Medb Ruane, 'A Conversation with the Artist', *Eilís O'Connell*, Kinsale, 1997; Claire Schneider, 'Eilís O'Connell', in Peter Murray (ed.), *0044 – Irish Artists in Britain*, Kinsale, 1999, pp. 112–19.

O'CONNELL, MAURICE (b. 1966). O'Connell outlined his vision of an artist as municipal worker: 'The worker is like a postman or road sweeper whose task is to pose questions, make statements and generate a dialogue. The worker does not sustain the conversation but establishes a place for it that is open and informal' (*Saman...*, 1999, 69). More readily known by the end of the twentieth century as a performance artist than as a maker of objects, Maurice O'Connell's commitment to questioning the significance of art in and for society revolved around concerns about how art arrives in the public sphere and in what way it is then mediated.

O'Connell was born in Dublin. His degree project in Fine Art Sculpture at NCAD in 1992, called *The Truly Modern Art Museum*, heralded a practice of art as intervention. Working in partnership with IMMA, he collected 30 objects, compressed them beyond recognition through different methods and posted them to 30 worldwide locations, where they would be stored for a year. The objects and locations were randomly paired: for instance, moisturizer was sent to Sudan; a tea towel to the Netherlands. An interrogation of the function of material culture in the making of history and as conduits for memory generally, the project was one of many collaborations that defined O'Connell's *modus operandi*. Some projects through the 1990s extended his degree project. *Never Mind 'Kangaroo' just answer the question* (1995, IMMA) was an installation piece that drew attention to the often dubious nature of how knowledge is manufactured, with metaphorical reference to the etymology of 'kangaroo'. Some other works were purposefully inseparable from a strong persona. *Marathon Man* (1998) was an example of this, where a daily running routine was cue to a character formation for the duration of a performance work. Two exhibitions highlighted O'Connell's interest in challenging conventions of cultural production and the related fetishism of art objects. *Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired* (1995, Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin) was an exposition of the generation of ideas from which art projects could be later developed. With objects and statements presented under titles such as *The Leg Bones of a Shaman*, *A Wedding Proposal* and *Wolf from the Door Coat*, O'Connell focused on potential roles of artists and art in society. At the Green on Red Gallery, Dublin, the *Last Great Buffalo Hunt*



228. Eilís O'Connell, *Vowel of Earth Dreaming its Root*, 1998, Kilkenny limestone, Isle of Dogs, London