

**The Sheela-na-gig:  
An Inspirational Figure for Contemporary Irish Art**

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## **Abstract**

### **The Sheela-na-gig:**

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A Sheela-na-gig is an enigmatic, medieval stone carving of a female figure with exposed genitalia. It is exceptional both as a public image of a woman with an exaggerated vulva and because it is often located on a religious building. This thesis explores the connection between the Sheela-na-gig and Irish contemporary art considering theological, feminist and historical themes. The artists Barrie Cooke, Louise Walsh and Eilis O'Connell are reviewed with a focus on their works that were inspired by the Sheela-na-gig. The Killinaboy and Ballyourney churches are focal points in this thesis because of their connection to the artists and because they have Sheelas that became linked to saints. The theological writings on virtues and vices are present in the early Irish texts of penitentials. These penitentials evolved into devotional rituals based on the Sheela, but were also used as a warning against immoral behaviour in monastic praxis. The thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach to inspiration and the forces that bring together the Sheela, the artists and certain social and theological issues in Ireland. The analysis is supported by interviews and oral histories that were collected as part of the research. In this way, the underlying themes of feminism, sexuality, form, repression, history and nature are revealed as key to understanding how the Sheela has served as an inspirational figure for selected contemporary Irish art.

## Acknowledgements

*Give me silence, water, hope*

*Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.*

Pablo Neruda

This story started with a fleeting thought of how a mysterious figure, the Sheela-na-gig, inspired three Irish artists. It became one of the great adventures of my life, not simply in the travels along Irish back roads, but in the torturous struggle of facing my demons and putting words on paper. Support appeared in various forms from various people. Without their generosity, this thesis would not have been possible.

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I dedicate this thesis to my father, Jose Manuel, and to my godfather, Aristobulo Ocampo Arias, who I trust would be proud.



Dr. Pamela Bright  
1935 -2012

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## Chapter 1      Introduction

The Sheela-na-gig that first inspired contemporary Irish artist Barrie Cooke (b.1931) is situated over the doorway of the abandoned Killinaboy Church in County Clare, Ireland near where Cooke lived in the mid-1950s. The Killinaboy Sheela is typical of the Sheela-na-gigs found in Ireland: an enigmatic, medieval stone carving of a female figure with exposed genitalia. Ireland was a very conservative society in the 1950s and the Catholic Church held a strong influence over the day-to-day lives of the people in County Clare. The public image of a woman with an exaggerated vulva was exceptional enough, but seeing it as part of a religious building was particularly intriguing. Local women performed rituals linked with the Sheela-na-gig in disregard of the teachings of the Catholic Church. Cooke was thus inspired not only to learn more about the carved figure, but to create art.

Cooke was not alone. Interest in the Sheela grew from the 1960s onward taking into account the antiquarian knowledge accumulated during the period from the 1830s to the 1950s. The renewed interest was reflected in increasing levels of both academic scholarship and popular interest. Other artists also sought out the Sheela and integrated aspects of it into their art. In this thesis I will explore the connection between the Sheela-na-gig and Irish contemporary art considering theological, feminist and historical themes. These perspectives are applied to the original sculpture and how it has been regarded over time. In addition to Barrie Cooke, contemporary Irish artists Louise Walsh (b. 1963) and Eilis O'Connell (b. 1953) are included in this study of how the image of the Sheela-na-gig has inspired them and shaped their work.

This thesis will begin with a discussion of the Sheela itself including earlier images such as the "Heraldic Woman" motif from ancient art. Eamonn Kelly, Keeper of Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, considers the development of the Sheelas in Ireland as part of a larger decorative scheme from the continent, whereby the Sheelas evolved from part of a collective grouping to single figures in isolation following the Norman invasion of 1169.<sup>1</sup> I will also consider theories of what inspired the creation of the Sheelas, including both Christian and pre-Christian sources. Kelly has proposed that the Sheela's origins in the Romanesque style of architecture are tied to the age of Christian pilgrimage to the important shrines of Santiago de Compostela (Spain) and Rome during the second half of the

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<sup>1</sup>Eamonn Kelly. *Sheela-na-Gigs: Origins and Functions* (Dublin: Town House and Country House Trinity House, in association with The National Museum of Ireland, 1966) 13.

eleventh century to the end of the thirteenth century. The pilgrims sought to be spiritually whole and free from worldly sins such as lust, which had been portrayed as a naked woman surrounded by serpents eating her breasts and genitalia.<sup>2</sup> The antiquarians of the 1840s regarded the Sheela in negative terms, while more recent theories of the Sheelas's creation see it as a talisman, protector, symbol of "Irishness" or active female power.<sup>3</sup> An oral history was collected as part of this thesis work of the Martin family and their experiences over three generations with the Sheela located on their property.<sup>4</sup> We learn in a very direct way of the importance of the Sheela to this family, the aura of the Sheela as a protective spirit and its apparent powers of fertility. No consensus on the origin of the Sheela has emerged.

Sculptures of nude feminine figures with displayed genitalia have a long history. Art historian Douglas Fraser explores the complex theme of the "heraldic woman" motif, which is a displayed female figure exposing her genitalia and symmetrically flanked by contrasting figures. The heraldic woman motif has appeared in places such as Luristan (Iran), New Zealand and Ecuador.<sup>5</sup> Fraser describes the connection between the heraldic woman motif, through its use in the Italian Romanesque capitals of churches (which reflected the themes of Ancient Near Eastern models) and the grotesque, exposed Sheela-na-gig images on English and Irish Norman churches. Fraser concludes that the displayed female image is not only "unusually compelling", with the power to attract good or repulse evil, but public self-exposure is also an act of "enormous consequence"<sup>6</sup> reserved for extreme moments of our life experience, such as birth and death.

Sheelas in Ireland may well have served different purposes at different times, and the location of a Sheela is crucial to its understanding. The thesis will focus on the Sheela-na-gig's of two particular churches, Killinaboy and Ballyourney, and examine them in the context of other Sheelas in Ireland. These churches were chosen because

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<sup>2</sup> Kelly, *Sheela-na-Gigs* 9.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly, *Sheela-na-Gigs* 5.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Martin. Personal correspondence, Behy Sheela. 9 Oct. 2011. E-mail.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Fraser. "The Heraldic Woman: A Study in Diffusion," in Douglas Fraser, ed. *The Many Faces of Primitive Art: A Critical Anthology* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966) 36.

<sup>6</sup> Fraser 81.

they connect with various aspects of this thesis: As mentioned above, Barrie Cooke was initially inspired by the Killinaboy Sheela. This Sheela also supports the argument that the figures are derived from continental Romanesque statuary. Historian Peter Harbison tells of the ecclesiastical importance of the Killinaboy church, with its double-armed cross in low relief on the west gable, which might have been built around 1200-1250.<sup>7</sup> The double-cross is of special interest because it was used to signify a repository of fragments from the True Cross.<sup>8</sup> The Killinaboy Church would thus be identified as having a reliquary, a likely part of a pilgrimage route and thus a location that would have been directly subject to continental influences.<sup>9</sup>

Oral histories from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century speak not only of the Church's very circumspect regard for the Sheela-na-gig but also of women seeking it out for their own spiritual beliefs in defiance of the church's guidance and as an alternative to the iconography promoted by the Catholic Church. Irish writer P.J. Curtis describes the continuing power of the Sheela figure by explaining how, in the early 1960s, infertile women undertook the ritual "rounds" around the Killinaboy Church at night to pray to the Sheela, which was considered to be an image of Saint Inghine Bhaoith.

The Sheela at St. Gobnait Church in Ballyourney, County Cork is of special interest because the church is devoted to a local abbess, Saint Gobnait, who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century and the Sheela is seen by some as representative of her. Artist Eilis O'Connell visited the church at Ballyourney to observe the ritual ceremonies held on the Saint's "Pattern Day" where the devotional rounds are still made. O'Connell was motivated to attend this ritual following correspondence related to this thesis study.<sup>10</sup> Her perspective provides some insight into the significance of this inspirational image.

A discussion of monasticism follows the review of the Sheelas and the two important churches where Sheelas are located. This gives some insight into the intellectual environment that existed at the time the Sheelas were created. The Doctrines of the Council of Trent are reviewed here because they represent a turning point in the official attitude

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Harbison. "The Double-Armed Cross on the Church Gable at Killinaboy, Co. Clare." *North Munster Journal of Archaeology* (1976) 10.

<sup>8</sup> Harbison 5.

<sup>9</sup> Harbison 12

<sup>10</sup> Eilis O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2011. E-Mail.

of the Catholic Church, rejecting images such as the Sheela and no longer sanctioning them within the practices of the Church.<sup>11</sup> A discussion of the evolving status of women in Ireland considers how Marianism and the associated ideal of female virtue were used as a repressive force on the status of women. The ongoing (and sometimes forbidden) cults surrounding the Sheelas demonstrated the search by women for a more personal and progressive ideology.

The thesis will then move forward through time to consider how the Sheela-na-gig was regarded during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in particular how the Sheela was embraced by women rebelling against the dominance of the Catholic Church. The attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Sheela is complex and evolved with the emergence of feminist scholarship during the 1960s in Ireland. Historian Maryann Valiulis describes the political, ecclesiastic and feminist debate during the early years of the Free State, i.e. the late 1920s and 1930s. One of the main issues that women fought against was the restrictive gender legislation advocated by the Roman Catholic Church. The Church had promoted the role of the “subordinated woman” which denied a woman’s public identity and centered her in a place of domesticity. The construction of the Irish ideal woman as “pure and good” represented the response of the Catholic Church to the changing role of women in modern society, where women were exploring their sexuality, having children outside of marriage, wearing imported fashion, going to films and demanding a public identity by claiming their political rights in the Irish Free State. The substantial challenges facing women in Ireland and the feminist response parallel the increasingly open regard for the Sheela.

Finally, the work of three contemporary Irish artists, Barrie Cooke, Louise Walsh and Eilis O’Connell, is explored with a particular focus on their works inspired by the Sheela-na-gig. As part of the original contribution of this thesis, multiple interviews were conducted with these artists. Cooke said that when he lived near Killinaboy Church, he was intrigued by the Sheela figure, researched the local archaeological journals, located about forty Sheela figures in Ireland and photographed them. Cooke then made figures in clay inspired by the Sheela. These clay Sheelas have, in turn, inspired poets such as Seamus Heaney. Cooke has also explored the Sheela image in both oil and watercolour paintings. Some previously unrecorded art related to the Sheela has been documented in this thesis including a mixed

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<sup>11</sup> Michael P. Carroll. *Irish Pilgrimage: Holy Well and Popular Catholic Devotion* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) 44.

media and watercolour Sheela. The Sheela images fit easily into the larger themes of Cooke's art, which include natural forces and the female form.

Louise Walsh first heard about the Sheela at art college and it struck her as a symbol of female empowerment and alternate to the Virgin Mary. Walsh interpreted the Sheela image in terms of feminism, sexuality and against the structures of the Roman Catholic Church and its repressive role towards women in Ireland. Some of Walsh's works included images of shells and photographs of women with open mouths on their bellies, which echo the imagery of the Sheela-na-gig as an icon of female sexuality. For Walsh, strong female imagery helps to subvert the more traditional, passive female model and helps to develop a personal landscape based on autonomy. Walsh was inspired by the Sheela as a powerful female model and it served her as a talisman helping to liberate her so that she could create her art – which is art dedicated to helping others to find their voice in society.

Sculptural works by Eilis O'Connell's are seen to hold the inspirational influence of the Sheela-na-gig. These have been described by Katherine Nahum as "pure formalist aesthetics evolved from a surface and incorporating the primordial forces of nature, the fragmented female body and the ancient land."<sup>12</sup> In the visualization of the female body, O'Connell uses the entrance to the womb in the form of the Sheela-na-gig vagina as an enclosed and vital space.<sup>13</sup> A deeper inspirational force, which connects the Sheela to Irish monuments, body images and ancient imagery may also be argued.

In considering how the elements of this thesis come together around the image of the Sheela-na-gig, it is useful to consider the historical and religious context provided by the Churches of Killinaboy and Ballyourney for their Sheelas and the associated devotional rituals. The strict control of the Roman Catholic Church had attempted to silence the concerns of women since early modern times. The secret devotional rituals at these churches, which were almost exclusively conducted by women, grew in response to this enforced silence. The Sheela provided inspiration for these women. In a similar spirit, the Sheela provided a means of breaking the restrictions imposed on Barrie

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<sup>12</sup> Katherine Nahum. "In the Roundness of Being of Eilis O'Connell, " *Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (Chestnall Hill, MA: Charles S. and Isabella V. McCullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 1997) 63.

<sup>13</sup> Nahum 6.

Cooke, Louise Walsh and Eilis O'Connell. Each, in their own way, was able to bring forth a more complete and more liberated view of nature, society and the female body.

This thesis thus uses an inter-disciplinary approach to explore how the Sheela-na-gig has served as an inspirational figure in contemporary Irish art. The artists that are the subject of this thesis not only exemplify this influence, but provide a lens through which one can examine the themes of feminism, sexuality, form, repression, history, art, and nature which are channeled through the Sheela-na-gig figure. As a first step, we begin by studying the form of the Sheela-na-gig itself.

## Chapter 2      The Sheela-na-gig

In order to understand the inspirational role of the Sheela-na-gig, it is important to have a deeper understanding not only of the Sheela-na-gig, but also of the social forces that led to the creation of the Sheela and shaped the perception of the Sheela over time.

The Sheela-na-gig is a medieval stone carving of a naked female figure with a pose that displays and emphasizes the genitalia, as shown in Figure 2.1. They are found on churches, castles, monasteries and other buildings in Ireland, France, England, Wales, Scotland, Spain, and Norway.<sup>14</sup> Over 100 examples have been recorded in Ireland where the surviving Sheelas are most prevalent.<sup>15</sup> Irish Sheelas are believed to have been made between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with dating based contextually on the buildings where the Sheelas were installed.<sup>16</sup> The origin and meaning of the Sheela image remains unknown. There is little recorded history to explain exactly who created the Sheelas and why.

There are various thoughts on the origin of the name “Sheela-na-gig”. The name was first published in the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 1840-44 as the local name for a female exhibitionist carving then present on a church gable wall in Rochestown, County Tipperary, Ireland. It was also recorded in 1840 by John O’Donovan, an official of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, referring to a figure on Kiltinane Church, County Tipperary. The name may be derived from an anglicization of the Irish *Sile na gioch*, *Sighe na gCioch* or *Sile-ina-Giob* where *Sile* or *Sighe* refers to *Sheela* signifying an “old hag”; *gioch* or *gCioch* refers to “paps” or breasts, and *ina-Giob* refers to “on her hunkers” or squatting.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on the Sheela see: Anthony Weir. Distribution Map of Exhibitionist Figures in Great Britain. <<http://www.beyond-the-pale.org.uk/xBitmap.htm>> ; Jorgen Andersen. *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles*. (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977) mentions Sheelas in France, 139 -140; Anthony Weir and James Jerman. *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London: Butler and Tanner – B.T. Basford, 1986) lists female exhibitionists in Spain, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly 13.

<sup>16</sup> Kelly 44.

<sup>17</sup> Kelly 5.

There were earlier carvings of naked female figures with exposed genitalia. In his research on Primitive Art, Douglas Fraser found images which carry a similar pose to the Sheela-na-gig in the indigenous cultures of Luristan (part of present-day Iran), Etruria (part of present-day Italy), New Guinea, New Zealand, and Ecuador. According to Fraser, the term “heraldic woman” defines the motif as: “. . . an image of a displayed female figure that is symmetrically flanked by two other beings. By ‘displayed’ is meant a figure that holds its knees apart exposing the genital area . . . Femininity is made clear through the representation of the vulva or, in other instances, of the breasts.”<sup>18</sup> A typical example is shown in Figure 2.2. The symmetrical flanking of the motif is explained by Fraser as: “. . . two beings, one on either side of the central figure, [which] form mirror images or counterparts of each other . . . [and] since the woman’s position is balanced, the whole design is essentially symmetrical about the vertical axis.”<sup>19</sup>

The presence and the posture of those two beings have no relevance according to Fraser, as they could be animals, monsters, birds, or human beings, yet they must maintain a contrasting form within the group.<sup>20</sup> Fraser believes that the representation of “a female figure with her legs spread apart dates back many thousands of years.”<sup>21</sup> Earlier examples date back to the early Neolithic Period (~7000 BC) and were found at Chatal Huyuk in Anatolia (part of modern Turkey) as figures of “the goddesses in the birth-giving position.”<sup>22</sup> The earliest combination of the displayed figure flanked by other figures originated in the Ancient Near East during the Protoliterate Period (~4000 BC) and is seen on the Luristan pin (Figure 2.2) from around 1000 to 600 BC.<sup>23</sup> Fraser believes the Luristan pin and similar objects could have served as both a woman’s ornaments as well as “votive offerings to the Mother Goddess” because some of them had been found in the walls of a building which could have been a temple.<sup>24</sup> According to Fraser, the European images “seem to depend on the symmetrically flanked, displayed female figure,

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<sup>18</sup> Fraser 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser 37.

<sup>20</sup> Fraser 37.

<sup>21</sup> Fraser 37.

<sup>22</sup> Fraser 37.

<sup>23</sup> Fraser 37.

<sup>24</sup> Fraser 38.

although none of these quite qualify as heraldic women.<sup>25</sup> Some examples of these types of European figures are found in the Romanesque capitals of the cathedral in Piacenza [1122-1233] as shown in Figure 2.2.<sup>26</sup> Fraser concludes that: "the Italian Romanesque figures may be compared with the so-called Sheela-na-gig, grotesque female images depicted on many English and Irish churches, mostly of Norman date [11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century]."<sup>27</sup>

There is a widely-held thought that the Sheelas in Ireland were derived from exhibitionist carvings found on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque churches of continental Europe. These designs were then transferred to Ireland by the Normans and by pilgrims returning from the continent. Indeed the majority of surviving Sheelas are in regions that were occupied by the Normans. Art historian, Joselita Raspi Serra points to the Italian Como-Pavian tradition as an important element in the development of the Sheelas and "one of the most remarkable phenomena of 12th and 13th century European sculpture . . . which spread out on the periphery of the main development of Romanesque and Gothic sculpture, but kept itself tenaciously apart from it."<sup>28</sup> Raspi Serra saw these sculptures as a "world peopled by fabulous and horrid beings, animated by linear and geometric decorations, usually interlaced, by coarsely worded figural representations, often with a motionless hieratic appearance characteristic of oriental art."<sup>29</sup> This ornamental work freely invaded the church facades with "swollen monsters inspired by Moslem bronzes and winged animals reminiscent of Sassanian [Persian] fabrics."<sup>30</sup>

Many stonemasons were from Como and they traveled in closely knit bands throughout Italy and Europe carrying their artistic formulas.<sup>31</sup> The Como-Pavian influence was seen in England in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>25</sup> Fraser 43.

<sup>26</sup> Fraser 44.

<sup>27</sup> Fraser 44.

<sup>28</sup> Joselita Raspi Serra. "English Decorative Sculpture of the Early Twelfth Century and Como-Pavian Tradition." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Dec. 1969): 352. Web JSTOR . 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Raspi Serra 352.

<sup>30</sup> Raspi Serra 352.

<sup>31</sup> Raspi Serra 353.

due to the arrival of traveling groups of masons.<sup>32</sup> The Sheelas do not feature a high degree of artistic skill, but the masons creating these images may nonetheless have been influenced by the aforementioned forces in creating their designs, either directly or indirectly, by the patrons directing the creation of buildings.

The design of the Irish Sheelas varies significantly, which is not surprising given that the context, views of the patrons commissioning the works, and masons may have changed significantly over the approximately 400 year period when Sheelas were created. Different styles of Sheela may have been appropriate for the different types of buildings where they were originally installed. A brief review of the principal and most common design features remains instructive, keeping in mind that exceptions exist for each rule. Eamonn Kelly explains that “the majority of Sheela-na-gigs are carved on rectangular blocks of stone which are twice as high as they are broad. The general size range is between 40 cm and 60 cm in height.”<sup>33</sup> Figures were done in high or low relief, in false relief or defined by incised lines. While Sheelas have typically been “carved roughly”, some are excellent examples of the stone-carver’s craft, such as the Sheela in Ballylarkin, County Kilkenny.<sup>34</sup>

The poses of the Sheelas are diverse: They can be either standing or “reclined seated”. Other Sheelas have wide-splayed legs, or splayed thighs with the heels together, or the legs may be absent. Arms and hands are typically used to emphasize the presence of the vulva. Some Sheelas use both hands to grasp open the vulva. Occasionally the Sheelas hold objects. Kelly said that some circular objects seen with one Sheela might be a mirror and comb, such as seen on medieval mermaid figures of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>35</sup> This may be significant because mermaid sculpture often occurs in a European medieval context as a symbol of vanity and lust.<sup>36</sup>

Most of the Sheelas have a large head and some have incised ribs, which could be intended to signify starvation. While the female breast is commonly a symbol of sexuality and motherhood, Kelly found that “breasts are rarely shown . . . but in those cases where they are present . . . they are small and usually accompanied by ribs,

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<sup>32</sup> Raspi Serra 354.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly 14.

<sup>34</sup> Kelly 14.

<sup>35</sup> Kelly 34.

<sup>36</sup> Kelly 34.

indicating emaciation.<sup>37</sup> Facial expressions can be aggressive and menacing, such as with the Sheela found in County Cavan (Figure 2.1) where the teeth and tongue are prominent. Eyes can be bulging or “bossed” (i.e. squinting).<sup>38</sup> Most of the Sheela-na-gigs are bald.

As previously noted, Sheelas are commonly found on churches, castles, and monasteries but Kelly also pointed out that, “the majority of known or recorded Sheela-na-gigs are no longer in primary positions on the buildings for which they were originally carved.”<sup>39</sup> Sheelas present either in castles or churches are probably derived from old churches and re-used in secular and religious sites.<sup>40</sup>

For this thesis, which considers how the Sheelas inspired some contemporary artists, it is useful to survey the reaction of viewers to the Sheela over time. There is no record of the intent of those who originally commissioned, and created the Sheelas, but that absence may be useful – since speculation about the intent of the Sheelas is revealing of those who have proposed various theories.

Clearly the Sheelas were, for a period of centuries, a popular and accepted form of decoration given the large number of Sheelas in a range of prominent locations in castles, churches and monasteries. In 1631, however, provincial statutes for Tuam, County Galway show that parish priests were ordered to hide carvings such as the Sheela and to “take note of where they were hidden.”<sup>41</sup> This suggests either a shift in the attitude of the Church towards the figures that were originally incorporated into religious buildings and/or a greater authority of the Roman Catholic Church to impose devotional regulations in Ireland.

Formal documentation of the Sheelas begins only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1824 the Ordnance Survey 6in. sheet was established to support the valuation of land and buildings for the new local taxation system in Ireland.<sup>42</sup> In

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<sup>37</sup> Kelly 35.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly 36.

<sup>39</sup> Kelly 40.

<sup>40</sup> Kelly 43.

<sup>41</sup> Weir and Jerman 14.

<sup>42</sup> Barry Crosbie. *Irish Imperial Networks: Migration, Social Communications and Exchange in Nineteenth-Century India* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 110.

the Ordnance Survey (OS) letter of 1839, Gaelic Irish scholar and staff member in the topographical department, Eugene Curry (1794-1862) reported that above the circular doorway in a church in Killinaboy was “the representation of a dwarf or stunted man on a stone over it in front.”<sup>43</sup> A year later, a letter to the OS about the Antiquities of County Tipperary by the Celtic Irish scholar, John O’Donovan, who worked under George Petrie in the topographical department, cites a description by the antiquarian Thomas O’Conor of a figure on the old church of Kiltinane as an “ill excuted [sic] piece of sculpture . . . grossest idea of immorality and licentiousness . . . being in its way in direct opposition to the sentiment of . . . people professing the Christian faith.”<sup>44</sup> After seeing the figure, John O’Donovan agreed it was of “very bad taste to exhibit such a figure on a Christian chapel at so late a period.”<sup>45</sup> O’Conor found that the carving was known by the name “Sile Ni Ghig” which referred to a local woman whose excesses had thrust her “into the gulph [sic] of destruction.”<sup>46</sup> The woman did not represent a human being, but rather “in all respect a brute.”<sup>47</sup> O’Donovan had seen similar figures elsewhere and asked George Du Noyer, a geologist and artist who worked for the Geological Survey of Ireland, to make drawings of the stone figures. O’Donovan described the Ballyfinboy figure as a rudely carved “representation of a woman in naked majesty” and the Shane Castle Sheela as a “figure of similar hideous character.”<sup>48</sup>

A manuscript from antiquarian and topographer, John Windele dates to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and speaks of the Sheela attached to Castle Warren, near Monkstown, County Cork in a similar way:

At Barnahealy was found a brown gritty stone female figure, one of those old Fetish figures often found in Ireland on the front of churches as well as castles. They are called ‘Hags of the Castle,’ and when placed above the keystone of the door arch were supposed to possess a tutelary or

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<sup>43</sup> Eugene Curry. “Of the Parish of Kilnaboy.” *The Antiquities of County Clare: Ordnance Survey Letters, 1839* (Ennis, Co. Clare: Clasp Press, 1997, 2003) 12.

<sup>44</sup> Barbara Freitag. *Sheela-na-gigs:Unravelling an Enigma* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004) 17.

<sup>45</sup> Freitag 17.

<sup>46</sup> Freitag 17.

<sup>47</sup> Freitag 17.

<sup>48</sup> Freitag 17.

protective power, so that the enemy passing by would be disarmed of evil intent against the building on seeing it.<sup>49</sup>

A summary of the various discoveries concerning the Sheela-na-gigs was presented in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* in 1894 under the title "Figures Known as Hags of the Castle, Sheelas or Sheela na gigs." The article provided a list of thirty-two Sheelas and reported that the figures were female figures "cut in relief on stone . . . seated . . . in an upright position."<sup>50</sup> Different styles were mentioned and the summary noted "a considerable degree of artistic ability and skill of the workman who executed them, and the figures themselves are well modeled and finished. Others are of ruder execution, and, on superficial inspection."<sup>51</sup> The article refuted the theory that the Sheelas "were intended to represent Pagan Deities, worshipped by the inhabitants of Ireland before their conversion to Christianity; [the theory] is not supported by any evidence that can be advanced in support of such a view. They are, as a rule, invariably obtained either from the sites of old churches, or from the walls of castles built after the fourteenth century."<sup>52</sup>

As discussed previously, Sheelas have been moved from one place to another over time, which reflects the changing perspective on the Sheelas. The 1894 review article also states that many carved stones found at castles might have come from the ruins of stone churches built during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and that the figures were "appropriated by the builders . . . and transferred to their walls either for ornament, or under the idea of their possessing some occult and sacred influence, such as conferring good fortune or additional safety on the owner."<sup>53</sup>

In 1937, the British archaeologist Dr. Edith M. Guest presented a taxonomy list of the Irish stone-carved figures in the *Journal of Royal Society of Antiquaries*. Guest wrote that the figures were "probably symbols of a pre-

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<sup>49</sup> "Figures Known as Hags of the Castle, Sheelas, or Sheela na gigs." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Fifth Series, Vol. 4.1 (Mar. 1894): 78. JSTOR. Web.

<sup>50</sup> "Figures Known as Hags" 77.

<sup>51</sup> "Figures Known as Hags" 77.

<sup>52</sup> "Figures Known as Hags" 77.

<sup>53</sup> "Figures Known as Hags" 78.

historic cult."<sup>54</sup> The Sheela-na-gig term was accepted and understood as, "denoting a female figure so displaying or calling attention to anatomical features, as to suggest that it is a symbol of a fertility cult."<sup>55</sup> Guest's principal contributions are: the organization of the carved figures by counties, a drawing distribution map of the Sheela-na-gigs, and due to its similarities of the figure, a classification of the images according to similarities of gestures with the arms, hands and thighs:

Type I = Arms usually in front of the thighs but may pass behind them, flexed and hands directed to the lower abdomen: a) Thighs splayed, b) Thighs absent or slightly indicated, c) Legs straight down. Type II = One arm and hand raised to the head: legs as in Type I. (a). Type III = Thighs and knees tightly flexed over the abdomen.<sup>56</sup>

The Sheela figure received increasing attention from the 1960s onward. In 1967 Celticist archaeologist Anne Ross wrote about the similarity between the Sheela-na-gig and female face-pots used in Romano-British fertility-funerary rites. Ross noted the "crude, and indeed lewd manner in which many of (the face pots) are represented" in contrast to "the extraordinary group of sculptures from Ireland, of indeterminate date, known as Sheela-na-gigs with their obvious fertility and (presumably) apotropaic significance."<sup>57</sup>

The publication of *The Witch in the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculptures in the British Isles* in 1977 by the art historian Jorgen Andersen represented a significant advance in the scholarship regarding the Sheela-na-gig. The text was based on Andersen's doctoral thesis and considered the origin, function and meaning of the Sheela. Andersen found that:

The basic attitude of a Sheela implies concentrated reference to her sex. Threat and aggression seem to emanate from this display, but it requires no implements beyond nudity and that significant gesture of the hands directed towards the lower abdomen, usually in front of the

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<sup>54</sup> Edith M. Guest. "Irish Sheela-na-gigs in 1935," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*. 7th ser, 6.1 (June 30, 1936): 107.

<sup>55</sup> Guest 107.

<sup>56</sup> Guest 109.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Ross. *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (Chicago: Academy, 1966) 229.

thighs, but often enough from behind the flexed legs. The latter is very much a gesture of intensification, impossible in naturalistic terms, but an efficient means of concentrating the spectator's attention upon the vulva."<sup>58</sup>

Andersen saw the Romanesque Norman corbels as a precursor of the Sheelas "like a stage set for the appearance of the Sheela."<sup>59</sup> It is also a nude motif of debauchery that was included in the grotesque repertoire of the Norman carvers around the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. during the monastic reform which needed "stricter standards and prescribing intensified safeguards around the spiritual life of the church."<sup>60</sup> Theologians promoted powerful images to deter danger to the soul in terms of female sexuality and carvers selected figures like the Sheela for those "reforming bishops, or priests in need of a formulated distaste for women to keep them on the path, seeking a truly holy life away from temptation."<sup>61</sup> Andersen suggested that the Sheela motif in Ireland was both transformed and dispersed due to the intermingling of the Gaelic and Norman cultures. The Sheela's extent of dispersal was also attributed to its popularity during the medieval times especially "in areas now considered strongly Norman, such as the Cashel region, where the Sheelas are by far the most numerous."<sup>62</sup> Andersen thus argues that the "displayed motif" figure of the simple Gueron corbel in the continent led to figures such as the Athlone Sheela in Ireland (Figure 2.3).

Irish archaeologist Helen Hickey (also known as Helen Lanigan-Wood) provides some additional perspectives on the Romanesque figure carvings made in Ireland from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in her 1985 book *Images of Stone: Figure Sculpture of the Lough Erne Basin*. Hickey draws attention to male exhibitionist figures on the Aghalurcher stone (Figure 2.4) and Berrymount window fragment (now at Ballyconnell Church of Ireland, Cavan) with their large heads, prominent ears, phalluses, testicles and lack of bodies, but concedes that these male

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<sup>58</sup> Andersen 120.

<sup>59</sup> Andersen 64.

<sup>60</sup> Andersen 64, 65.

<sup>61</sup> Andersen 65.

<sup>62</sup> Andersen 70.

examples are relatively rare in Ireland.<sup>63</sup> The male exhibitionist figure that was part of the Aghalurcher Church, Fermanagh may have belonged to one of the four gables or part of a cornice. The ruins of this church generally date back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century but include a 7<sup>th</sup> century foundation. The church was associated with the cult of Saint Ronan mac Aedha within the ruling of the King Thomas Og Maguire.<sup>64</sup> Hickey agrees with Anderson in identifying a continental origin for the Sheelas, citing the few examples of pre-Romanesque carvings in Ireland e.g. the half-naked statue on White Island, Lough Erne, County Fermanagh (early Christian period) and the displayed female figure on the Monasterboice Cross (9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century), County Louth. Examples of early female exhibitionist figures in the acrobatic and distorted poses as with the Aghalurher figure are seen on a voussoir of the Romanesque chancel arch in the Nun's Chapel at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly (rebuilt in 1167). Hickey believes that the Sheelas of Ireland reflect the particular attitude to women prevalent in the early Irish Church where women were viewed "as evil seductresses and the cause of man succumbing to the sin of lust."<sup>65</sup> Hickey thus explained that in Ireland "lust came to be represented almost exclusively by grotesque female carvings although the French Romanesque churches provide models for many other ways of illustrating the sin."<sup>66</sup>

In 1986 Anthony Weir, writer and artist, and James Jerman, retired lecturer in Education at the University of Leicester, analyzed the Sheela in the context of other obscene exhibitionist figures, medieval bestiaries and Christian beliefs from an art historical perspective in *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* and considered both the origin of the figures and how they were used:

. . . the British 'sheela-na-gig', one of the few remaining 'obscene' figures in our islands . . . [and] how it came to pass that lewd carvings were placed on or in Christian churches . . . resists successfully any attempts to eradicate them during the frequent periods of puritanical iconoclastic destruction of statues and carvings. It is the tenacity with which these grotesque

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<sup>63</sup> Helen Hickey [Lanigan Wood]. *Images of Stone: Figure Sculpture of the Lough Erne Basin* (Fermanagh: Fermanagh District Council and Arts Council, 1976, 1985) 48, 50.

<sup>64</sup> Seomsamh O Dufaigh. "Ronan of Aghalurcher." *Journal of the Clogher Historical Society*, Vol. XIX.2-3 (2007-8) n. pag.

<sup>65</sup> Hickey 50.

<sup>66</sup> Hickey 50.

sculptures have clung to existence that has mystified students of the bizarre, and a number of opinions about their possible origin, purpose, and longevity have been expressed.<sup>67</sup>

Weir and Jerman believe that Romanesque motifs were introduced into Britain and then to Ireland from France. They speculated that it was only at some later time that local folk beliefs began to “invest [the Sheelas] with popular notions of magic.”<sup>68</sup> The Sheelas and other “obscene” figures created as part of figurative Romanesque decoration in churches and monasteries in the 12<sup>th</sup> century were intended to provide “visual support to the Church’s moral teachings.”<sup>69</sup> Weir and Jerman thus approach the obscene/erotic figures in the context of “the medieval Church’s campaign against immorality, [believing] that they were not intended to inflame the passions but rather to allay them.”<sup>70</sup> To support their argument, Weir and Jerman point to the fact that “these sculptures are sexual and draw attention to the genitalia by a flagrant display often highlighted by the play of the hands; but an equally distinctive feature of the Sheela is its repellent ugliness: huge disproportionate head, staring eyes, gaping mouth, wedge nose, big ears, bald pate, herculean shoulders and twisted posture.”<sup>71</sup> The meaning of Romanesque art is concentrated in its religious character and its Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. Weir and Jerman state that the Christian message of sin and redemption was demonstrated through biblical texts, commentaries [Beatus], saint’s lives, heroic deeds, mythological and legendary tales, events of the natural world [Physiologus] and fantasy.<sup>72</sup> Images embodied warnings against the sins of avarice, fornication, sorcery and witchcraft through the readings of St. Paul’s Revelation of Heaven and Hell. The most influential of the writings were those of St. Augustine of Hippo [354-430] on sexuality and marriage. In *De continentia*, Augustine opens the spirit to understand the flesh “Walk in

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<sup>67</sup> Weir and Jerman 10.

<sup>68</sup> Weir and Jerman 144.

<sup>69</sup> Weir and Jerman 10.

<sup>70</sup> Weir and Jerman 11.

<sup>71</sup> Weir and Jerman 11.

<sup>72</sup> Weir and Jerman 35.

the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh; for the flesh lusteth against the Spirit.”<sup>73</sup> St. Augustine’s works were widely read during the Middle Ages by clergy and monks.<sup>74</sup>

The mid-1980s saw support for some alternate theories for the creation of the Sheelas, such as Etienne Rynne’s *A Pagan Celtic Background for Sheela-na-gigs?* (1987). Rynne (1932-2012), Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the National University of Galway, argued for a blend of the Romanesque images with native Celtic imagery: “prototypes for the Romanesque and medieval Sheela-na-Gigs exist from the pagan Celtic Iron Age, some associated with a fertility cult . . . [that] became, somehow related to and fused with a male ‘Lord of the Animals’ figure of similar Celtic background.”<sup>75</sup> Rynne proposed that Sheela’s squatting posture can be linked with that of the Celtic god Cernunnos.<sup>76</sup> He suggested that a “new, true Sheela-na-Gig element was introduced into Ireland with Romanesque art and architecture . . . following on the introduction of the monastic Orders and the advent of the Anglo-Normans later in the twelfth century, both groups opening wider doors to the art and culture of north-western Europe.”<sup>77</sup> Rynne’s perspective is that the Irish simply “adapted their pagan-derived cross-legged figure to the newly-introduced Sheela motif and then forged ahead with renewed enthusiasm and gusto, producing more and better Sheela-na-Gigs than anyone else. A remarkable continuity is one of the most striking aspects of Irish art.”<sup>78</sup>

Eamonn Kelly outlined his theories on the origin of the Sheelas in *Sheela-na-Gigs: Origins and Functions* (1996). Kelly recognized the changing perspectives on the Sheelas, i.e. that “more recently the images have come to

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<sup>73</sup> Weir and Jerman 83. For an in-depth review of Augustine teachings see: Pamela Bright , ed., and trans. *Augustine and the Bible. The Bible through the Ages*, vol. 2 [Based on *Bible de Tous les Temps*, vol. 3, Saint Augustine et la Bible. Paris: Beauchesne, 1986], Anne-Marie La Bonnadière, ed.]. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999; Peter Brown. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: London and Faber, 2000); Philip Lyndon Reynolds. *Marriage in the Western Church: The Christianization of Marriage During the Patristic and Early Medieval Periods* (Leyden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1994, 2001).

<sup>74</sup> Weir 84.

<sup>75</sup> Etienne Rynne. “A Pagan Celtic background for Sheela-na-Gigs.” Etienne Rynne, ed., *North Munster Studies: Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney* (Limerick: The Thomond Archaeological Society, 1967) 190.

<sup>76</sup> Rynne 190.

<sup>77</sup> Rynne 198.

<sup>78</sup> Rynne 199.

be regarded in a positive light. By some they are seen as a symbol of Irishness and by others, particularly Irish feminists, they are a symbol of active female power<sup>79</sup> but Kelly cautioned that “no tradition or folklore has been recorded in Ireland which provides any useful insight into the origin or function of Sheela-na-gigs.”<sup>80</sup> According to Kelly, the depiction of figures in medieval churches based on the monastic idea of vices, such as avarice and lust was “a sin which pertained particularly to women.”<sup>81</sup> Kelly postulates that lust imagery on Romanesque churches and monastic buildings on the continent and Britain was inspired from classical examples of Tellus Mater, the Earth Mother with suckling snakes and portrayed “as a naked woman whose breasts and genitalia were eaten by toads and serpents.”<sup>82</sup> These exhibitionist figures, male and female, were stone carved on the Romanesque churches and monastic buildings along the pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela and Rome to remind the faithful of the “Church’s teaching that sinners were punished in hell through the bodily organs by which they had offended.”<sup>83</sup>

Kelly also considered how the significance of the Sheela evolved over time – as a feminine figure that is taken as a metaphor for the land and it is “within this context that a reinterpretation of exhibitionist figures in later medieval Ireland took place.”<sup>84</sup> As protective icons, Sheelas were originally meant to provide protection against lust, but there was then a shift during the Middle Ages in Ireland to consider that the Sheelas provided general protection against evil. For Kelly, the Sheela-na-gig represents both the “positive aspects of female sexuality and, in particular, on the reproductive function [and] classical exhibitionist figures carved in European male-dominated feudal society.”<sup>85</sup> The process of appropriation and redefinition of the Irish Sheela-na-gig “has been on-going since the figures were first introduced during the twelfth century.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Kelly 5.

<sup>80</sup> Kelly 5.

<sup>81</sup> Kelly 9.

<sup>82</sup> Kelly 9.

<sup>83</sup> Kelly 10.

<sup>84</sup> Kelly 46.

<sup>85</sup> Kelly 46.

<sup>86</sup> Kelly 46.

The story of the Behy Sheela ("Red Sheela") in County Sligo is consistent with Kelly's observations. The Sheela is shown in Figure 2.5 and the oral history collected as part of this thesis research is given in Appendix I. It tells of the Martin Family who have owned the land where the Red Sheela is located for many generations. Sandra Martin provided stories spanning three generations which tell of the family's belief in the protective nature of the Red Sheela, but the family also allows for its powers as a talisman, especially regarding fertility with Sandra being one of three sets of twins that her mother gave birth to.

Yet another theory regarding the meaning of the Sheelas was put forward in 2000 by Joanne MacMahon and Jack Roberts who propose that the creation of the Sheela was connected to Celtic spiritual forces and ancient religious beliefs.<sup>87</sup> The Sheela's protection against the evil eye was sensed by the faithful. This protective power was concentrated in the "sacred centre, the vulva." Following this theory, the practice of rubbing the Sheela to cure illness or provide fertility originated in such beliefs.<sup>88</sup> Consistent with Rynne's approach, MacMahon and Roberts see the Sheela as being part of "an unbroken tradition of Celtic art which first flowered in Ireland around the 3rd century BC and continued through the early Irish Christian period."<sup>89</sup> They see the Sheela as symbolizing elements of the pre-Christian world, where aspects of life, death and regeneration were transformed into a powerful force of a displayed female figure of Irish mythological legend: the hag as the goddess of death and regeneration.<sup>90</sup>

In *Sheela-na-gigs and Other Unruly Women: Images of Land and Gender in Medieval Ireland* (2000), art historian Katherine Karkov writes that the "process of creating meaning is important, as Sheela-na-gigs developed out of a continental context but have been changed over the centuries into representations of a distinctly Irish past, often set against a postcolonial present . . . they refuse to be pinned down to one meaning, role or interpretation."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Joanne McMahon and Jack Roberts. *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland and Britain: The Divine Hag of the Christian Celts – An Illustrated Guide* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2000) 26

<sup>88</sup> McMahon 26.

<sup>89</sup> McMahon 82.

<sup>90</sup> McMahon 110.

<sup>91</sup> Catherine Karkov. "Sheela-na-gigs and Other Unruly Women: Images of Land and Gender in Medieval Ireland," *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and Its European Context*. Ed. Colum Hourihane (New Jersey: Department of Art and Archaeology, Trustees of Princeton University, 2001) 313.

Karkov sees a diverse collection of images of women represented as strong and sexually aggressive and "having to do with the protection or control of land and kingship" in classic manuscripts and sagas.<sup>92</sup> The Sheela has continued to evolve in meaning, as Karkov states: ". . . like Derbforgaill [wife of Tigernan O'Rourke, king of Breifne and daughter and sister of Ua Mael Sechlainn kings of Mide], the Sheela-na-gigs have become not quite defenseless victims in a battle for access and control – this time access to and control of the past rather than the land. And like Derbforgaill, they had become symbols of a lost Ireland. But they had also undergone yet another transformation, having been taken up as icons of women's power by contemporary artists and feminists alike."<sup>93</sup>

Maureen Concannon, a Jungian psychologist, approaches the Sheela figure within the history of an ancient Irish symbol of the divine feminine archetype in *The Sacred Whore: Sheela Goddess of the Celts* (2004). The spiritual and sexual power of the Sheela is seen by Concannon in the context of the unity of cosmic energy or *neart* (strength) in Irish and its sexual energy, which is manifested in the Goddess Great Mother Earth, Anu or Aine within its "creativity in all its forms."<sup>94</sup> The vulva becomes an icon in the form of a displayed female figure. Thus, Concannon believes that "the images of the Sheela were meant to illustrate the powerful energy of God in anthropomorphic form."<sup>95</sup> Beauty and sexual allure "are insignificant when a woman is giving birth, expressing her wildness, her fearlessness, or dealing with death."<sup>96</sup> As such, Concannon describes Sheelas as those "wrinkled bags of bones of the later medieval period [which] were 'seen in grim and deadly seriousness as personifications of the devil or as the devil's whores, as objects to be exterminated.'"<sup>97</sup> Concannon sees the Sheela as a relevant presence in today's life, both as an inspiration for the return to the feminine and for her power of "transformation and

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<sup>92</sup> Karkov 317.

<sup>93</sup> Karkov 328.

<sup>94</sup> Maureen Concannon. *The Sacred Whore: Sheela Goddess of the Celts*. (Cork: Collin Press, 2004) 142.

<sup>95</sup> Concannon 144.

<sup>96</sup> Concannon 158.

<sup>97</sup> Concannon 158.

renewal.”<sup>98</sup> The emergence of the Goddess movement in the United States in the late 1960’s was a result of the convergence of neo-pagan ideas and practices with the spiritually oriented group of the women’s liberation movement. Feminist authors such as Mary Daly, Merlin Stone, Naomi Goldenberg and Carol Christ were very influential in the early days of the Goddess movement on the awareness of the damaging effects or irrelevance of male-identified religions, specifically Judeo-Christianity, for women. They championed an alternative women-identified spirituality which was centred on the principle of the sacred feminine or “The Goddess.”<sup>99</sup> An alternate system of spiritual beliefs was developed which sought to elevate the position of women. It embraced the concept of the Goddess. A growing interest in the Sheela, paralleled this interest in the Goddess concept and was arguably enhanced by the work of feminist theologians and the broader feminist movement in society.

In *Sheela-na-gigs: Unraveling an Enigma* (2004), Barbara Freitag, lecturer in International Studies at Dublin City University focuses on the Sheela’s meaning in the context of childbirth with the ancient folk deities and rural traditions of birth and death.<sup>100</sup> The imagery of the Sheela is marked by “her skeletal upper half, suggestive of old age and death, and her fertile lower part emphasizing fertility and birth.”<sup>101</sup> According to Freitag, medieval women sought spiritual support through long-held traditions along with herbal remedies, amulets, girdles, charms, invocations and rites relating to springs, wells, stones and wakes.<sup>102</sup> The regard for the Sheela image was coupled with the fertility and childbirth rituals that remain present today. Freitag reports that “In [the] Ballyourney [Church] the agate [stone] is touched three times straight after the rubbing of the Sheela . . . formerly this stone used to be

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<sup>98</sup> Concannon 164. See also: Ann Pearson, *Reclaiming the Sheela-na-gigs: Goddess Imagery in Medieval Sculptures of Ireland* (Canadian Women Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme, Vol. 17.3 (1997) 20-24.

<sup>99</sup> For Mary Daly and Goddess movement see: Peter B. Clarke, ed. *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements* (Abingdon, Oxon:U.K.; N.Y.: Routledge, 2006); John Hinnells, ed. *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Abingdon, Oxon: U.K.; N.Y.: Routledge, 2009); Mary Daly. *Beyond God the Father* (1974. Mass: Beacon Press; Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1985).

<sup>100</sup> Freitag 69.

<sup>101</sup> Freitag 70.

<sup>102</sup> Freitag 92.

'handed about for its virtues."<sup>103</sup> An Irish Times journalist, Katie Donovan, wrote in "Touching faith in a stone Sheela" (7 July 1994) that when she asked a pilgrim at Ballyourney Church about the ritual of rubbing the agate stone after touching the Sheela figure of St. Gobnait, she was told that, "It is a fertility ritual, very pagan. Why not? Wasn't that here long before Christianity?"<sup>104</sup>

The Sheela thus remains enigmatic, providing room for various interpretations. The central view among academics, however, is that the Sheela is derived from continental Romanesque figures and was originally used for moral teachings and as a warning against lust. That said, there may well have been Celtic influences on the appearance and interpretation of the Sheela as the early church appropriated local traditions and iconography, which may have included aspects of fertility and protection. Even if these elements were not originally present, various (mainly female) groups have appropriated the Sheela over the past centuries and have made it a much more positive symbol. It continues to evolve.

Understanding the inspirational force of the Sheelas also requires some understanding of the historical forces which led to their creation, and the social forces that shaped attitudes to the Sheelas over time. At certain times and for certain groups, the Sheelas have been considered as more threatening than inspirational. Given that they are frequently located on religious buildings and given the powerful influence of religion on Irish society, a theological context is provided to the Sheelas, including a review of monasticism and Marianism.

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<sup>103</sup> Freitag 104.

<sup>104</sup> Freitag 104.



Figure 2.1

Some examples of Sheela-na-gigs. Counter-clockwise from upper left: (a) Kiltinane Church, County Tipperary; photo taken of Sheela in-situ; Sheela stolen in 1990; Web <<http://www.beyond-the-pale.org/>>, (b) Cavan, County Cavan; Cavan County Museum; Web <<http://www.sheelanagig.org/>>, (c) Ballinderry Castle, County Galway; in-situ; Web <<http://www.beyond-the-pale.org/>>, (d) Leighmore [Liathmore] Church, County Tipperary; in-situ; Web <<http://www.sheelanagig.org/>>.



Figure 2.2      Left: Heraldic figure, bronze pinhead; Luristan, Iran. Collection David-Weill. Right: Romanesque capital, Piacenza Cathedral, Emilia-Romagna, Italy. Douglas Fraser, "The Heraldic Woman: A Study in Diffusion." *The Many Faces of Primitive Art: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Douglas Fraser (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey; Prentice-Hall, 1966) 38. Print.



Figure 2.3      Left: Romanesque Sheela-na-gig at Athlone Church, Westmeath, Web <<http://www.irelands-sheelanagigs.org/>>. Right: Church at Guéron, Bayeux region, France with Sheela inset. Jorgen Andersen. *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1977) 57, Print.



Figure 2.4      Male exhibitionist figure from the Romanesque church at Aghalurcher (12<sup>th</sup> century) which may have belonged to one of the four gables or part of a cornice. Fermanagh County Museum. (Photograph by Robert Gooding).



Figure 2.5      *Sheela-na-gig* at Behy, Riverstown, County Sligo. Martin family homestead. (Photograph by Robert Gooding).

## **Chapter 3      Contextual Topics in Irish Society**

An understanding of some of the important social forces in Ireland is critical to this thesis inasmuch as these forces provide context to the creation of the Sheelas, the regard for the Sheelas over time and their inspirational role in contemporary Irish art. These social forces include Catholicism and feminism. Monasticism is also important because of the insights it provides into the intellectual environment of the monasteries where many of the Sheelas were first installed. This environment led to the theological writings on virtues and vices wherein the Sheela is seen as a device to warn against immoral behaviour. The chapter also includes a discussion of two sites where the Sheela figures are present and which are particularly significant to the artists discussed in this thesis.

### **3.1    Two Significant Irish Churches Featuring Sheela-na-gigs**

The churches of Killinaboy and Ballyourney will be used as focal points in this thesis inasmuch as they: 1) each feature a Sheela-na-gig, 2) have had a direct impact on an artist included in this thesis, 3) are associated with a devotional saint and 4) have seen penitentials evolve around the church as documented in oral histories.

#### Killinaboy Church and the St. Inghine Bhaoith Cult

The early history of Killinaboy Church (Figures 3.1 – 3.3) reveals the beginnings of the Christian landscape in County Clare and how this history connects with the stone-carved Sheela-na-gig situated on the south wall above the doorway (Figure 3.4). According to the archaeologist, John Sheehan, the Killinaboy church-site comprises: an early church, a round tower and a holy well typical of medieval parish churches built around 1302 on the sites of monasteries as mentioned in the Papal Taxation Lists.<sup>105</sup> As such, Killinaboy Church holds a continuous ecclesiastical presence from the Early to the Medieval Period.<sup>106</sup>

The historian Michael Mac Mahon tells how the old monastic settlements with its termon lands or sacred precinct were subsequently absorbed “into the diocesan parish of Killinaboy in the church reforms of the 12<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> John Sheehan. “The Early Historic Church-sites on North Clare.” *North Munster Antiquity Journal*, Vol. 24 (1982) 31, 32.

<sup>106</sup> Sheehan 32.

century.”<sup>107</sup> The monastic enclosures of early churches and their termon lands served the “temporal but prudent [purpose] of protection, [and were] to define the area of legal ownership and to mark the termon or sacred precinct of the monastery.”<sup>108</sup> The monastery was a centre of learning and culture, a source of refuge in times of war and a source of prestige for the local rulers. Sometimes the weaker clan of a tribe transformed themselves by making a homestead into a church involving entire families who joined the monastic life and turned the newly-formed monastery into a prestigious and wealthy endowment.<sup>109</sup>

The “boundary aspect” of a church such as Killinaboy was important in defining the territorial divisions between ecclesiastical and secular territories in a practice going back to the Celtic Iron Age. Cult centres were usually sited on boundaries between communities. According to Sheehan “the druids believed that boundary areas bore supernatural qualities. Inauguration ceremonies and oinag [fairs] often pre-Christian in origin were also regularly held in boundary zones.”<sup>110</sup> It followed that early historic church-sites in Northern County Clare, such as Killinaboy Church, were built on its peripheral zones.<sup>111</sup>

The Saint Inghin Bhaoith monastery (the future site of Killinaboy Church) and its lands were located within the chiefdom of Cathair Commain<sup>112</sup> and carried an importance for the whole community with its devotion to the venerated saint. Sheehan also mentions the importance of these sites: “Temple Cronan must have been important from an early stage, as its special graves suggests, and this importance carried on into the twelfth century when the stone church with its fine Romanesque style carvings was erected . . . and the importance of Killinaboy is attested to

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<sup>107</sup> Michael Mac Mahon. “The Cult of Inghin Bhaoith and the Church of Killinaboy.” *The Other Clare*, Vol. 24 (2000) 12.

<sup>108</sup> Sheehan 37.

<sup>109</sup> Mac Mahon 38.

<sup>110</sup> Sheehan 42.

<sup>111</sup> Sheehan 42.

<sup>112</sup> Blair D. Gibson. “Chiefdoms, Confederacies and Statehood in Early Ireland” in *New Directions in Archaeology: Celtic Chiefdom, Celtic State*. Ed. Bettina Arnold and Blair D. Gibson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 119.

by its round tower, tau-cross and unusual east gable.<sup>113</sup> The ancient monastery of Killinaboy was devoted to the cult of Saint Inghin Bhaoith and it carried a significant ecclesiastical purpose along its boundary-areas: that of a place where inter-tribal communal transactions occurred, and diverse people mixed under the influential presence of the Church. As Sheehan states, it meant "to forge rather than to sever links."<sup>114</sup>

The Killinaboy Church is distinguished by the cyclopean masonry on its west gable with its unusual double-armed cross, reflecting the beginnings of the cult of the relics in Ireland.<sup>115</sup> Its round tower is considered by Sheehan to be the only surviving ecclesiastical feature in Northern Clare that probably dates back to the period from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It is evidence that "a full monastery existed at the site during the Early Historic Period."<sup>116</sup> In 1894, the antiquarian Thomas J. Westropp described the structure of Killinaboy as: "an oblong building, 63 feet x 20 feet 3 inches internally without chancel and extensively repaired." On the south wall, Westropp mentions an ancient window-slit, and a round-headed door 13 feet farther east where above it there is "a misshapen little figure, probably a defaced "sheela na gig."<sup>117</sup> The carved Sheela-na-gig was photographed and drawn by Westropp as part of his study.

Eugene Curry wrote about the origins of Killinaboy Church, Saint Inghin Bhaoith and the devotional respect for the cult of the saint by the local people (in particular by women) in his letter of 1939 during the Ordnance Survey in Ireland.<sup>118</sup> His description of the figure above the semi-circular doorway of the church is misrepresented as "the representation of a dwarf or stunted man on a stone over it in front,"<sup>119</sup> The figure would be described by Edith Guest in her compiled list of Irish Sheela-na-gigs in 1935 "as St. Inghean Bhaoith (daughter of Baoth), the otherwise

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<sup>113</sup> Sheehan 45.

<sup>114</sup> Sheehan 45.

<sup>115</sup> Sheehan 39.

<sup>116</sup> Sheehan 41.

<sup>117</sup> Thomas Westropp. "Churches with Round Towers in Northern Clare (Part I)." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Fifth Series, Vol. 4, 1 (March, 1894) 27.

<sup>118</sup> Curry 12.

<sup>119</sup> Curry 12.

anonymous first Abbess.”<sup>120</sup> In 1977, Jorgen Andersen described the surroundings of the defaced medieval carved female figure of Sheela-na-gig of Killinaboy and located it within the church and the cult of the saint: “[The] monastic site, marked by the church, is named after St. Inghean Bhaoith, founder and first abbess, and the figure above the door has been known under her name. Standing, with knee splayed and feet turned out, hands above thighs joined in gesture towards the lower abdomen. Round bald head, grim mouth, incision of ribs, and lean neck indicated by incised folds.”<sup>121</sup>

It is remarkable that not only is the provocative figure of the Sheela present on a religious building, but that the Sheela is venerated as a religious icon. The early Irish monastic site of Killinaboy Church thus gave birth to the cult of Saint Inghin Bhaoith. The cult was established within a large clan settlement, from which the legacy of the devotional rituals of penitentials or “turas” originated and the tradition has continued from early modern times to the present.

The origins of the early worshippers of Killinaboy Church and the Cult of Saint Inghin Bhaoith are thought to lie in the ancient branches of the Eoghanacht tribes (c. 6<sup>th</sup> century) and the Eoghanacht of Aine<sup>122</sup> who settled around The Burren and Aran Islands.<sup>123</sup> When the Dalcassians with the Ui Bhriain became ruling chiefs over the Eoghanacht tribes in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the strong cultural religious traditions of the Ui Fidgeinti [Eoghanacht branch] held on to their devotion of Saint Inghin Bhaoith. The widespread influence of the cult is seen in many of the local place names.<sup>124</sup>

People seem to instinctively search for manifestations of diverse spiritual forces; manifestations such as symbols, institutions, doctrines, and practices. Raymond Guillepsie, historian, tells that “In the mind of the early modern Irish laity, God not only existed but also His supernatural world of angels and demons were accessible to

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<sup>120</sup> Guest 115.

<sup>121</sup> Andersen 149.

<sup>122</sup> Mac Mahon 12.

<sup>123</sup> Mac Mahon 12.

<sup>124</sup> Mac Mahon 12.

them by being part of their natural world, yet He was different. He was Holy.”<sup>125</sup> Manifestations of God were for both the laity and the clergy called “Providence.” Yet its understanding implied a vast difference between the theology of the clergy and the embodiment of its powerful presence in the laity’s world reality which transcended their everyday experience.<sup>126</sup> As such, for the laity, the consciousness of God became more tangible during personal or community crisis, illness, death, famines and natural disasters. Thus in understanding this manifestation of God, Catholic Irish lay people sought a response mediated by traditional symbols of the communion, prayer or the cult of the saints.<sup>127</sup>

The cult of the saints was promoted since medieval times through hagiographical literature and the devotion to relics as channels to the power of God. In Ireland, the belief in a saint, “whether living or dead, was firmly embedded in a social network which recognized his sanctity and whose needs he was intended to respond to.”<sup>128</sup> In the understanding of the holy, lay people relied not on theological abstraction but on particular times and special places, e.g. Christmas, Easter, the Mass, or traditional sites marked by the activities of a holy man or woman in a region maintained by rituals.<sup>129</sup> For Irish lay people, the cult of the saint focused on the local Irish saint of parishes or villages where Guillespie says they were “usually a court of first appeal for local problems.”<sup>130</sup> The holy place was chosen through hagiographical lore, not by “the teachings of the clergy but the actions of a saint which sanctified a place.”<sup>131</sup> The favourite holy place for Irish devotees was the holy well with its devotional pilgrimage that entailed a spiritual cleansing. It was a cult “which spanned all sections of Irish Catholic society. Members of the nobility such as the first earl of Antrim and the third earl of Thomond visited holy wells as did the lower orders.”<sup>132</sup> Michael Carroll,

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<sup>125</sup> Raymond Guillespie. *Devoted People: Belief and Religion in Early Ireland* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997) 64.

<sup>126</sup> Guillespie 41.

<sup>127</sup> Guillespie 63.

<sup>128</sup> Guillespie 70.

<sup>129</sup> Guillespie 84.

<sup>130</sup> Guillespie 71.

<sup>131</sup> Guillespie 90.

<sup>132</sup> Guillespie 91.

sociologist, explained that the attitude of the Church hierarchy supported Irish devotional rituals insofar they were part of the doctrines stipulated in the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Devotional rituals were taken as such during the synod legislations of the 1600s, stressing that the saint's power was experienced only through the intercession of God at the holy wells. At the Synod of Drogueda in 1614, legislation was passed for the ecclesiastical province of Armagh: "Superiors should also oppose those superstitious practices which occur sometimes at wells, trees, etc. If it be certain that these waters have naturally, or through the intercession of a particular saint, the power of healing, or any virtue, the people are not to be prevented from assembling there, provided the danger of abuse be removed."<sup>133</sup>

Carroll writes that Popular Catholicism "was blissfully unconcerned with esoteric doctrines about Transubstantiation, the Virgin Birth, or the Immaculate Conception; in fact its central ritual involved walking several times around a holy well and shapeless piles of stones."<sup>134</sup> This type of "Popular Catholicism", Carroll explains, was born spontaneously at the local level within certain constraints laid down by official Catholicism, of which the rounding rituals carried a penitential value and the Irish priest could select the ritual of "making rounds" as a penance.<sup>135</sup> At the same time, the holy well was sought either to receive relief from an ailment or to release a penance.<sup>136</sup> Another goal of the Counter-Reformation was to ensure the uniformity of rituals, such as mass at a church and not in domestic places as was the Irish custom. This practice had irritated Cardinal Rinucini, papal nuncio in 1645, who reacted with disgust saying, "Tridentine bishops dispatched in mint condition from Italy" had regressed to the older Irish tradition. Yet those religious traditions were the ones which maintained Ireland as Catholic during the Counter-Reformation.<sup>137</sup>

Saint Inghin Bhaoith was a well-known venerated Irish Saint. The holy wells of Saint Inghin Bhaoith are found in Killinaboy with its "Blessed Tree" as well as in the townlands of Anneville [Inchiquin] and Ballard

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<sup>133</sup> Carroll 44.

<sup>134</sup> Carroll 40.

<sup>135</sup> Carroll 40.

<sup>136</sup> Carroll 23.

<sup>137</sup> Carroll 126.

[Inchiquin].<sup>138</sup> Eugene Curry writes about the location of holy places dedicated to the Saint in 1839 including a “Holy Well a little to the east of the Church, called after the Patron Saint, at which a Patron and Stations were formerly held on the Patron day, 29th December, and which is still resorted to for the cure of sore eyes, and for delicate children. There is a modern little stone cross over it.”<sup>139</sup>

Between 1910 and 1912, Westropp investigated the popular Irish beliefs of wells and associated customs:

Hesitation in questioning poor people too closely about their religious feelings and rites has, I fear, rendered my notes on this important subject somewhat bald. The pagan Irish, of course, revered wells, and the famous ‘King of the Waters’ in Mayo was connected with St. Patrick by early hagiographers. With the usual wise tactfulness of the ancient Irish missionaries all that was harmless was adopted into the new religion, and the wells lost none of their old observances and honour. The dedications of the Clare wells form a most valuable record, for, even when the founder of the church was forgotten, or a new patron invoked, the well usually kept the name of the ancient local saint.<sup>140</sup>

The connection of devotional rituals and cult of Inghin Bhaoith at Killinaboy is made more immediate to this thesis by an oral history that was collected as part of this thesis research and is provided in Appendix II. P.J. Curtis is an Irish author, musicologist and lecturer who grew up in Killinaboy and whose mother welcomed Barrie Cooke to the area in the 1950s. In the oral history, Curtis tells of how the Sheela was a “figure of power as late as the early ‘60s, when infertile women came to pray to her – usually in the dead of night to escape the notice of the people and especially the priests.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Mac Mahon 12.

<sup>139</sup> Curry 13.

<sup>140</sup> Thomas J. Westropp. *Folklore of Clare: A Folklore Survey of County Clare and County Clare Folk-Tales and Myths* (Ennis, Co. Clare: Clasp Press, 2000) 49.

<sup>141</sup> P. J. Curtis. Personal correspondence. 8 Dec. 2010. E-mail.

### Ballyourney Church and the Cult of Saint Gobnait

The late medieval ruins of Ballyourney Church in County Cork (Figure 3.5) “almost certainly stand on the site of . . . a 12<sup>th</sup> century [building]” according to archaeologist Michael O’Kelly.<sup>142</sup> The description of the church and relics are mentioned in several commentaries. An 1855 article in *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* by Dorothy C. Harris states that:

Near the old church in Ballyourney are the traditional foundations of [St. Gobnet’s] house. A few fields away stands St. Gobnet’s stone close to the Roman Catholic Chapel. The carving of this stone is thought by Mr. George Du Noyer to be contemporary with the Saint, circa [the] late 6<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century. There was also supposed to be a wooden statue of the Saint, still kept in Ballyourney chapel.<sup>143</sup>

A circle of stones with two upright stones, mentioned in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* in 1863, is what remains of her cloghaun or cell. According to Harris, “St. Gobnait and her nunnery not only existed, but were of importance; that St. Abban who gave her the nunnery and made her Abbess, was perhaps her brother, and seems to have died not later than 650 A.D.”<sup>144</sup> John Romilly Allen tells that from A.D. 450 to 650 there was a separate Celtic Church in Britain which he called the pre-Augustinian Church. For Romilly Allen, there was no distinctive Christian influences on the native art of Britain during those 200 years. Thus the monuments belonging to the pre-Augustinian Church consisted of rude pillar-stones with early-form incised crosses, Latin inscriptions, Celtic inscriptions in Ogams without ornament or sculpture. One exception is “St. Gobnet’s Stone at Ballyourney, Co. Cork, with a cross enclosed in a circle, surmounted by the figure of a bishop holding his crozier.”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Michael J. O’Kelly. “St. Gobnet’s House, Ballyourney, Co. Cork.” *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 57 (1952) 37.

<sup>143</sup> Dorothy C. Harris. “Saint Gobnet, Abbess of Ballyourney.” *The Journal of the Royal of Antiquaries of Ireland*. Seventh Series, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Dec 31, 1938) 272.

<sup>144</sup> Harris 275.

<sup>145</sup> John Romilly Allen. *Celtic Art in Pagan and Christian Times* (London: Methuen and Co., 1912; New York: Dover Publication, 2001) 165.

In 1937, Edith Guest examined the Church of Ballyourney, the remains of the ancient Abbey of Saint Gobnait and the medieval stone carving known as Sheela-na-gig (Figure 3.6). In the same context as in the Killinaboy Church, the stone carving has evolved into the fabric of Ballyourney church under the mantle of Saint Gobnait. Guest describes the figure as: “above a window in its south wall is sculptured in low relief a torso, credited with the name of Saint Gobonet, but also accepted by Irish antiquarian writers as a Sheela-na-gig. The term ‘Sigla na gcioc’, anglicised into ‘Sheela-na-gig’ means, if we take Sheela as a proper name, ‘Sheela of the breasts’ and is eminently applicable to the earliest figures found, though not to all examples known later.”<sup>146</sup>

George V. Du Noyer, artist and member of the Geological Survey Department also mentions the Sheela-na-gig figure in the 1860s as representing “a small rude carving on the top stone of the window, in the south wall on the nave of Ballyourney old church; it is popularly known as the effigy of St. Gobbonet, and its date to be about the 14<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>147</sup>

Local saints were also seen as a source of protection. Philip O’Sullivan Beare, nephew of Donald O’Sullivan Beare, Prince of Beare, who was travelling in 1602 “on a march from Glengarriff in County Cork arrived at Ballyourney [and] he was sufficiently mindful of St. Gobnait, to whom the village was dedicated, to make an offering to the saint and asked for her protection for the rest of his journey.”<sup>148</sup> Donnchadha O hEaluithe, linguist and lecturer at the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, said that Saint Gobnait was traditionally associated with St. Abban (6<sup>th</sup> century) who had his Cill Abbain nearby on the lower ground in the townland of Sean-chluain while Gobnait’s nunnery stood on a hill “with a good command of the valley rolling westwards towards Macroom.”<sup>149</sup> Saint Gobnait was cited in 1746 by Charles Smith who in *The Ancient and Present State of the County and City of Cork*

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<sup>146</sup> Guest 374.

<sup>147</sup> George Du Noyer. “Catalogue of 95 Antiquarian Drawings Presented to the Academy: George Du Noyer Reviewed Works.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* (1836-1869), Vol. 8 (1861-1864) 283.

<sup>148</sup> Guillespie 71.

<sup>149</sup> D. O hEaluithe. “Saint Gobnet of Ballyourney.” *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*. Vol. 57 (1952) 43.

wrote that she was an abbess of a nunnery of regular canonesses under St. Abban at “Ballyourney i.e. ‘the town of the beloved,’ six miles west of Macroom, [where there] is a small village and ruined church.”<sup>150</sup>

The devotion to Saint Gobnet is linked to her legendary journey from Oileain Arann in the Atlantic to Ballyourney, County Cork along the counties of Limerick, Waterford, Cork and Kerry. Each county holds one Cill Ghobnait that carries her memory of care for the poor, a virtue that won her sanctity, and they all celebrate her Patron Day on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February. There is no mention of her tutor, her students or her particular mission at a nunnery in Muscrai [Muscraig] where she saw her deer’s dream to establish her church. Thus Teampall Gobnatan became a religious centre of the Muscrai ui Fhloinn (Ua Floinn) [Eoghnacha clan of 6<sup>th</sup> century] along the district from An Dribseah to Buirneach (River Dripsey to Ballyourney), a territory of the Flann Clan. As in the Killinaboy monastic settlement, Saint Gobnait’s religious centre was within the chief residences at Magh Cromtha [Macroom].<sup>151</sup>

The respect and devotion for Saint Gobnet continued during the 1600s, receiving a visit from the Nuncio Rinuccini and Monsignor Massari at Ballyourney Church where a mass was officiated in October 1645. The devotional rituals at Ballyourney Church were recorded by Sir Richard Cox in 1687 as “a small village, considerable only for some holy reliquary (I think of Gobonett) which does many cures and other miracles, and therefore there is a great resort of pilgrims thither.”<sup>152</sup> In 1601, Pope Clement VIII gave his support to the Irish cause against Reformation and granted a special indulgence of ten years and quarantines to the faithful who would visit the parish church of St. Gobnet on her feast-day, and would follow the Tridentine ideology of confession and Holy Communion, pray for peace among the Christian princes, for the expulsion of heresy, and for the exaltation of the Holy Mother Church.<sup>153</sup> While Saint Gobnait’s renaissance was only for a short period, the people’s devotion to her continued unbroken. By the 1700s, the commentary on Ballyourney Church reflected the tattered state of the Catholic churches and its clergy. The resilience of devotion to Saint Gobnet is described as, “One Masshouse, One Popish

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<sup>150</sup> O hEalughthe 45.

<sup>151</sup> O hEalughthe 46.

<sup>152</sup> O hEalughthe 48.

<sup>153</sup> O hEalughthe 51.

Priest, No Fryary, no reputed Nunnery, No Popish School – but this Parish is remarkable for the Superstition paid to Gubinet's image on Gubinet Day.”<sup>154</sup>

Carroll tells how the supernatural powers of the saints embodied in the holy wells were legitimized by the official Church during confession with a penitential purpose. The water of the holy wells was important for the cure of body illnesses, but it did not have a principal role in the penitential rituals of these sites. What was central to these penitential rituals was the practice of “making rounds.”<sup>155</sup>

The devotional rituals of “making rounds” consists on walking around a well clockwise way for a specified number of times while saying the prayers of Our Fathers, Hail Marys, Creeds, and Glorias. Counting the rounds with pebbles, the devotee will deposit one to “count off” near the well in a pile until the round is complete. The Rounding rituals are also part of a series of stations that had to be rounded in a set order as shown in (Figures 3.7 and 3.8). The penitence’s value embodies the physical pain of walking barefoot or on ones knees.<sup>156</sup>

On her Pattern Day, February 11, the special devotion to Saint Gobnet is still honoured with “rounds” that last around one hour.

Go mbeannaighe Dia dhuit, a Ghobnait Naofa  
Go mbeannaighe Muire dhuit aus beannaim fein fuit;  
Is chughat a thanag a’ gearan mo sceil leat  
A’s a d’iarraidh mo leighis ar son De ort.<sup>157</sup>

May God bless you, Holy Saint Gobnait,  
And may Mary Bless you,  
And I bless you myself.  
For it is to you that I come,  
To plead my case with you,  
To request my healing,  
From you on God’s part.

At each station, the devotee goes around clock-wise and does a praying penitence. During the devotional *Tura* (penitence) at Ballyourney Church, the medieval carving figure of the Sheela-na-gig, which is named after Saint Gobnet, is included in the ritual as it is performed: The custom is to say 28 Paters, 28 Aves and the 4 Credos on the three first stations from both the exterior and interior of the ring. For the fourth station inside the church: at its

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<sup>154</sup> O hEalughthe 49.

<sup>155</sup> Carroll 30.

<sup>156</sup> Carroll 31.

<sup>157</sup> O hEalughthe 60.

eastern end a Pater, Ave and Credo are said; then to the Priest's Tomb at the right corner of the east gable a Pater, Ave and Credo are repeated. Then to the Holy Well (Figure 3.9) and the same prayers are repeated with a drink of water which completes the round. There is the "full" round ritual in which all the stations visited by the devotee follow the same pattern with the difference that this time as O hEaluighthe tells,

The encircling of the church brings the devotee back again to the west wall where he kneels on the inner circle and repeats the seven Paters and Aves and the Apostles' Creed. He rises and begins the encircling of the outer walls of the church once more, and on reaching the south wall enters into the church for the first time, having once more said his decade on his beads. He kneels at the chancel end, facing eastwards, and there says one Pater, Ave and the Apostles' Creed or Gloria. On conclusion, he rises and going to the south window rubs the effigy [Sheela-na-gig, which is known as St. Gobnet] above the window head. He goes then through the door into the churchyard and travelling ar deiseal [counter clockwise] round the church building once more while saying his decade. This brings him to priest's grave at the south corner of the east gable where he knees and says one Pater, Ave and the Apostles' Creed or Gloria. Rising, he goes westwards and at south corner of the west gable he makes the sign of the cross on St. Gobnet's bowl and thrice on himself. He rubs his handkerchief to the bowl too. Continuing westwards he reaches the churchyard gate and proceeds southwards to Gobnet's well where he says seven Paters and Aves and the words 'Ar impi an Tighearna agus Naoimh Ghobnatan mo chuid tannis d'Fhagaint anso.' He drinks of the well-water and thus concludes the "full" round.<sup>158</sup>

### 3.2 Aspects of Monasticism and Theology Related to the Sheela-na-Gig

Monasticism provides a backdrop to the evolving perception of the Sheelas and the emergence of devotional practices that grew up around the Sheela. The Christian monastic movement was a vehicle for two powerful energies: mysticism and asceticism, which helped spread Christian beliefs from the east in Egypt to the west of Europe and into Ireland. Together, mysticism with Plato's idea of the immortality of the soul, and the ascetic

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<sup>158</sup> O hEaluighthe 61.

practices, based on Greek contemplative traditions of purification and contemplation, created the fundamental basis of the early Christian monastic movement. Later on, the spread of monasticism to Western Europe occurred under influential spiritual leaders such as Athanasius, John Cassian and Martin of Tours, whose influence reached the Celtic world of Ireland. Three important figures emerged within the development of monasticism in the Irish church: St. Patrick, Columcille, and Columbanus. Under the doctrine of *homoiosis*, or the assimilation to God, these spiritual leaders became the guiding lights for the “Golden Years” of the Irish Celtic church and the distinctive views and practices of the ecclesial monastic movement reforms.<sup>159</sup>

In the history of Greek Christian mysticism, Origen’s theology of mysticism prepared the groundwork in the creation and triumph of the monastic movement in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Monasticism became a religious innovation that carried great influence, and an institution whose values have influenced Christianity to the present day.<sup>160</sup> Ideas need an institution to have effect, and monasticism provided that institution.

The hagiography of “special people” called the saints, such as Patrick, Columcille and Columbanus exemplifies the doctrine of *homoiosis*, first stated by Plato. Patrick and others were examples of this doctrine in their pursuit to imitate the perfect goodness of the gods.<sup>161</sup> St. Patrick, a captive, visionary, bishop, and missionary is the legend who has been buried in the hagiographies of Ireland. Thomas O’Loughlin, professor of Historical Theology at the University of Nottingham in England states that Patrick has been so “shamrockladen by the cultural politics of defining Irish identity that for many he has become an almost mythical figure.”<sup>162</sup> The development of monasticism in Ireland along the lines of continental thought had a drawback: St. Patrick’s aim was to create a ruling episcopate in the Roman-Britain style and that of the Continent, where the monastic element was ruled by a bishop, yet the tribal

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<sup>159</sup> Sonya Ocampo-Gooding. “Monastic Ecclesial Reform and Its Impact on the Early Development of the Irish Churches.” The University of Limerick Historical Society. *Histories Studies Society Journal*, Vol. 10 (2009) 11.

<sup>160</sup> Bernard McGuin. “The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism.” *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) xvi.

<sup>161</sup> Catherine Thom. *Early Irish Monasticism: An Understanding of Its Culture Roots* (New York: New York, 2006) xxi.

<sup>162</sup> Thomas O’Loughlin. *Celtic Theology: Humanity, World and God in Early Irish Writings* (London and New York: 2000 ) 25.

and rural Irish organization presented a deterrent to this diocesan episcopacy setting after his death in 520 A.D.<sup>163</sup> There were 100 years of silence that covered Irish religious development and organization of the nascent churches under the legendary image of St. Patrick and the account of a missionary visit of Palladius in 431 A.D.<sup>164</sup>

The strength of the monastic movement grew in importance during the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland when important monasteries were founded.<sup>165</sup> Ireland's introduction to Christianity took place during the powerful monastic movement that spread from Egypt to Asia Minor and to Western Europe during the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. The "Golden Age" of the early Irish church and culture gave Ireland the title of the "Island of Saints and Scholars" from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century, and served as a model for the rest of Europe alongside Ireland's missionary monks.<sup>166</sup>

Another of the distinctive features that emerged from the 100 years of silence under the St. Patrick and Palladius missions from the nascent Irish churches was the Hiberno-Latin writings during the six century and its ascetic praxis of monasticism. These writings and ascetic practices contributed to the shift in the theology of sin clearly stated in the Irish handbooks of penances or "penitentials." This points to the distinctiveness of the Celtic consciousness and illustrates the radicality of the Irish response to the Christian evangelium.<sup>167</sup> In particular, the Irish penitentials embodied the shift on the theology of sin which changed from being punitive and public to the post-patristic healing and private.<sup>168</sup> The penitentials were distinctive features of the insular churches (i.e. the Irish and the Welsh) in how they guided innovation and transformation into a new Christian practice and theology.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> John T. McNeill. *The Celtic Churches: A History A.D. 200 to 1200* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 69.

<sup>164</sup> Daibhi O'Croinin. *Early Medieval Ireland: 400-1200* (London, New York: Longman, 1995) 197.

<sup>165</sup> Nancy Edwards. *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 99.

<sup>166</sup> O'Croinin 196.

<sup>167</sup> O'Croinin 197.

<sup>168</sup> O'Loughlin 52.

<sup>169</sup> O'Loughlin 49.

The purpose of the Irish penitentials was to heal the penitent and to return the sinner to the community and its worship involving his/her heart for the true conversion to become real. The notion of conversion is ingrained in the Irish psyche. Druids had a place of honour in society as healers, lawyers and doctors and with the filid, they were the keepers of the stories of the Tuatha to keep the sense of community. Likewise the *Anmchara* of the Irish monastic tradition knew in detail the stories of the monks who came to them for advice. The *Anmchara* knew that healing was the primary reason for the penances and as such they did not take advantage of the “power” they had.<sup>170</sup> By keeping their ancient customs, the early Irish monastic church also gave us a cultural window into the development of the penitential rituals (or Turas) that took place in early Modern Ireland around their ancient churches and in the presence of the Sheela-na-gig.

#### Decrees of the Council of Trent and Changing Attitudes Towards the Sheela-na-gig

The Reformation in Ireland was enforced only moderately prior to 1590 and by the time an enforced Protestantism was in effect, it had to compete with the “Counter-Reformation Roman Catholicism imported by priests trained at seminaries in Europe” according to the ecclesiastical history scholar Niguel Yates.<sup>171</sup> The enforced Protestantism took a new theological view on Roman Catholicism during the 1600s to 1630s when “Calvinist became the dominant theological party in the Church of Ireland.”<sup>172</sup> This new view was expressed by the Calvinist Bishop of Derry (1616-1634), George Downham, who told a Roman Catholic in his diocese that his “religion of popery is superstitious and idolatrous, your faith erroneous and heretical, your church in respect of both apostatical, your deified Pope the head of that Catholic apostasy, and consequently Anti-Christ.”<sup>173</sup> It is in this polemical context during the 1630s that Irish Roman Catholicism grew stronger in the number of bishops while at the same time, the introduction of a reformist Counter-Reformation agenda into the Diocesan administration took effect in the midst of a

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<sup>170</sup> Thom 74.

<sup>171</sup> Niguel Yates. “The Religious Condition of Ireland 1560-1770” (PDF) (Oxford University Press, 2006) 2.

<sup>172</sup> Yates 9.

<sup>173</sup> Yates 10.

deliberate policy of persecution.<sup>174</sup> Yates tells how the Irish Roman Catholic parish clergy grew from 34 to 57 between 1630 and 1637 which gave the impulse to the decree of Tuam Provincial Synod, approved by Rome in 1634 for an enforcement of strict post-Tridentine discipline, including regulations in respect of clerical dress, keeping of registers, admission to holy orders, the solemnization of marriages, the hearing of confession and the reception of the Holy Communion.<sup>175</sup>

Along with the new ideology of the Counter-Reformation in Ireland, historian Raymond Gillespie wrote of the conflicting powers between Irish native folk beliefs and the orthodoxy of Roman Catholic theologies that arose with the implementation of the Synods. Gillespie tells how historian Carlo Ginzburg argued in his book "Night Battles" how ancient popular ideas of cosmology, witchcraft and their suppression came "under the influence of the new power relationships of the Counter-Reformation were theologized and consequently demonized and later deformed and then expurgated by the superimposition of the scheme of the educated classes."<sup>176</sup> Together with the ideas of social changes in the areas of marriage, baptism and funeral customs, and ideas on cosmology and witchcraft, there were other changes towards the imposition of theologically-formed preconceptions on the nature of beliefs in the context of the Council of Trent upon the Irish native ideas about the supernatural.<sup>177</sup> According to Gillespie, the drive of the Roman Catholic Church to impose its religious conformity in Ireland through the Synods led to condemning the Irish traditional Catholicism and the specific order that: "Priests were urged to hide sheelanagigs, prohibit invocations of the devil, prevent gathering magical herbs and stop the preparation of virility potions as well as controlling the process to holy wells and reforming behaviour at communal events such as wakes and pilgrimages."<sup>178</sup>

It is in this theological context that the presence of the image of woman developed into the perceived violation of the Decrees of the Council of Trent by the Irish Catholic Roman clergy. In the volume, "The Catholic Community in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" of the *Helicon History of Ireland*, Anthony Weir found

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<sup>174</sup> Yates 11.

<sup>175</sup> Yates 11.

<sup>176</sup> Gillespie 5.

<sup>177</sup> Gillespie 6.

<sup>178</sup> Gillespie 6.

several instances in which the medieval stone carved Sheela-na-gig was related to living Irish women noted in diocesan and provincial statutes of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Weir wrote that:

In 1631, provincial statutes for Tuam order parish priests to hide away, and to note where they are hidden away, what are described in the veiled obscurity of Latin as *images obesae et aspectui ingratae*, in the vernacular ‘sheela-na-gigs’, i.e. at that time priests had begun to take notice of these ‘fat figures of unpleasant features’ and to remove them . . . A Diocesan (Ossory) regulation of 1676 [ordered] ‘sheela-na-gigs’ to be burned. Bishop Brehan in Waterford [ordered] exactly the same thing that year . . . the Kilmore-diocesan synod excluded from all sacraments . . those whom the synod calls *gierador* – they might perhaps be described as ‘living sheela-na-gigs’.<sup>179</sup>

Weir concluded that these statutes give “support to the evidence that in some country districts ‘sheela-na-gig’ was a term used to indicate women of loose morals or simply old hags.”<sup>180</sup>

The Sheela can thus be seen as emblematic of the struggle for the minds of the common people in Ireland who were bound to both the traditional beliefs as well as the authority of the Catholic Church. If, as some believe, the Sheelas had once been used by the church as iconography to warn the people against sinful practices, it appears the Sheela came to be perceived by the Church as a threat as the Sheela was embraced and transformed in meaning by the people. It is interesting that this apparent subversion of purpose that was of concern to the Church in the 17<sup>th</sup> century reappears in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as contemporary artists re-discover the Sheela, to be inspired by it and to create art which addresses contemporary issues.

### **3.3 Marianism and the Evolution of the Irish Female Ideal**

At the time that Sheelas were being created, especially from the 12th to 15th centuries, Brehon Laws or Gaelic customs relating to marriage and dowry giving were still in effect. Though male-oriented, the Brehon Laws

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<sup>179</sup> Weir and Jerman14-15.

<sup>180</sup> Weir and Jerman14-15.

nonetheless provided substantial rights for women.<sup>181</sup> This was also a time when traditional female iconography was present in Ireland and the focus of spiritual intercession. The increased presence of the Catholic Church, especially following the Council of Trent, led to a pre-eminence of the Virgin Mary as the Irish Female Ideal and the subordination of the more traditional iconography. The Catholic Church has been associated with repression of beliefs and oppression of women in Ireland over the past centuries. The Sheela has been an “observer” of this period of oppression and, on occasion, an agent of hope and change.

The Irish economic shift in late 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in significantly more conservative attitudes towards women and the emergence of the stem-family system in rural areas of Catholic communities.<sup>182</sup> This system had a profound influence on the Irish ideology of marriage, inheritance and role of women in the home which carried on into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the plantation periods in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the great famine in 1845, the role of women in Ireland was limited. According to Gearoid O’ Tuathaigh, Professor Emeritus of History at the National University of Galway, women had no formal political rights. They held a subordinate role at home and their inheritance rights followed English common law.<sup>183</sup> Economic and social shifts in Ireland gave rise to a new form of marriage in the late 1700s, which was the aforementioned stem-family system.

Kevin Whelan, Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, has told that in Ireland, the stem-family system is correlated to the social and economic forces that divided the rich Catholics and the poor Catholics.<sup>184</sup> Between 1760 and 1840 there was large-scale speculation in leases by a new class of Catholic middlemen who traded in low rents that were below market value, bringing with this system the demise of the old

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<sup>181</sup> For a review of Brehon Laws on marriage and dowry see: Margaret MacCurtain and Donncha O Corrain, eds. *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1979; Dublin: The Women’s Press, 1978). Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O’Dowd, eds. *Women in Early Modern Ireland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

<sup>182</sup> See: Peter Gibbon; Christopher Curtin. “The Stem-Family in Ireland.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 20. 3 (July 1978) 429, 430, 431.

<sup>183</sup> Gearoid O’ Tuathaigh. “The Role of Women in Ireland under the New English Order.” *Women in Irish Society: The Historical Dimension*. Eds. Margaret Mac Curtain and Donncha O Corrain (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979) 26.

<sup>184</sup> Kevin Whelan. “An Underground Gentry? Catholic Middlemen in the Eighteenth-Century Ireland”. *Eighteenth-Century Ireland/ Irish and da chultur*, Vol. 10 (1995) 34

Irish Catholic system of the underground gentry and clans.<sup>185</sup> The new economic shift "created three effects: a sharp jump in sub-tenant's rents, the expansion of commercial farming, especially in cattle, and the enclosure (in effect privatization) of commonages to bring them into commercial production."<sup>186</sup> Those hardest hit were the small land holders and with the downsized economy, the speculative middlemen "fattened at their expense."<sup>187</sup> Whelan points out that the outcome was the rise of big ranches of up to 8000 acres in Tipperary and Limerick. With these big ranches came the agrarian revolt of the Whiteboys and the Rightboys.<sup>188</sup>

An understanding of the position of woman in the family throughout the expansionist economy of late 1700s appears within this scheme. Whelan tells of increasingly large farmer families, which are shown in William Tighe's statistical observations in County Kilkenny in 1802 and concerned the Aylwards who developed a dairy empire in the Walsh mountains<sup>189</sup> in the late 1780s. Tighe writes that,

This family consists at present of five branches who hold among them over 2000 acres including Knockmeilin Knockmoylanj, Ballybrishan and other large townlands. Their houses are small and near each other and till lately were little better than those of the poorest farmers but they have now slated them to guard against malicious burnings Whiteboys or robbers. The women of the family constantly marry in it and for this purpose are obliged to buy dispensations at a high price and if a widow marries a stranger, she loses all except what she brought with her.<sup>190</sup>

According to Whelan, the Aylwards followed the conservative Irish community values of frugality, reticence and hard work. Whelan tells that "for these rising families, a coherent family strategy was crucial, one which followed primogeniture and successful dispersal of surplus children . . . to succeed, the acquisition, retention and

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<sup>185</sup> Whelan 33.

<sup>186</sup> Whelan 33.

<sup>187</sup> Whelan 34.

<sup>188</sup> Whelan 34.

<sup>189</sup> William Tighe. *Statistical Observations Relative to the Country of Kilkenny Made in the Years 1800 and 1801* (Dublin: Graisberry and Campbell, 1802) 383.

<sup>190</sup> Whelan 36 or Tighe 384, 385.

transmission of leases was vital.<sup>191</sup> Thus, there were several restrictions for control of the family: 1) primogeniture was the key for control of the family organization, 2) the practice of endogamy within a limited geographical area, and 3) family discipline was maintained through wills, dowries and marriage settlements.<sup>192</sup> A typical will, which served to regulate a daughter's marriage behaviour, is seen in John Browne's will of Big Barn in County Wexford in 1829. Browne bequeathed, "to my daughter Ann 250 pounds sterling and to my daughter Margaret 250 pounds sterling. Should any of my daughters aforesaid transgress before marriage or marry contrary to the consultation of the Reverend James Brown, my son, she or they shall be cut off to one shilling."<sup>193</sup> Within the parental control, the arranged match was an essential element. Thus women "became the pawns of an elaborate chess game: favoured gambits were cousin marriages, double marriages, and marriages across a series of generations."<sup>194</sup> In this sense, society was based on a carefully structured endogamous marriage network holding family interests "embedded in a hard legal carapace of wills, marriage settlements, dowries and trusteeships."<sup>195</sup> As Catholics, the religious education for boys and girls of the Catholic farming class of south Leinster and east Munster was conducted by the religious houses of the Presentation, the Mercy nuns, the Christian Brothers and the Diocesan clergy. The members of these orders were drawn from these same families providing a tradition of stability and continuity. These orders were the inheritors of the Anglo-Irish Counter-Reformation culture that Michael Carroll defines as the "key to ensure that Ireland remained a Catholic nation."<sup>196</sup> Carroll explains that these same gentry elite who supported a distinctive Catholic clergy by sending their sons to the Tridentine Irish colleges of Salamanca and Santiago de Compostela

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<sup>191</sup> Whelan 37.

<sup>192</sup> Whelan 37, 38.

<sup>193</sup> Whelan 38.

<sup>194</sup> Whelan 38.

<sup>195</sup> Whelan 38.

<sup>196</sup> Carroll 148.

during the 1500s and 1600s was part of this tradition of continuity.<sup>197</sup> Thus, according to Emmet Larkin, this tradition points to the idea that "this farmer-elite was the truly nation-forming class."<sup>198</sup>

By 1908, the establishment of the National University brought total control to all levels of education financed by the state and in 1914 the nation-forming class of Catholic tenant farmers became established in the *de facto* Irish State by Parnell.<sup>199</sup> While the consolidation of the clerical-nationalist alliance benefited the larger tenant farmer and the clergy, the role of women in society became more restricted under the idealized conception of the pure and good Irish woman supported by the Catholic Church's Tridentine Marian ideology that became of significant concern for 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish feminists.

Indeed the role of women in Irish society has been shaped by both theological and economic forces. This, in turn, has affected the institutions of family, community, work and politics. Most recently there has been the phenomenon of the Irish woman rejecting the image of the idealized virtuous mother to the more independent concept of a strong and independent woman. The imagery of the Sheela-na-gig has been present in this.

Maryann Valiulis, Director at Trinity College for The Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, writes that during the Catholic debates of 1920s and 1930s, the construction of a particular identity for the modern woman was based on her role and relationship to the new State. As an example, Valiulis tells of how the VicePresident of the Executive Council and Minister for Justice, Kevin O'Higgins, who was born in the Catholic heartland of Ireland (Stradbally, County Laois) as one of sixteen children, said that "the natural and normal role for women was that of bearers of children and keepers of the home and only abnormal women thought otherwise."<sup>200</sup> Ecclesiastical arguments also supported those views based on the moral image of women as mothers but also in the definition of women within the confines of the nation.<sup>201</sup> Edward Cahill S.J. (1868-1941), Jesuit priest and theologian, stressed

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<sup>197</sup> Carroll 142.

<sup>198</sup> Emmet Larkin. *The Historical Dimesions of Irish Catholicism* (New York: Arno Press, 1976, 1984) 8.

<sup>199</sup> Larkin 113.

<sup>200</sup> Maryann Valiulis. "Neither Feminist nor Flapper: The Ecclesiastical Construction of the Ideal Irish Woman" in *The Irish Women's History Reader*. Eds. Alan Hayes and Diane Urquart (London; New York: Routledge, 2001) 153.

<sup>201</sup> Valiulis 153.

that women's duties were "especially that of bringing up the children, are such far-reaching importance for the nation and the race that the need of safeguarding them must outweigh almost every other consideration."<sup>202</sup> As such, the Church's construction of the ideal image of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish woman was defined as "being pure, modest, deferential, respectful of hierarchy, unassuming, content with one's station in life."<sup>203</sup> Both the political and religious attitudes brought dire consequences for the everyday lives of the Irish women. Their work in industry was limited. Maternal health was jeopardized by blocking information on birth control. There was no female presence in the civil service level during the early years of the Irish Free State.<sup>204</sup> Motherhood and family defined the political status of order and stability described in the 1937 Constitution as "the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State."<sup>205</sup> Not only was the ideal woman and motherhood inscribed in the Constitution but it also had to be controlled and regulated by the State, since other forms of heterosexuality were present in real life.<sup>206</sup> Single heterosexual women, unmarried mothers and lesbians were outside the parameters of the Church and outside of the State's vision of the ideal woman and mother. They were considered to be of less value or negated altogether.<sup>207</sup> Thus the imagery of the sanctified religious Madonna's purity and virtuosity in motherhood contrasts with the vilified Eve's unmarried mother status or that of lesbians, with the latter posing a risk for the security of the community.<sup>208</sup>

Elizabeth Steiner-Scott, historian, bares the facts of the hidden face of the "ideal" Irish home such as the prevalence of wife-beating, which was not reported in the press during the early years of the Irish Free State. From the Catholic perspective, the intervention on wife-beating in Irish homes was considered to be of "socialist, and even

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<sup>202</sup> Edward Cahill. "Notes on Christian Sociology. VI. The Social Status of Women. (B) the Feminist Movement. *The Irish Monthly*. Vol. 53. 619 (Jan. 1925) 28-29.

<sup>203</sup> Valiulis 156.

<sup>204</sup> Valiulis 157.

<sup>205</sup> Valiulis. "Virtuous Mothers and Dutiful Wives: The Politics of Sexuality in the Irish Free State," in *Gender and Power in Irish History*. Ed. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Dublin; Portland, Oregon: Irish Academic Press, 2009) 102.

<sup>206</sup> Valiulis. "Virtuous Mothers" 103.

<sup>207</sup> Valiulis 110.

<sup>208</sup> Valiulis 111.

communist, social policy.”<sup>209</sup> During the 1920s, two distinct occurrences give insight into the policy for prevention of wife beating in the status of the Irish women at home: While the Irish government was passing laws imposing segregation of the Irish woman at home, two American anthropologists, Arensberg and Kimball, were doing field work in Clare which revealed the living conditions of women in the home. According to Steiner-Scott, the report exposed that barren women received full blame for infertility in country districts and that it was acceptable for her husband to beat her for that. One man recalled how he would “bounce a boot off her now and then for it.”<sup>210</sup> During the 1970s, the Women’s Movement brought to light this abusive treatment of women. Refuges for battered wives were created. While the State was forced to support such measures, it opposed feminist theories on domestic abuse and asserted instead that physical abuse was due to alcoholism and not the corrupt power dynamic.<sup>211</sup>

The Irish political and religious attitude towards the ideal image of woman was thought to be a product of popular devotional spirit during the early times of the Free State. Marianism or the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is, as art historian John Turpin writes, a “socio-religious phenomenon.”<sup>212</sup> Marianism grew from French Counter-Reformation piety writings, of which the idea of “the holy slavery of Mary” came from the Jesuit St. Louis Grignon de Monfort (d. 1716). For this reason, Turpin argues that the Irish Free State in 1921 “was suffused with Marian culture.”<sup>213</sup> For example, Daniel O’Connell (1775-1847) the Lord Mayor for Dublin and Member of Parliament, was affiliated with the Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and was a devoted Marianist.<sup>214</sup> Turpin looks at the origins of this Marian devotion and the devotion it inspired which thrived in Ireland and around the Continent. There were

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<sup>209</sup> Elizabeth Steiner-Scott. “To Bounce a Boot Off Her Now and Then . . . : Domestic Violence in Post-Famine Ireland,” in *Women and Irish History: Essays in Honour of Margaret MacCurtain*. Eds. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis and Mary O’Dowd (Dublin; Niwot, Colorado: Wolfhound Press Ltd., 1997) 143.

<sup>210</sup> Steiner 143.

<sup>211</sup> Steiner 143.

<sup>212</sup> John Turpin. “Visual Marianism and National Identity in Ireland: 1920-1960.” *Art, Nation and Gender: Ethnic Landscapes, Myths and Mother Figures*. Eds. Tricia Cusack and Sighle Bhreathnach-Lynch (Hampshire; London; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003) 67.

<sup>213</sup> Turpin 70

<sup>214</sup> Turpin 68.

apparitions of the Virgin in Paris in 1830, at Knock, Ireland in 1879, and at Fatima, Portugal in 1917. Pope Pius IX's declaration of dogma of faith of the devotion to the Immaculate Conception in 1854 served to establish Mary as the new Eve<sup>215</sup> and the Marian Year was extolled by Pope Pius XII in 1954.<sup>216</sup> Turpin says that Emmet Larkin's socio-religious study explores these devotional exercises and how both the liturgical rituals and other devotional practices "provided the Irish with a substitute symbolic language and offered them a new heritage with which they could identify."<sup>217</sup> It was from the 1930s to 1960s that James Donnelly considered that the "Marian cult offered its central symbols values and devotional practices."<sup>218</sup> Devotion to Mary became central to the survival of Irish identity through Catholicism and was disseminated through all the convent schools around Ireland.<sup>219</sup> At the same time, Tridentine ritual conformity was entrenched deeply into the minds of the Irish but the older ways of beliefs in their own Irish saints and rituals were not forgotten.

Irish women had also to carry the identity of their country as Angela Martin, anthropologist and sociologist, considers "what it means materially for Irish women when they represent the Irish nation and its alterity or difference with respect to Britain, Europe, and/or other Others."<sup>220</sup> Martin refers to the concept of mimesis and embodiment to explain the representation of "difference" in the Irish women's body. As an example, Martin refers to the studies of Janice Boddy and Susan Bordo on cultural aesthetics. Boddy demonstrates how through the process of mimesis, cultural aesthetics are transformed into a material embodiment of cultural ideals which are absorbed into a body to a point that it becomes a metaphor of those cultural ideals. For Bordo, the cultural aesthetic in the context of mimesis is seen in terms of anorexia nervosa which is "an embodiment of cultural norms of femininity expressed through

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<sup>215</sup> Turpin 67, 68, 69.

<sup>216</sup> Turpin 76.

<sup>217</sup> Turpin 68.

<sup>218</sup> Turpin 68, 69.

<sup>219</sup> Turpin 69.

<sup>220</sup> Angela K. Martin. "Death of a Nation: Transnationalism, bodies and abortion in late twentieth-century Ireland." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. Ed. Tamar Mayer (London; New York: Routledge, 2000) 68.

slimness in America.”<sup>221</sup> As such Martin demonstrates how the process of mimesis is developed in the context of Irish women and the nation, with the latter centred around the Irish female body and the Virgin Mary. This is used to explain how Mary shapes the Irish female body in subtle ways. Irish women experience in their everyday lives the behaviour of femininity being materialized through their devotional practice to Mary. This behaviour is directed to represent and manifest the ideal of Mary in their own “essence,” i.e. in their behaviour, motherhood and their relationship with others.<sup>222</sup> Those embodiments are felt by women through the ideal image of Mary and affect how Irish women experience their bodies because they “are mimetic of Mary. It is through mimetic performance that Irish women come to embody femininity and, by extension the Irish nation.”<sup>223</sup> Therefore, mimetic performance which involves the Irish woman and Mary is experienced through the Marian devotional practices that reflect the idea of motherhood and how the feminine body is regulated. It is in this context that Martin points out how the anxieties of the nation’s boundaries appear in Irish women’s bodies through constitutional attempts to define the limits of women’s bodies -- as in the abortion and divorce campaigns. Those cases have presented both the Virgin Mary’s image and the values that have “functioned as an important symbol of Ireland’s radical alterity with respect to the rest of the European Union and has also served to foreground the contested nature of women’s bodies within these political debates.”<sup>224</sup> The experience of mimesis in Irish women’s bodies through Mary and the nation is, for Martin, not only the construction of feminine materiality but also entails its regulation through gendered division of labour and states laws in the present.<sup>225</sup>

In her analysis on the Sheela-na-gigs, Catherine E. Karkov, art historian at the School of Fine Arts, History and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds, says that “the process of creating meaning is important, as the sheela-na-gigs developed out of a continental context but have been changed over the centuries into

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<sup>221</sup> Martin 68.

<sup>222</sup> Martin 69.

<sup>223</sup> Martin 69.

<sup>224</sup> Martin 71.

<sup>225</sup> Martin 83.

representations of a distinctly Irish past, often set against a postcolonial present.<sup>226</sup> Karkov observes that while the Sheela-na-gig has been linked to the women's characters in history and fiction, at the same time the figure has rejected the direction to be positioned in a specific role, meaning or interpretation. In this context, Karkov defines this resistance in the words of Eamonn Kelly as, "the process of redefinition is ongoing."<sup>227</sup> Sheela-na-gigs in their process of time and space have become "icons of women's power by contemporary artists and feminist alike."<sup>228</sup> For example, the celebrations of *Dublin Millenium* in 1988 included Cathleen O'Neill's feminist poster, "*The Spirit of Women*" (Figure 3.10) and presented a ". . . marginal, counterhegemonic representations of the Millennium . . . which attempted both to commemorate former Dublin women – a few who are not well known, but could be, and to protest against the consistent exclusion of women from the more widely distributed representation of Dublin history."<sup>229</sup>

O'Neill's poster, Molly Mullin states, was singled out as "troublesome" in the *Irish Times* and shopkeepers refused to sell it because of its grotesque graphic design. O'Neill explained that she chose the "slim, decorative border of sheela-na-gig on her poster" because she "was reclaiming a positive woman's symbol for the Millennium."<sup>230</sup> For Mullin, it was clear evidence of "subversive historical representation in which Cathleen O'Neill's Sheela-na-gig rebels against constructions of Irish femininity in which women are meant to be chaste, passive."<sup>231</sup> At the same level, Mullin considers that Sheela-na-gigs contested "supporting narratives particularly those in which the past is repressive for women, modernity is liberating, and in which the Catholic Church has always sought the same control over women's bodies as it does at present."<sup>232</sup> On another front, Karkov comments on the controversial

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<sup>226</sup> Karkov 313.

<sup>227</sup> Karkov 313.

<sup>228</sup> Karkov 328.

<sup>229</sup> Molly Mullin. "Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference." *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 17. 1 (Spring, 1991) 329.

<sup>230</sup> Mullin 31.

<sup>231</sup> Mullin 47.

<sup>232</sup> Mullin 48.

debates brought by a visitor denied access to study the Sheela-na-gig collection at the National Museum of Ireland in 1987. Karkov tells how the National Museum was “unwittingly cast as a grotesque, tyrannical, and cannibalistic parent, keeping dangerous progeny hidden deep within its bowels.”<sup>233</sup> In collaboration with the National Museum of Ireland, several Sheela-na-gigs were part of the exhibition *From Beyond The Pale: Art and Artist at the Edge of Consensus* in 1994. For Karkov, the Sheela-na-gig’s presence “was also as combined symbols of a powerful female body and a lost Irish past.”<sup>234</sup>

The shifting regard for the Sheela and Virgin Mary over time mirrors the shifts in society. We do not quite know why Sheelas were initially installed on religious buildings such as the churches in Killinaboy and Ballyvourney, but they became the subject of cult worship. The dominant influence of the Catholic Church then led to the Sheela-based icons becoming subordinate to the Irish image of women as pure and good through the mimetic links with the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Mary was the beacon of female spirituality and the female ideal. Further suppression of the Sheela imagery led almost to their eradication. They survived however, and the development of feminism and other liberating social forces have led to renewed attention to the Sheela as a source of spirituality. The cultural heritage of the old beliefs and flexibility of new spiritual approaches can be seen to persist as seen with the story of the Behy Sheela. Amid this arc, it is interesting to examine the inspirational role that the Sheela played for Barrie Cooke from the late 1950s onward - at a time when Irish society remained quite conservative and the liberating forces of feminism and sexuality were only beginning to emerge as a presage to the social revolution of the 1960s.

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<sup>233</sup> Karkov 328.

<sup>234</sup> Karkov 329.



Figure 3.1 Killinaboy Church. Double-armed cross on the west gable. Photograph taken in 1943. Collection of Clare County Library; JPEG file.



Figure 3.2 Killinaboy church and round tower. Man on horse cart along the road of *Bothar-na-Mac-Riogh* to Corofin. Picture taken by Thomas J. Westropp, 1901; Westropp Collection, Clare County Library; JPEG file.

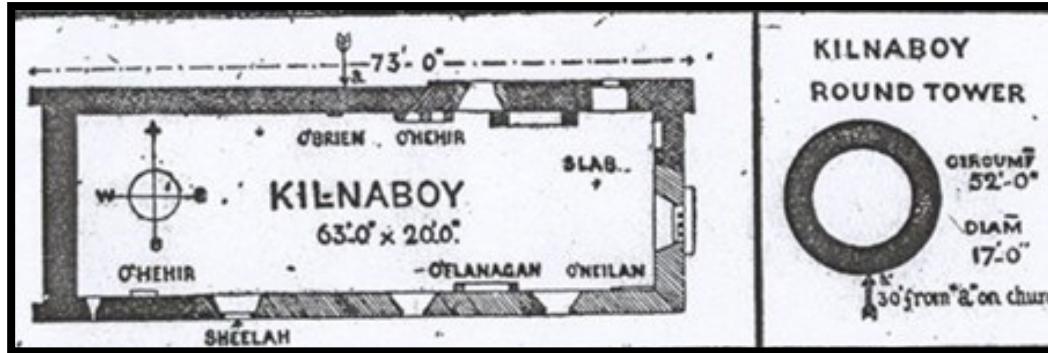


Figure 3.3 Killinaboy plan with St. Inghine Bhaoith (Sheela-na-gig) from "Churches with Round Towers in Northern Clare (Part III)" by Thomas J. Westropp: J. of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, Fifth Series, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Dec. 1894), 334.

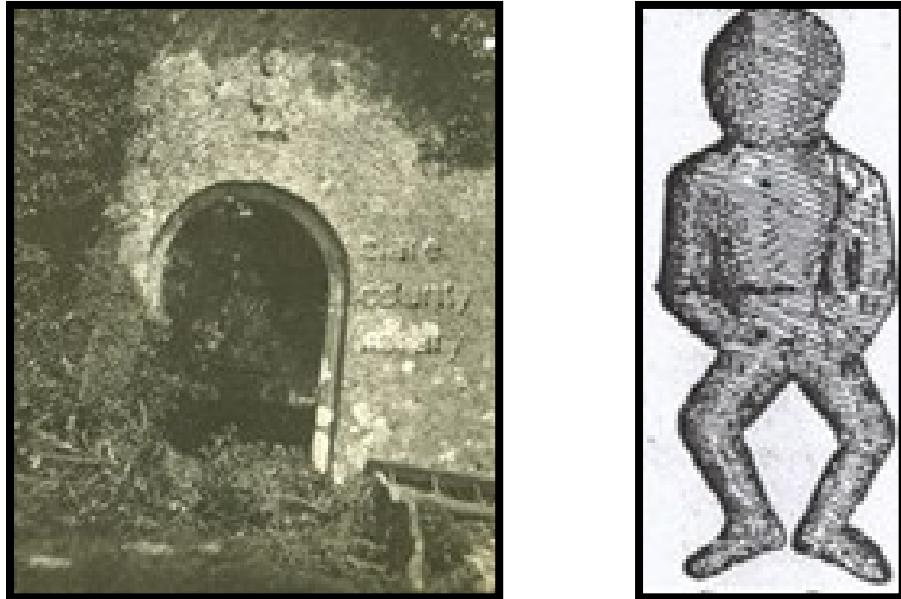


Figure 3.4 Sheela-na-gig over the rounded door of the south wall. Drawing taken from both a rubbing and a photograph by Thomas J. Westropp in 1894; Westropp Collection, 1898; Clare County Library; JPEG file.



Figure 3.5 Ballyourney Church, County Cork, (12<sup>th</sup> century), southwest side; Web <<http://www.megalithicireland.com/>>.



Figure 3.6 Sheela-na-gig over rounded window on the southwest side of Ballyourney Church, County Cork; Web <<http://www.megalithicireland.com/>>



Figure 3.7

Site of devotional pattern ritual at Ballyourney Church, County Cork; Web  
<http://www.megalithicireland.com/>

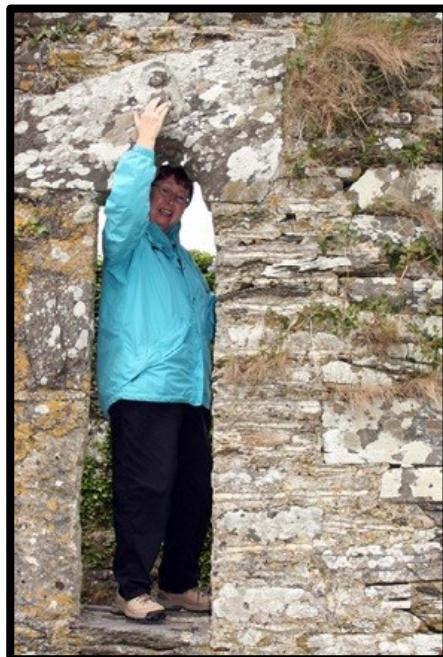


Figure 3.8

Visitor touching "Saint Gobnet" (Sheela-na-gig figure). Web. 2008.  
<http://www.mytripjournal.com/pv/377519-15-1-0-0-Anne-found-the-Sheelanagig/>



Figure 3.9      Holy well at Ballyourney Church which is a station on the rounds made in devotion to Saint Gobnait (2011). Photo courtesy of Eilis O'Connell.



Figure 3.10      Catherine O'Neill's feminist poster "The Spirit of Woman" for the Dublin Millenium (1988). Molly Mullin, "Representations in History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference." *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 17.1 (Spring 1991).

## Chapter 4 Barrie Cooke: The Flow of Water and the Flux of Nature

One of the first works of Barrie's that I saw was a Sheela-na-Gig, half painting and half modeled clay, a kind of river reliquary in which the little pelvic arching creature is on her back in what is obviously the bed of a stream. This could as easily have issued from the hand that modeled the Willendorf Venus as from the one that had done its apprentice work under the guidance of Kokoschka: it was a votive object as well as a self-aware, post-Freud, post-Fraser image, and the way it combines a relish of the specific properties of paint and clay with an awareness of the ecological, the psychological and the anthropological was typical of the artist's vision throughout his whole career. Seamus Heaney.<sup>235</sup>

The Sheela-na-gig has been a source of inspiration for Barrie Cooke since 1955 when, as a young man of 22, he walked across the field near his rustic home in Killinaboy and saw a Sheela-na-gig over the door of the ruins of a medieval church (Figure 4.1). Sheela-inspired images figured prominently in Cooke's art during the early 1960s. It was a time when images of female nudity were severely restricted by the definitions of obscenity in Ireland, but some allowance could be made for these medieval images located on church walls. The Sheela image thus became an acceptable vehicle for Cooke to use in exploring his interests in the female form, natural forces, flow and the land. Cooke undertook efforts to raise awareness of the Sheela from an archaeological perspective. Cooke moved away from the Sheela image artistically in the 1970's. In 2009, Cooke once again examined the Sheela in a series of watercolour paintings. A more complete understanding of the influence of the Sheela requires, a brief review of Cooke's life, artistic themes and some related works.

### Beginnings

Barrie Cooke was born in Cheshire, north-west England, in 1931. He recalled the early years of his childhood: "I've forgotten the name [of the boarding school]. I think I deliberately obliterated it. I've spent most of my life getting over it. I went to Wrekin College in Shropshire for about a year after that. You were taught that every

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<sup>235</sup> Seamus Heaney. "Total Absorption." *Profile 10: Barrie Cooke* (Oysterhaven, Kinsale, Co. Cork: Gandon Editions and the artist, 1998) 6.

emotion you have, you squash. I think that's why I had difficulty. Painting was the only thing I could let go with.”<sup>236</sup> Cooke’s father was English and mother was American, though her grandfather had emigrated to the United States from Donegal, County Donegal. Cooke and his parents left England in 1947.<sup>237</sup>

Cooke had two strong interests from his early adolescence onward: biology and literature, “I intended to be a fishery biologist and was accepted by both Cornell and Harvard. As for literature, my parents weren’t art people. That was one of the benefits of Harvard. D. H. Lawrence was the biggest influence on my life and on Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath [who were friends of Cooke at Harvard].”<sup>238</sup> Cooke defines himself when he said, “I loved Lawrence; he was like me. He was a countryman. Ted was a countryman.”<sup>239</sup>

Cooke recalled his first experience at Harvard, “My first week was in a classroom filled with pre-med students, all grossly more able than me, and I realized then that that wasn’t on. I took a course in art history, and the pleasure of seeing slides of paintings was just so immense. I realized then that I wanted to paint.”<sup>240</sup> Cooke combined his studies at Harvard with informal night classes at the Boston Museum School. He also enrolled for two summers at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a prestigious school and artist’s residence in Maine that taught traditional figuration. Visiting lecturers at Skowhegan included Jack Levine, an advocate of social realism who was committed to figurative art, Theodoros Stamos and David Smith.<sup>241</sup> Cooke was also drawn to the abstract works of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, William Baziotes and Willem de Kooning. “I didn’t understand them. It’s not art, I kept saying to myself. Yet I was drawn to them and I just couldn’t bring myself to admit it.”<sup>242</sup> Cooke felt more connected to Figurative Expressionism with painters such as Chaim Soutine, Oskar Kokoschka and Max Beckmann,

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<sup>236</sup> Vera Ryan. *Movers and Shapers 2: Irish Visual Art 1940-2006* (Cork: The Collin Press, 2006) 260.

<sup>237</sup> Ryan 257.

<sup>238</sup> Brian McAvera. “Empirical Investigations.” *Irish Art Review* (2002), Vol. 20. 2 (Summer, 2003) 60, 62.

<sup>239</sup> Barrie Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>240</sup> Niall, McMonagle. “Actual Vitality.” *Profile 10: Barrie Cooke* (Cork: Gandon Editions and the Artists, 1998) 14.

<sup>241</sup> Karen Sweeney. *Barrie Cooke: Irish Museum of Modern Art* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011) 16.

<sup>242</sup> Aidan Dunne. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne: With Contributions by Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, John Montague* (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1986) 26.

who he felt "perhaps fitted in better [with his own emerging style]."<sup>243</sup> Cooke graduated from Harvard in 1953 and had his first show at the Behn-Moore Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>244</sup> A review of the show in *The Harvard Crimson* said that, "In an age when the young painter with talent is more often than not won over by the forces of abstract or non-objective art, it is an increasingly rare pleasure to run across a new artist who has talent and an interest in portraiture at the same time. In his first one-man show at the Behn-Moore Gallery, Barrie Cooke shows that he has both."<sup>245</sup>

#### Arrival in Ireland and Kokoschka

Cooke considered a return to England in 1953 but found it a "grey, dismal place, regimented, stifling and austere."<sup>246</sup> Instead, he travelled to Ireland. Cooke recalled the sense of freedom and openness as he walked down the gangplank on his arrival in Dublin.<sup>247</sup> Cooke had a letter from Professor Jack Sweeney of Harvard and two references, "Nial Montgomery the architect, and the other Seamus Delargy [Director of the Irish Folklore Commission]. The next day Delargy brought me to the Burren and to the River Fergus. We saw trout rise. That was the exact spot near Kilnaboy that Dick Harris had said was the best dry-fly river in Europe . . . I found the cottage within three days. I stayed for two years."<sup>248</sup>

Cooke held his first solo art show in Dublin in 1955 and received a scholarship to study with Oskar Kokoschka in Salzburg.<sup>249</sup> Kokoschka came to be an important influence in giving Cooke the confidence and direction to pursue a more instinctive style of painting. He recalled that Kokoschka:

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<sup>243</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke* by Aidan Dunne. (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery) 26.

<sup>244</sup> Ryan 264.

<sup>245</sup> John A. Pope. "The Argoer". *Harvard Crimson*, Jan. 18 (1954).

<sup>246</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke*. (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery) 27.

<sup>247</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke*. (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery) 27.

<sup>248</sup> Ryan 259.

<sup>249</sup> "Barrie Cooke." Irish Expressionist Artists. Biography. Paintings. *Encyclopedia of Art*. 2010. Web. Aug. 2010. <<http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/irish-artists/barrie-cooke.htm>>

. . . wasn't interested in teaching painting, because it can't be done, but he was interested in helping people to see. Very few people see things on their own. Children do, but only for a very short time. Adults see things through a social haze, through their upbringing, or through other people's eyes. It's very difficult to see things through your own eyes, and yet very simple. And Kokoschka tried to teach people how to look – and he gave me confidence and faith in my own eyes.”<sup>250</sup>

“Kokoschka aimed for sensory experience over theory, which could be done inwardly through a creative seeing based on the belief that the world around was in constant flux. Life-models moved continuously, and students used watercolour to capture the moment.”<sup>251</sup>

Cooke added that “With Kokoschka I learned to trust my instinct . . . He wasn't a brain at all; far from it. He taught me to look. Whatever you see - if you see it well enough, if you see it strongly enough, you can draw it. That's all he taught.”<sup>252</sup>

#### Killinaboy and Sheela-na-gigs

Cooke's connection to the Sheela-na-gig has a very specific origin: “In 1955 I lived in Kilnaboy, County Clare, and in the ruined church there was a Sheela-na-gig over the door. I was intrigued by this. I went through local archaeological journals, traced about forty in Ireland and photographed them. Then I made a [Sheela] figure in clay, put bales of turf over the thing and fired it.”<sup>253</sup> Later Sheelas, which tended to be larger, were made in a more traditional way, using a kiln.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Dermot Healy. *Barrie Cooke: A Retrospective*, essay by Aidan Dunne, interview with Dermot Healy, poems by Seamus Heaney, review by John Montague (Dublin: Nissan Art Project in collaboration with the RHA and in association with *The Irish Times*, 2003) 25.

<sup>251</sup> Sweeney 16.

<sup>252</sup> Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>253</sup> McMonagle 43.

<sup>254</sup> See: Nicola Gordon Bowe. “From the Edge: Art and Design.” *Circa Contemporary Art in Ireland*. Article reproduced from *Circa 20th Ireland*, a special accompanying *Circa 92*, Summer 2000, produced in collaboration with the National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

Cooke thought of the Sheela “as primitive art and something to do with fertility . . . but I try not to think about [it’s origins] . . . But I do. I do a great deal, but on the other hand, I try not to. I try not to do consciously. I was originally convinced that it was originally a pagan fertility figure and I checked and checked and could not find [support for that].”<sup>255</sup>

Cooke is defiant in rejecting conscious motivation or structures to his art. This attitude is also present in rejecting a detailed or mechanistic analysis of the factors that led to the creation of his Sheela-based art:

Why was I so interested? I think sex had something to do with it . . . I have always been interested in sex . . . I thought about sex but I didn’t know about it. Whereas now, everyone talks about sex, everyone knows about it . . . It was one of the things that attracted me to the Sheela. There were things in it, in her, that you would not normally see; that would not normally be discussed . . . I know that there were things there that I was forbidden to discuss. There was a critic who said it [the Sheela] was very interesting work, but it was too much like sculpture and painting. There should be a difference between the two. I know that there should not be a difference. I knew that for certain. It was not totally sexual. It was one of the motivations.”<sup>256</sup>

The Irish poet John Montague recalls that when he first met Barrie Cooke (in 1959) he was “immediately struck by this intense, dark, bearded young man. English by birth, American by education, who had chosen to live in Clare, one of the more remote counties of Ireland.”<sup>257</sup> Montague said that:

Once, when I was in County Clare, Barrie Cooke brought me to see a ruined church near the Burren. In the interior, there was a delicate crucifixion, carved in stone, but over the porch stood an unmistakable fertility figure, a grosser, mocking version of the famous Venus of Laussel found near Lascaux, where European man began. That it had remained so long (I understand that there are over sixty in Ireland) shows that medieval Ireland knew the power of the Mother

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<sup>255</sup> Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>256</sup> Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>257</sup> John Montague. “The Painting of Barrie Cooke.” *Barrie Cooke By Aidan Dunne* (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1986)14.

Goddess, the primal principle of fecundity. Cooke's version of this theme, the presiding deity of the present stage of his art, restores this lost aspect of our heritage. A clay figure, as though created by a swirl of the riverbed (there are even real pebbles) it has almost hallucinatory power. But it is more the power of ritual gesture than of tasteful contemplation, and it seems to me to suggest the central fascination of Cooke's work: how closely can an artist expose himself to flux, and still transpose his findings into that other form of life called art?<sup>258</sup>

Montague recalls seeing this clay figure at the initial Independent Artists show in 1960. Cooke was given special prominence at the show with "ten paintings, many of them quite large, done in deep eddies of colour, [which] created a general effect of almost tropical luxuriance . . . Beside the oils, there was a small figure of a sprawling woman, done in terra cotta, by which the artist set great store."<sup>259</sup>

Cooke created approximately eight Sheelas during this time, mostly as mixed-media art objects. Four of these are shown in Figures 4.2 – 4.5. An exact number is not available and there does not appear to have been a careful record made of these creations. Cooke's different Sheela creations are not derived from different archaeological Sheelas, but instead, as Cooke said from a "Sheela of my own invention . . . The Killinaboy did inspire some – and those were the first two that I did."<sup>260</sup>

The first, *Sheela-na-gig* (1959) (Figure 4.2), remains in the possession of Barrie Cooke. This small figure is framed in wood imbued within nature, rocks and water. The female figure is modeled in terracotta ceramic clay of brownish-orange colour with splayed legs, headless and no arms, showing her breasts and incised ribs. The Sheela-na-gig protrudes from an irregular, brownish-orange terracotta surface that has been formed around like a grotto; a protected sacred space in nature, against the surrounding bluish watery surface. At the bottom of her legs, blue pebbles seem dispersed, as if being pushed by the current of a river that has eroded the surface at her feet showing the dark rock of a cliff.

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<sup>258</sup> Montague 16.

<sup>259</sup> Montague 13.

<sup>260</sup> Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

Cooke's imagery of the medieval Sheela-na-gig carvings became a central motive in his one-man show when he opened at the Hendricks Gallery in Dublin in March 1962. Among Cooke's oil paintings, watercolour paintings and drawings, four Sheela-na-gig's are listed. This exhibit likely included the *Sheela-na-gig I* (1961) (Figure 4.3) which was again exhibited in 2011 at a retrospective held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). *Sheela-na-gig II* (1961) (Figure 4.6) is an oil-on-board painting that Barrie Cooke made for his friend, Robert Parker, who he had met at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in the 1950s. Parker's recollection of the painting is: "We swapped pictures sometimes in the 1950s. I think he was living in Corofin, in County Clare, in very rustic circumstances, i.e. no heat, light or water. He was doing a lot of paintings of that figure and describing its place in pre-Christian Ireland --- all new to me. I think he made some little clay ones too. It was all shooting, fishing and painting Sheela na gigs."<sup>261</sup>

Barrie Cooke's second exhibition at the Hendricks Gallery, in 1964, revisited his interpretation of the Sheela-na-gig image. Desmond Fennell, an Irish writer and art critic, said that seeing Cooke's paintings made him pause because of Cooke's obsession with:

an important segment of the human soul, with that part of us which finds its mirror image in earth, wind, flowing water, disheveled hair and animality trying to transcend itself. It is a welcome experience today to find art even a partial confession to essential human nature. Since human nature is essentially religious, it is hardly surprising that the part which interests Cooke should come consecrated to a great god: Dionysius. I had looked around at his lithe and swift female nudes, at his crouching, lying and washing women, and I had noticed that none of them had a face. Then I saw a single portrait head of 'Harriet' and thought, before I had looked at the title of a Maenad. Cooke is not interested in woman, the human being. He is interested on those aspects of her which he can use as symbols of frenzy, of wild nature, of reproduction and of soulless religion doing its best to have a soul. Water and woman are as closely linked in Barrie Cooke's consciousness as they have always been in the consciousness of primitive man – and of civilized man to the extent that he is primitive. A fascination: earth and woman come together

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<sup>261</sup> Robert Parker. Personal correspondence. May 29. 2012. E-mail.

in Sheela-na-gig for him. He has two canvases covered with delicately coloured earth and stones, realistic re-creation of small parts of the earth's surface. They are the work of a pious devotee.<sup>262</sup>

The 1964 Hendricks exhibition likely included the *Sheela-na-gig* (1962-1963), shown in Figure 4.4, which is perhaps the most famous of Barrie Cooke's Sheelas and which is presently in the Hugh Lane Museum in Dublin. The different colour and texture of the clay figure indicates that this was made using a kiln, as discussed above. In this mixed media on board artwork, Cooke has transplanted the imagery of the enigmatic carved figure he first saw at the Church of Killinaboy in the late 1950s to create a womanly grotto landscape. Cooke modeled the figure in unglazed clay which protrudes as Joanna Shepard (Head of Conservation, Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane) describes as, "from a barren, semi-monochrome landscape of smeared concrete and dripped paint, on to which rocks and collaged, conveying a raw, primitive energy."<sup>263</sup> Shepard tells how Cooke acknowledges the paradox of these sexually explicit carved figures being present on Roman Catholic churches "in a country that had, in the past, pronounced sexual taboos."<sup>264</sup> The figure is especially intriguing in how these "fertility symbols . . . embody the force of the landscape" and thus reflect Cooke's interest in the natural processes of regeneration, decay, fertility and sexuality.<sup>265</sup> Shepard interprets the headless figure with truncated limbs as "a universal mother god" who evokes the idea of "mankind's inextricable link to the land, its rhythms and its forces."<sup>266</sup>

By the early sixties, Cooke was receiving increased attention in Ireland. Brian Fallon described Barrie Cooke in the *Irish Times* as "the best young artist in the country."<sup>267</sup> In 1965 Cooke had a solo exhibition at the Osborne Gallery in New York where he took his imagery of the Sheela-na-gig and the juxtaposition of woman and

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<sup>262</sup> Desmond Fennell. "Show has Air of Delight." *Irish Times* (April) 1964.

<sup>263</sup> Joanna Shepard. *Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane* (London; New York: Merrell Publishers Ltd. 2006) 96.

<sup>264</sup> Shepard 96.

<sup>265</sup> Shepard 96.

<sup>266</sup> Shepard 96.

<sup>267</sup> Brian Fallon. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne: With Contributions by Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, John Montague* (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1986) 7.

nature to a new audience. The invitation card included a comment by the art critic John Canaday, who said (in the context of a previous show):

My choice for the best painter in the show would be Barrie Cooke, who coincidentally is also one of the best painters in the current high-low, hodge-podge of a thousand paintings from sixty nations that make up the Paris Biennale . . . He is a strong painter, abstract at first glance, who reveals his pictorial elements slowly . . . an extraordinarily good painter who . . . is one of the rare artists who seem able to incorporate the esthetic lessons of abstraction with the expressive potential of nature and the figure.<sup>268</sup>

The catalogue for the 1965 New York exhibition also lists *Woman in the Burren* (Figure 4.7) which can be seen as an extension of the Sheela creations. A nude female figure is present, but unlike the previous Sheela images, the figure is placed in the context of a natural background, integrating Cooke's elemental themes of woman and the land.<sup>269</sup> While the association of woman and nature may now be seen as cliché, it was a novel and important part of the feminism in the 1960s and into the 1970s. The program for Barrie Cooke's third exhibition at the Hendricks Gallery, in 1966, featured the female nude and the enigmatic imagery of the Sheela-na-gig.<sup>270</sup>

Cooke speaks of his role in raising consciousness in the Sheela-na-gig as an archaeological object over and above its role in artistic inspiration: "No one was serious about them then [when Cooke first saw the Sheela in 1955]. At that time historians were embarrassed. Now there is a pub in Sligo called Sheela-na-Gig."<sup>271</sup> While Cooke was living in Jerpoint, County Kilkenny, he met an archaeologist who was interested in the Sheela-na-gig:

One day I met a young Danish archaeologist, Jorgen Andersen, a student of P. V. Glob [Danish archaeologist, 1911-1985] who wrote 'The Bog People'. Andersen wanted to write a book on the Sheelas in French – *Les Femmes Sauvages d'Irlande*. He wrote the first book, *The Witch in the Wall*. There is a church in Herefordshire near Wales where there is a dateable Sheela. They say

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<sup>268</sup> John Canaday. *Barrie Cooke*. Osborne Gallery, Exhibition Nov. 19 - Dec. 11, 1965, New York: n. pag.

<sup>269</sup> Canaday n. pag.

<sup>270</sup> The Ritchie Hendricks Gallery. *Barrie Cooke*. June - July, 1966: n. pag.

<sup>271</sup> Ryan 277.

that they never appeared on churches before the 8<sup>th</sup> century but things were moved around.

What I used to do was go to the National Library. I'd learn from the periodicals.<sup>272</sup>

Cooke not only read and developed his own conception of the Sheela-na-gigs, but also sought them out:

There was said to be one near Fethard. Sonja [his wife, at that time, artist Sonja Landweer] and I went down and spent two days looking for it. It was covered in ivy. Six months later I took Nuala Ni Dhomhaill down to see it and it was gone. It had been pried off the wall. There is one in NIHE [Northern Ireland Housing Executive]. It came from a school teacher's garden. I think the Hunts [Hunt Museum in Limerick] got hold of it.<sup>273</sup>

#### Nudes and Nature

In the early 1970s Cooke moved away from depictions of the Sheela to explore other themes, moving from studies of fish, to flowing waters in the landscape, to bloody carcasses, to the process of bone formation and to portraits. The 1971 exhibition *2 Deeply: One Hundred Paintings by Barrie Cooke and Camille Souter* in Dublin marked Cooke's move towards some related subjects. Bruce Arnold, an Irish art critic, describes Cooke's insight into nature and painting in terms of the artist as a huntsman:

Cooke hunts for reality. He digs and probes for what is really there, be it in bone and flesh, in water flowing over rocks, in the conjunction of trees and fields, in the heavy, flaccid carcass of a dead animal. He has both the directness and cunning of a huntsman, and it is no surprise – more, it is a help – to know that he shoots and fishes with skill and success. But what of these qualities in his paintings? The directness is there in the assault on his subject. When he paints a nude it is just that: Full, vital, sensuous, erotic. He does not extenuate with imagery. He is almost careless of the framework. He moves in with sure instinct to what can quite legitimately be called 'the kill', the pinning down in his canvas of the one thing he must paint. What, then, of the cunning? An artist as direct as Cooke cannot afford many mistakes. His raid on his subject is by its nature tempestuous. Even in his landscapes and bog pictures there is a sense of turmoil, of

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<sup>272</sup> Ryan 278.

<sup>273</sup> Ryan 278.

capturing reality just as it is, of first preserving life that is there, then enriching it so that it will go on living in the painting. It has to work, he seems to be saying, and I will bring to bear all the skills I have in order to achieve that single aim.<sup>274</sup>

Barrie Cooke often returns, either explicitly or implicitly, to the themes of nature and water. *Woman in the Burren II* (1976) (Figure 4.8) is one of a series of paintings of which the Irish poet, John Montague, writes “Cooke was among the first to suggest Clare’s hidden richness, to which he pays homage.”<sup>275</sup> Cooke has “walked every inch of the Burren” and knows it well.<sup>276</sup> In *Woman in the Burren II*, Cooke situates the sculptural female figure in the centre of square-cut rock in the gridded slabs with her feet firmly planted in a fissure, like the medieval Sheela-na-gig female figure. She embodies the primal consciousness of a unified nature.<sup>277</sup>

Cooke has painted and exhibited many nudes. While the Sheela images might be seen as an entry into this subject matter, made during more conservative times, Cooke’s nudes are more sensual and quite distinct from the Sheela images. Niall McMonagle, the Irish poet, said that the series of Cooke’s nudes received harsh reviews by students, who labeled them as “predator art”, yet Cooke feels that “when I’ve painted nudes, it’s a celebration of their bodies and their personalities, and that to me has nothing to do with politics.”<sup>278</sup> Cooke has painted nudes through five decades. According to Aidan Dunne, the *Irish Times* art critic, “Each of them is a blend with a dynamic background that often flows like water even if they nominally consist of a sheet or a blanket.”<sup>279</sup> Cooke’s nudes do share the physicality and earthiness of the Sheela-na-gig.<sup>280</sup> The nudes also at times look back to the Old Masters’ reclining poses as in *Long Nude* (2006) and incorporate modern language: “She is not a goddess or a nymph but

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<sup>274</sup> Bruce Arnold. *2 Deeply 100 Paintings by Barrie Cooke and Camille Souter* (Dublin: The Carroll Building Grand Parade, 1971) 11.

<sup>275</sup> Montague. “Barrie Cooke.” *Representing Art in Ireland* (Cork: Fenton Gallery and the Artists, 2008) 46.

<sup>276</sup> Ryan 260.

<sup>277</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne* (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery) 76.

<sup>278</sup> McMonagle 16.

<sup>279</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne* (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery) 117.

<sup>280</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne* (Belfast: The Douglas Hyde Gallery) 117.

she has been transformed into a sexual desirable presence.”<sup>281</sup> Cooke says that when he paints a nude, he strives for two conflicting aims, “I like it to be a particular body, yet I want it to be any body -- just light on skin.”<sup>282</sup> As a celebration of bodies, the nudes embody the personification of the water’s flowing energy, which play an important element in Cooke’s work recalling the fertility of the earth and the consciousness of spirit within the body. The Sheela may be seen as Cooke’s entrée into this line of thought at a time (i.e. in the early 1960s) when the concept of connecting women and the female body with more basic natural elements was a progressive and somewhat novel thought.

#### Later Works and Lifetime Themes

Barrie Cooke trained as a realist, but was also drawn to Abstract Expressionism. His work reflects a distinct hybridization of both styles, which is a reason his work reveals, “a search for abstract shapes that embody essential principles of natural structure and growth.”<sup>283</sup> This perspective continues to be held, twenty years later, by Patrick T. Murphy, director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery. In 1986 Murphy stated that, “Cooke is simply one of the most important artists working in Ireland today both in terms of technical virtuosity and unique vision.”<sup>284</sup> A retrospective of Cooke’s work was held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in 2011 on the occasion of Cooke’s 80th birthday. In the catalogue, the director of the IMMA, Enrique Juncosa said that, “Barrie Cooke is one of Ireland’s foremost painters to have emerged since the fifties.”<sup>285</sup> Consistent with this acclaim, Cooke has been a member of the *Aosdána* [*aos dana* or “people of the arts,” an affiliation of creative artists in Ireland] since 1981.<sup>286</sup>

“Bone boxes” are another group of Cooke’s creations. They have most often been connected to Cooke’s studies of animals, but there is also a connection to the Sheelas. By 1972, Cooke’s Sheela-na-gig imagery had

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<sup>281</sup> Sweeney 26.

<sup>282</sup> Patrick Murphy. “Barrie Cooke on Paint and Painters.” *Irish Arts Review* (1984-1987) Vol. 3. 1 (Spring, 1986) 38.

<sup>283</sup> W. J. McCormack. *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Maden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 137.

<sup>284</sup> Murphy. *Barrie Cooke* 7.

<sup>285</sup> Enrique Juncosa. *Barrie Cooke: Irish Museum of Modern Art* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011) 9.

<sup>286</sup> Ryan 282.

become a central part in his studies of life processes, landscapes, rivers and nudes. When the editor of *Arts in Ireland* invited Seamus Heaney to "contribute a piece of writing complementary to Barrie Cooke's 'bone-boxes' and his watercolour drawings of bone"<sup>287</sup> Heaney included the imagery of the Sheela-na-gig. The connection between Cooke's bone boxes and Heaney's "Bone Dreams" poem is straightforward, but of greater interest is Heaney's explorations of the connections to Cooke's Sheela-na-gigs and the ancient bog landscape which, in Heaney's mind, reminds him of the bog-person finds in Jutland of "women [witches?] staked and buried in the bogland."<sup>288</sup>

Cooke's landscape paintings often feature the Burren and a selection of the paintings were presented in the exhibition, "Barrie Cooke: Recent Paintings for Luba Kaftanikof" at the Hendricks Gallery in Dublin in 1979. Luba Kaftanikof was supportive of Cooke when he first arrived in Clare and she found a small cottage at the edge of the Burren for him to live in. Kaftanikof, whose mother was from Donegal and father from Russia, knew many of the intellectuals who lived in Clare.<sup>289</sup> The 1979 exhibition included images of woman in the landscape of the Burren; a theme that embodied nature and the enigmatic Sheela-na-gig. The Irish artist, Blaithin O'Ciobhain said that Cooke's womanly aspect of barrenness and richness is transformed and:

. . . the mysterious female figure reappears to sit sphinx-like on the rocks. The ancient mounds of the Burren still exist and will continue to do so, untouched by the fleeting atmosphere conditions.

The spring-well cascades, a shaft of white sunlight links sky and rock and the diversity of natural forms found in the imagination as perceived by an artist.<sup>290</sup>

The Douglas Hyde Gallery presented a selection of Cooke's works from the period of 1961 to 1986 in its 1986 exhibition: *Retrospective of Barrie Cooke*. Cooke's images of women had been established by the 1980s within a broader spectrum of understanding their context in nature and in life. The Irish art critic Kate Robinson said that for

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<sup>287</sup> Heaney. "Bone Dreams for Barrie Cooke." *The Arts in Ireland*. Autumn (1972) 52.

<sup>288</sup> Heaney. "Bone Dreams for Barrie Cooke" 53.

<sup>289</sup> Ryan 258.

<sup>290</sup> Blaithin O'Ciobhain. "Impressions: The Painter's Hope." *Irish Press*. May 11 (1979) 1.

Cooke, "creation is embodied in the female nude"<sup>291</sup> and the background of Cooke's female images illustrates how he:

has borrowed from the Tantrist the idea that female principle is the active force in the universe.

Hidden in, and a part of, the great forest, or enclosed in earth as *Woman in the Burren*, she is perhaps a less crude relative of the Sheela-na-gig. This gross fertility symbol, seen on many walls around Ireland, fascinated Cooke when he came here and he made many interpretations of it.<sup>292</sup>

Aidan Dunne wrote about the 1986 exhibition featuring Cooke's works from his time in Borneo and the *Bone Boxes* from the late 1960s. Dunne recalled Cooke's studies with Oscar Kokoscha in 1955 and said Cooke "felt strongly that modern artists were turning their backs on the real world, and he believed passionately in figurative as opposed to abstract art. This attitude has guided Cooke consistently."<sup>293</sup> Dunne also recognized Cooke's approach to expressing his artistic work in a flowing figurative manner that is seen in his early work of waterscapes, landscapes, animals and the Sheela-na-gigs.

*Burren Night* (1989) (Figure 4.9) provides a particular insight into the meaning of the Sheela-na-gig in the landscape of Killinaboy. The exhibition "Special Place" was commissioned by the Arts Council in 1989 for touring to second-level schools. Twelve artists, including Barrie Cooke, were each invited to create an artwork exploring a place that was of particular significance for them. Cooke explained *Burren Night* (1989) to his young audience:

I lived in the Burren, on the edge of it where bare rocks join rich pasture for nearly ten years when I was young. Its age and its womanly combination of barrenness and richness nurtured me and still does. No year has passed without at least two return visits there and many times I have tried to paint my feelings about it. I've walked in it and lived in it in lovely and filthy weather, day and night. This painting is a memory of the Burren at night when I used to walk across the crag to the neighbour's house sometimes wondering

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<sup>291</sup> Kate Robinson. "Art: Kate Robinson." [Archives of NIVAL] n. pg.

<sup>292</sup> Robinson. "Art: Kate Robinson." n. pag.

<sup>293</sup> Dunne. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne*. Douglas Hyde Gallery. 10 April – 10 May 1986. n. pag.

at its beauty, often frightened by it. Painting is very many things: a way of retaining memory; a way of understanding experience by re-living it; occasionally it is just a way of simply delighting in what is beautiful. You do it to explain this world to yourself and in that sense it is utterly selfish. But, just as everyone has a wish to convince one's friend of something wonderful or important, so, if a total stranger can share your excitement that's a deep pleasure too; not something that can be sought, but certainly something for which to hope.<sup>294</sup>

Aidan Dunne has reflected on the role of the Sheela in Cooke's lifetime body of work. Dunne equated Cooke's sculptural Sheela-na-gigs created in clay, as complementary to Cooke's early 1960 still-lives of slain animals, such as *Carcass of a Sheep* (1962) in their emphasis on sheer physical substance. Dunne raises the complementary nature of life and death in these images, with the power to produce inherent in the female figures of the Sheelas. For Dunne, life and death have an affinity with other figures that bring up the "logical opposites of the dead animals, recalling not only the Venus figures of antiquity, which may or may not have been fertility fetishes, but also Coubert's explicit study of a nude woman with her legs parted, *The Origin of the World*."<sup>295</sup> Cooke situates the sculptural Sheelas near flowing water, as seen in *Sheela-na-gig I* (1961), in what Dunne sees as an association that is "later echoed in *Crossing a River* (1982) in which a nude woman stands knee-deep in a fast-flowing current against a thickly wooded bank opposite and in *Big Nude with Night Painting* (1980), in which the reclaiming figure is a soft, liqueficient blur of pale flesh, dissolving into the watery canvas of a lake-surface."<sup>296</sup> Another figure in flowing water and having the same duality between life and death is the early *Woman in the Burren* (1963-64) that Dunne sees as part of Cooke's body of work inspired by the Sheela-na-gigs. Dunne sees *Woman in the Burren* as:

nestless in a hollow in the limestone, perhaps a grave, surmounted by ambiguous, bone-like objects and with a sense of flowing water - perhaps the water that constantly works its way through fissures in the stone, opening spaces, enlarging them by solution, releasing nutrients,

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<sup>294</sup> Cooke. "Burren Night." *A Special Place*. An Arts Council Touring Exhibition/An Chomhairle Ealaion, (1989) n. pg.

<sup>295</sup> Dunne. "Reading the Water." *Profile 10: Barrie Cooke* (Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 1998) 11.

<sup>296</sup> Dunne. "Reading the Water" 11.

fueling the cyclical life process. The image is built in viscous, neutral washes that suggest bodily fluids.<sup>297</sup>

### Inspiration

While the focus of this text is on the role of the Sheela-na-gig in inspiring Cooke's art, it is also interesting to see the consequential role that Cooke's image of the Sheela had in inspiring others, mainly on the work of his poet friends: John Montague found Cooke's Sheela images to be inspirational. The *Sheela-na-gig* is present in his *Love Poems* (1992) where emotions range from lust to purity, devotion, rage, betrayal and serenity. In Montague's Sonnet poem *Sheela-na-gig*, the emotional protection of the Sheela is felt as well as the forces of life and death – as a vacuum. The tomb-like aspect of the vagina's stone female figure is recalled as Montague writes:

To sigh and die upon the Mount of Venus / layer after layer of warm moss / to return to that first darkness! / Small wonder she grins at us, from gable / or church wall. For the howling babe / life's warm start: man's question mark?<sup>298</sup>

Barrie Cooke was featured as the subject of one of the series of *Profile* volumes of Gandon Editions, a publisher of books on Irish art and architecture. Seamus Heaney wrote an introductory text in which he describes Cooke's fascination with earth and woman and how that fascination connects with the medieval stone female figure of the Sheela-na-gig. Heaney recalls (in a quote that appears at the start of this chapter) how the way that Cooke "combined a relish of the specific properties of paint and clay with an awareness of the ecological, the psychological and the anthropological was typical of the artist's vision throughout his whole career."<sup>299</sup>

Cooke had plans to build on his broad interest in the Sheela and to hold an exhibition based exclusively on the Sheela-na-Gig in 1975.<sup>300</sup> It would have included some real Sheelas from the Irish National Museum and various modern painters including Pierre Aleschinsky (Belgian artist, b.1927) and Antonio Saura (Spanish artist, 1930-1998).

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<sup>297</sup> Dunne. *Profile* 11.

<sup>298</sup> Katie Donovan. *Ireland's Women: Writings Past and Present*. Eds. Katie Donovan, A. Norman Jeffares and Brendan Kennelly (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1994) 64.

<sup>299</sup> Heaney. "Total Absorption." *Profile* 10: Barrie Cooke 6.

<sup>300</sup> McMonagle 43.

Willem de Kooning was also approached to participate because some of his works had elements suggestive of a Sheela. While de Kooning responded saying he knew nothing about Sheelas, he made a tentative commitment to contribute a drawing to the show.<sup>301</sup> The Sheela-na-gig show did not, however, receive the support of the Hyde Gallery, where it was destined, and the failure for the show to materialize remains an ongoing regret for Cooke.<sup>302</sup>

Barrie Cooke has supported not only the arts, but also rural life in Ireland - by living it, promoting it and protesting against changes to the rural landscape. As such, Cooke's presence was felt at the 2006 exhibition *Local/Local* at the gallery of *Siamsa Tire, National Folk Theatre and Arts Centre* in Tralee, County Kerry. This exhibition explored the theme of the sense of place and folk culture in contemporary rural Ireland. The exhibition featured Barrie Cooke's *Map of Killinaboy 1954*, a personal take on an ordinance survey map with an intimate landscape of his own (Figure 4.10).<sup>303</sup> The artist Deirdre O'Mahoney describes the map as:

a crude, creased marker to his personal and painterly concerns, and of great significance in reading his subsequent paintings. Elements that would feature in Cooke's work are clearly present. Water; signifier of Cooke's environmental concerns in future decades, the river Fergus; the provider of sustenance and sport, and the Sile-na-gig; modeled in clay presiding over the church, a potent symbolic evocation of the sensual, the feminine 'other' . . . his neighbours, are all carefully marked and named.<sup>304</sup>

These neighbours include the blacksmith, Pat J. Curtis's family, whose son P.J. campaigned against the construction of an interpretative centre on the Burren; the local artisans, John and George remembered as two of the most skilled craftsmen in Ireland with their symbol of the wheelright; Luba Kafstanikof, who found the ramshackle cottage for Cooke to live in; and the Kellegher's: Michael, Peggy, and Sheila. The Church of Killinaboy is also shown

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<sup>301</sup> Ryan 277.

<sup>302</sup> Ryan 276.

<sup>303</sup> Eve Kelliher. "Kerry artist plays the name game in Siamsa exhibition. *The Kingdom*, (Jan 26) 2007. Cork: Kingdom Media Limited. Web. 2009. <<http://www.the-kingdom.ie/news/cwmhaumhid/>>

<sup>304</sup> Deirdre O'Mahoney. *Peripheral Vision-Place Space and Culture in Twenty-First Century Rural Ireland*. MA Fine Art Crawford College CIT Cork. n. pag.

with its inspirational presence including the clay-modeled Sheela-na-gig and the Tau Cross with its long history of monastic symbolism.<sup>305</sup>

Surrounded by his natural space in the Burren, Cooke's map "shows a man locked into his immediate community, to whom the landscape was not just a 'view' or Radharc (Gaelic for spectacle/vision/view) [but also] the earthy, the sensual and the communal bond of friendship."<sup>306</sup> In a conversation with Healy Dermot, Cooke reflected on those early years:

My dream had been to find a cottage overlooking a trout stream in Wales, then, by coincidence, fate, certain actions, I ended up on the edge of the Burren overlooking the River Fergus for ten years. My front door opened on to the valley of the river and my back faced on the Burren. I lived very crudely, very primitively, for a couple of years. I existed through the kindness of neighbours.

I was twenty-one.<sup>307</sup>

The primitive nature of Cooke's living has been well recorded by both John Montague and Seamus Heaney in their years of friendship. Montague declares that:

Barrie Cooke has been a friend for nearly fifty years, so I am beginning to understand him . . .  
The first Cooke I met was a hermit of the Burren, living in the heart of that extraordinary stonescape, and worshipping the Sheela-na-gig at Kilhaboy. Indeed, Cooke was among the first to suggest Clare's hidden richness, to which he pays homage in works like *Woman in the Burren* (1964).<sup>308</sup>

For Heaney, the austerity of life in Clare was defined as:

. . . the ascetic has always been latent in Barrie Cooke's aesthetic anyhow. Although he is beloved as an artist for the great generosity of his work as a whole (thinking of his oeuvre can sometimes be like thinking of a monsoon) and although his nervous system is as attuned to the

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<sup>305</sup> O'Mahoney n. pag.

<sup>306</sup> O'Mahoney n. pag.

<sup>307</sup> Dermot. "Living by Water." *Force 10*. Autumn (1994) 37.

<sup>308</sup> Montague. "Barrie Cooke." *Representing Art in Ireland* 46.

plenitude of nature as his palette is susceptible to the pleasures of the pigment, there is always an insistent pressure of spirit being the lushness and sensuality. The man himself has the fine-limbed stamina of a Zen master . . . In fact, during the 1950s, when he first embraced a painter's life in earnest, Barrie Cooke did live like a hermit. His two-roomed cottage in County Clare, bare of all convenience and adornment, was equally reminiscent of the master poet's hut in old Japan and the scribe's cells in the woods of early Christian Ireland.<sup>309</sup>

Cooke moved away from the subject of the Sheela in the 1970s. One reason was that the growing popular interest in the Sheela had led to its trivialization. "One example is that terrible pub in Sligo [called the Sheela-na-gig]."<sup>310</sup> It was only in 2011, perhaps refreshed by the retrospectives on his life, that Cooke returned to the subject and created a series of watercolour Sheela-na-gig paintings (Figure 4.11). Cooke says, "I have always thought that painting, art and literature and all those things, all those imaginative things were feminine." In response to a suggestion that medieval doctors differentiated between genders by "wetness", Cooke said: "I agree with that. Feminine is wet and the masculine is dry. Dead easy. That's why my painting is generally wet . . . Masculine is rational."<sup>311</sup> Perhaps it follows that the Sheela is revisited in the very wet, fluid study using watercolors.

One test of inspiration is whether an artist would have followed a similar path if the source of inspiration had not been there – in this case, what direction would Barrie Cooke's art have taken if he had not seen the Sheela above the door of the Killinaboy church in 1955. A review of Cooke's work over the decades suggests that he might have followed a similar path of exploring and ennobling natural themes, including women, but that the Sheela provided a vehicle that significantly enriched this lifetime study. It provided an early venue to explore the themes of sexuality in more repressive times. The Sheela provided an engaging and somewhat controversial subject to draw an audience into Cooke's works, and to extend beyond the study of art into literature. It inspired an integration of the themes of nature and flow into the basic elements of woman and earth.

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<sup>309</sup> Heaney. "An Angler's Crouch." *Barrie Cooke: Irish Museum of Modern Art* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011)12.

<sup>310</sup> Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>311</sup> Cooke. Personal interview. June 2011.

In contrast, Louise Walsh first saw a Sheela over a quarter century after Cooke. Cooke's very traditional views on gender had given way to a generation seeking to advance the rights of women and same-sex couples among many other issues. The world in the early 1980s had changed dramatically from the Church-dominated and repressive era present when Cooke was first inspired by the Killinaboy Sheela, but not yet to the extent that a lesbian felt a complete release from the oppression of the Virgin Mary ideal. We see that the Sheela was able to inspire an artist from the generation that followed Barrie Cooke's to subvert the forces that were at work to limit her place in society.



Figure 4.1 Killinaboy Church and Sheela-na-gig, 65 cm. x 30 cm. Left: The entrance to the Killinaboy Church (1997); Sonia Schormann Collection , Clare County Library; The Sheela-na-gig has been highlighted with a black frame; Right: Sheela-na-gig detail (2003); Diel Collection, Clare County Library.

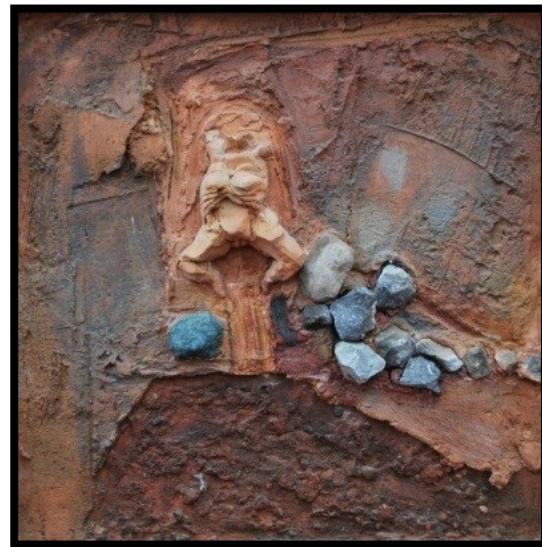


Figure 4.2 *Sheela-na-gig*, 1959. Mixed media on board, 50 x 50 cm. Private collection. (Photograph by Robert Gooding).

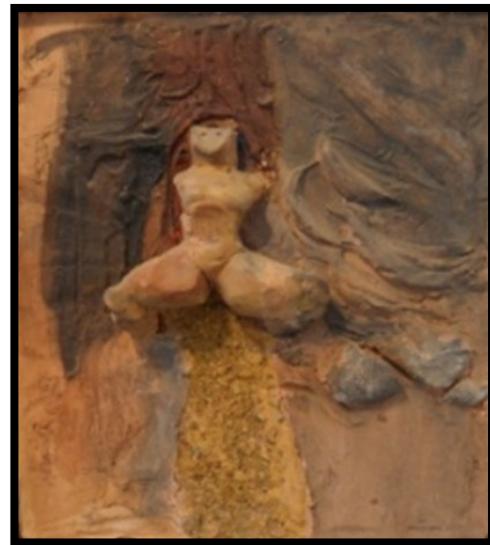


Figure 4.3

*Sheela-na-gig I*, 1961. Mixed media; 48 x 43 cm (Photograph by Robert Gooding).



Figure 4.4

*Sheela-na-gig*, 1962-63; Mixed media on board; 122 x 127 cm; *Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane* (Dublin, London: Merrell Publishers, 2006) 96; Print.



Figure 4.5      *Sheela-na-gig I*, 1964. Mixed media on board; 33 x 72 cm. Private Collection. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, c. 1986) 43; Print.



Figure 4.6      *Sheela-na-gig II*, 1961. Oil on board, 21 x 27 cm. Private collection.  
(Photograph by Robert Gooding).



Figure 4.7 *Woman in the Burren*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 165 x 206 cm. Private Collection. *Barrie Cooke by Aidan Dunne* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, c. 1986) 21; Print.



Figure 4.8 *Woman in the Burren II*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Limerick City Gallery of Art. Brian McAvera, *Empirical Investigations, Irish Arts Review* Vol. 20, 2 (Summer 2003) 61; Print .



Figure 4.9 *Burren Night*, 1989. Oil on canvas. A Special Place (The Arts and Council, 70 Merrion Square, Dublin) 11; Print.



Figure 4.10 *Map of Killinaboy in 1954*, 1984. Mixed media on paper, 95 x 100 cm. Private collection (one of two copies made). Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Barrie Cooke, Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art and The Lilliput Press, 2011) 31; Print.



Figure 4.11      *Sheela III*, 2009. Watercolour on paper, 27 x 23 cm. Private collection.  
(Photograph by Robert Gooding).

Chapter 5 Louise Walsh: The Sheela-na-gig as a Symbol of Empowerment

Audre Lorde<sup>312</sup>

Louise Walsh recalls hearing about the Sheela-na-gig in art college and it struck her as a symbol of female empowerment. Walsh created some Sheela-inspired drawings during these early years as she explored its use as a strong female image that could provide an alternate ideal to the Virgin Mary and perhaps form part of an alternate history distinct from the Catholic Church that Walsh saw as dominant, domineering and “anti-woman.”<sup>313</sup> Years later, the inspiration provided by the Sheela was evident in Walsh’s installation *Sounding the Depths* (1992) which was created in partnership with Pauline Cummins and gave “voice to the body’s means to abandon self-repression and loosening the tongue as a strategy for creativity, for living, for moving forward.”<sup>314</sup> The theme of empowerment and of giving a voice to those who have traditionally been ignored remains a theme in many of Walsh’s works, especially in the public works that she has created in more recent years. Walsh believes that while she left Sheela imagery behind years ago, the inspiration of the Sheela is part of what allows her to create the art she makes today.<sup>315</sup>

## Beginnings and Early Work

Louise Walsh was born in 1963 and brought up in the village of Crosshaven, near Cork, in the south of Ireland. Feminism is a source of inspiration for Walsh. Growing up as a lesbian in Ireland between the late 1960's

<sup>312</sup> Audre Lorde. *Conversations with Audre Lorde*. Ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson University Press of Mississippi, 2004) 90.

<sup>313</sup> Louise Walsh. Personal Interview. June 2011.

<sup>314</sup> Mary Armstrong. "An Interview with Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh." *Re-Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (MA: Charles S. and Isabella V. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 1997) 118.

<sup>315</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

and mid-1980's contextualized her understanding of social justice and made political and community activism central to her practice.<sup>316</sup>

Walsh began her artistic training at the Crawford School of Art and Design in Cork and graduated "With Distinction" in 1984. It was there that the Sheela was presented to her:

I remember the Sheela-na-gigs in college; when I was in art college. We were being taught by a very macho male about the Neolithic Period and the Bronze Age. And it went on for ages, and he didn't ever mention the Sheela-na-gig. I have a feeling it was a professor from another college, possibly from Galway, who started talking about the Sheelas. The other guy had been rambling on for years and not a mention of the Sheela. But I found them then to be a complete feminist symbol of female empowerment. So I think it was around then, when I was in art college, that I became conscious of the Sheela-na-gigs and it was almost like they were still very subversive, because they were hidden in the basement of the National History Museum. So we only heard about them. And then there was a book somewhere in the library, *The Witch on the Wall*. Someone brought the book in and showed it around. The book was, in a way, a bit crazy. That's how I first saw the images.<sup>317</sup>

It is evident from Walsh's first reaction to the Sheela image that she sees it both reflective of a male-dominated, repressive environment and an opportunity to use it as an icon supporting female empowerment. Walsh enrolled in the MA Fine Arts program at the University of Ulster and graduated in 1986. Walsh's art was described as a highlight of the post-graduate show: "perhaps the most powerful presence in regard to creating tension in the pieces was Louise Walsh's woman/horse sculptures"<sup>318</sup> such as *Untitled* (1986), shown in Figure 5.1. Walsh's aim was to strive for an ideal of what woman should be in society: "combining the female figure with that of a horse conveys my feelings about a woman's body being transformed to a 'beast of burden' carrying her offspring, lover and

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<sup>316</sup> Louise Walsh. "Reflecting on An Evolving Practice." PDF file. Web. 2009.

<sup>317</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>318</sup> Joan Fowler. "MA Fine Art Exhibition, University of Ulster, Belfast September 4-11, 1986." *Circa*, 31 (Nov - Dec. 1986) 35.

parents."<sup>319</sup> "They were like horse women and were about struggling under the burden of certain things, but I didn't want them to be too victim-like. I wanted them to be fighting as well."<sup>320</sup>

Walsh is concerned with the representation of the female body relative to the role of women in society. Issues of gender, identity, politics and their mutual relationship are of central importance, providing a very distinct contrast with the issues and forces that engaged and stimulated Barrie Cooke. During the 1980s, Walsh was particularly concerned with the themes of sexuality and issues such as the limited access to abortion in Ireland. Representations of powerless women in the media became important stimuli to her work: "That's when the beast of burden notion came. I was trying to use a symbol that dealt with all of my frustrations around women's bodies and feminism and I was really angry – all the work was due to anger."<sup>321</sup> Thus the horse became for Walsh, Kelly writes, a symbol of tamed power, i.e. the image of a wild, free horse that is captured by humans to be restrained, worked and abused.<sup>322</sup>

Walsh's work was featured in the Arts Council of North Ireland Touring Show *Issues* in 1989 which explored the struggle of the human condition. The drawing *And the Boat We Make Shall Keep Us Safe* (1987) (Figure 5.2) reflects Walsh's sense of human frailty and our dependence on others, combined with the hope and presence of strong female images. The nude figures in the drawing provide an expression of both vulnerability and confidence. They are without the protective garments provided and demanded by society, but an enduring spiritual strength remains apparent. "Walsh's sculptures are concerned with the themes of humanity, power and burden in society, but it is in her drawings that a more intimate and personal subject is explored."<sup>323</sup>

Walsh explores the mother–daughter relationship with art that conveys a tension between expectations and rejection. The figures in *Untitled Struggle* (1989) (Figure 5.3) suggest the movement of a see-saw with the couple's arms pulling forward and backward; the bodies forming a cradle-like boat. For Walsh, these early drawings

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<sup>319</sup> Fowler 35.

<sup>320</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>321</sup> Liam Kelly. *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in the North of Ireland* (Kinsale: Gandon Editions, 1966) 146.

<sup>322</sup> Kelly *Thinking Long* 146.

<sup>323</sup> Kelly *Thinking Long* 148.

were like a prayer because "I was really creating a situation where I was looking for support. I was looking at all the problems I had and I was wanting support from older Irish women, [such as] my mother, which I wasn't getting."<sup>324</sup> Indeed Walsh saw her mother as reinforcing the traditional patriarchal model, urging Walsh to find a husband who could deal with her rebellious spirit and shape her in the model of a traditional Irish wife and mother: "I think in my own weird way, I needed to create a female god. I needed to find somebody who was not an angry patriarch. [I needed] a world where women's power was celebrated and men and women treated equally."<sup>325</sup>

Walsh's *Mother Work* (1989) (Figure 5.4) provides a strong and optimistic response to these needs. Walsh considers the unending cycle of human condition from birth to youth to old age and the metamorphosis of the body rooted in earth and sod. The figure in this drawing emerges from roots which entwine with fibrous muscles and hair that grows and is transformed into branches of trees. The connection to the Sheela-na-gig as an inspiration and symbol of a strong feminist image is clear and Walsh affirms:

They are Sheela-na-gig . . . The Sheela-na-gig was a very powerful birthing image . . . There was a sense of needing a history for mothers there. What was going on in Ireland was difficult, with issues like the Kerry babies [a 1984 murder trial that deplored the treatment of unmarried mothers in Irish society]. Woman's sexuality was controlled by the church and women's sexuality was very negative. In a traditional Irish culture, women were churched. You had to be cleansed, [after giving birth] but not the men. You weren't allowed to go to church. Women could not receive the sacrament. I was really interested in this idea and felt it very strongly. The church was afraid of the woman's ability to create. I think to take any of that power away, to say you were debased by giving birth -- there can't be anything more sacred. They had to say it was a dirty thing and you had to be cleansed.<sup>326</sup>

The sense of needing a history for mothers led to Walsh seeking out the history of strong women:

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<sup>324</sup> Kelly. *Thinking Long* 148.

<sup>325</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>326</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

There were other images such as Gráinne Ní Mháille, the pirate queen from the Middle Ages. You start to try and collect female role models from history to reinforce that Irishness isn't about repression. Being Irish does not mean being under the thumb of the church. I think that the matriarchy was very powerful in Ireland originally. You had the Brehon Laws. There is an earlier freedom. There is a freedom more native, more local, more based on woman's history that has been cut off from us, but we can still take examples like the Sheela-na-gig: examples of feisty, fiery women -- even if they were made to frighten -- to take the image as a talisman. [The Sheela] became a talisman for me and other women too, but I think it was the power of the sexual, you know, that laughter; the laughing and the actual transgressive power of these images that was very important. I think there was also humor in the Sheela-na-gig . . . a trickiness . . . I think the Sheelas were also frightening [people] to be good. Sex is scary.<sup>327</sup>

Concerning the present location of Walsh's various *Mother* (1989) sketches (copies are in the National Library of Ireland), Walsh said:

I threw them out . . . I didn't want them. I didn't like them anymore. I think they were too illustrative. I changed my work . . . I just got a little bit uncomfortable with this religious theme. I was just going a bit too far to the other extreme: creating God . . . It was a work of a particular time. I was working my way out of an anger and Irish repression. I am not there anymore. I was a young woman in my late twenties. That was twenty years ago. I was trying to find a history that was not completely screwed by the church or about the repression of women.<sup>328</sup>

The female-giving-birth figure in *Untitled* (1989) (Figure 5.5) with her foot firmly planted on the earth, her open mouth and lifted head, embodies the female struggle. Julian Watson describes Walsh's drawings as "very intuitive" which consider "birth-giving and express feelings towards the sometimes fully adult first-born of pain,

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<sup>327</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>328</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

exultation, rejection, grappling and liberation.”<sup>329</sup> In this same spirit, Kelly describes Walsh’s sculptures as “unloading memory banks of an Irish female childhood.”<sup>330</sup>

In Walsh’s words:

These are all about birth. My work was very reactive to the culture I was in, which was very anti-woman; anti-sex. There was a real Irish thing about holding women back. You could only be a good mother; not be too powerful. There was no way of winning as a woman. You had to be a mother. You couldn’t have any sexuality of your own. When I was realizing I was lesbian, when I started making work, I was still protesting -- still angry at what was going on. A lot of this work moved through that.<sup>331</sup>

The work *Athene, The Other* (1989) (Figure 5.6) continues in that spirit:

The open mouth is a connection to the Sheela-na-gig. Athene’s also been birthed from a shell. She is standing on a shell. There’s a shell in her. I use shells a lot for the sea. There would be shells in the figures – as symbols of protection. Even though she was also rooted in branches, she was coming out of a shell. I was interested in the Venus image . . . birth out of a head.

Athena was supposed to be given birth out of a male god’s head.<sup>332</sup>

In the *Louise Walsh and Alice Maher* exhibition at the Arts Council Gallery, Belfast (March 1990), Walsh’s spirit is manifested in blackened figurative forms. Houghton observes how the scorched forms emerge violently in curving fashion from multiple heads, surging from the form of a vagina or an open mouth. In the text of “Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself” Walsh describes herself in “the cocoon of the studio, a measured calm is broken by the gasp of a bright butterfly which takes off, alights, breathes, moves, leaving a moist smell which we must inhale.”<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Julian Watson. “Images as Tough as Old Shoes.” *Fortnight*, 282 (March, 1990) 28.

<sup>330</sup> Kelly. “Two Artists at Arts Council, Belfast.” *Irish Times*, 8 March (1990).

<sup>331</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>332</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>333</sup> Jenny Houghton. “Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself.” *Issues*. Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition, Belfast, 9 Nov - 2 Dec (1989 -1990) n. pg.

Thus Houghton feels that Walsh's work has "both an awareness of urgency and energy, the recognition of self as it opens into the questions of the weakness of human condition and dependence in others."<sup>334</sup>

To allow the viewer to feel the exhibition space, Walsh incorporated some of her sculptures into the gallery itself. *To Have and To Hold* (1989) (Figure 5.7) seems to be holding up the upper gallery floor.<sup>335</sup> How Walsh dresses her sculptures is also significant: Julian Watson said that Walsh shows an "artistic ability to fashion a sort of frozen, sinewy metamorphosis – where it becomes hard to tell where moulding, carving, collage and found shape begin or end – which is extraordinary and eerie."<sup>336</sup>

The above images are images of female strength and support and are consistent with the defiant, naked honesty and assertiveness of the Sheela image. In some particular images, such as the Durer style drawing *Mother Work* (1989) (Figure 5.8) there is a more direct connection to the Sheela with the display of the vulva. Together these images follow on Walsh's regard for the Sheela as a strong Irish female image - and perhaps a connection to a more ancient Irish culture that featured strong female leadership. This contrasts with Walsh's view of the subjugated role of woman in the church-dominated, paternalistic Irish society that existed through much of the twentieth-century.

The use of found objects is seen in *Mother Work: For My Daughter Who Will Be A Warrior* (1989) (Figure 5.9), which is made with the prongs of an old garden fork, a shell, a large tangled piece of fallen wood and sections of a dismembered chair.<sup>337</sup> The message embedded in this sculpture is very personal which, as Kelly notes, is a desire for a continuing relationship with a daughter who will continue the fight. At the same time, Walsh explained that the title also references Audre Lorde:

. . . who made a piece of writing about her son and daughter. She was an African-American poet who died about 10 years ago; a lesbian poet. She was talking about raising her children being activists. She was raising them with truth and courage and with a respect for justice and equality: racial justice as well as queer [justice]. She was saying that they will be who they are, but they in

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<sup>334</sup> Houghton. n. pag.

<sup>335</sup> Kelly. "Two Artists" n. pag.

<sup>336</sup> Watson 28.

<sup>337</sup> Watson 28.

their very existence will be people who take on the world to make it better. And so this [work] was kind of inspired by that piece of writing. Audre Lorde was very good; very interesting.<sup>338</sup>

The aforementioned images are images of female strength and support and are consistent with the defiant, naked honesty and assertiveness of the Sheela image. In some particular images, such as *Mother Work* (1989) there is a more direct connection to the Sheela with the display of the vulva. Together these images follow on Walsh's regard for the Sheela as a strong Irish female image - and perhaps a connection to a more ancient Irish culture that featured strong female leadership. This contrasts with Walsh's view of the subjugated role of woman in the church-dominated, paternalistic Irish society that existed through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Installations and Public Works

Walsh's art was, in her own words, "becoming more refined and easier to make, and I was starting to sell smaller pieces. But I was becoming more interested in exploring ideas. In the early 1990s my work shifted towards photography; sculpture and installation."<sup>339</sup>

I was more interested in working in public sites, which more people could enjoy. I also realized I did not want to work in galleries. Politically, I was not so interested in making art to sell in the art market. I wanted the work to be seen outside of gallery situations because most of the world does not go into galleries. I was interested in making works in a different way.<sup>340</sup>

Despite this shift in Walsh's approach to art, the themes of empowerment and giving voice to the repressed remained and grew stronger.

Walsh used photography and projection in her piece *Outlaws Inlaws* (1991) (Figures 5.10 and 5.11) which was part of the exhibition "In a State" at the Kilmainham Gaol.<sup>341</sup> The exhibition comprised the works of twenty-one leading artists from both the north and south of Ireland, including people from both Catholic and Protestant

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<sup>338</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>339</sup> Kathy Deepwell. *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (London; New York: IB Tauris, 2005) 187.

<sup>340</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>341</sup> Deepwell 187.

backgrounds.<sup>342</sup> The artists were offered the opportunity to create and to display in the ground-floor cells a “site-specific installation on the theme of national identity.”<sup>343</sup> Visitors entered through the same doorway that hundreds of convicts and revolutionaries had passed through on their way to imprisonment and, for some, execution. The exhibition was organized by the Project Arts Centre in Dublin on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising which shaped the establishment of the Irish Free State.<sup>344</sup>

Walsh approached the theme of “identity” from her perspective as a lesbian and in the context of criminality and colonialism. The Victorian Sodomy Law criminalized homosexuality in Ireland. The European Court of Human Rights became important in changing the laws against homosexuality in both Ireland and the Republic. The cases of Senator David Norris v. Ireland in 1977, and Dungeon v. United Kingdom in 1981 resulted in the invalidation of the Victorian laws criminalizing homosexuality.<sup>345</sup> Walsh thought that there was “a paradox that seventy-five years later a former British law could be used against gay men and the queer community in general.”<sup>346</sup> Snakes being held by the chains of Law and Justice were put over the entrance to the Gaol to symbolize English imperialism.<sup>347</sup> From Walsh’s perspective on sexuality and identity, the snakes symbolized a “law restricting the serpents of crime . . . the English chains on the interlocked Celtic serpent,”<sup>348</sup> and within an Irish context, the symbol of pagan threat<sup>349</sup> i.e. the ideas of nationality, sexuality and oppression.

The dialogue between the viewer and the art in Walsh’s installation begins at the entrance of the cell. There is a trap door where Walsh placed tiles with snake images that one must avoid or pass over. The viewer is then confronted with light boxes showing images of two same-gender people kissing superimposed with images of

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<sup>342</sup> Pat Cooke. “A Modern Disease: Art and Heritage Management.” *Circa*. 61 (Jan - Feb, 1992) 6.

<sup>343</sup> Hugh Maxton. “In a State, Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin 16 May - 22 September.” *Circa*. 58 (Jul.- Aug., 1991).

<sup>344</sup> Deepwell 187.

<sup>345</sup> Margaret Scanlan. *Culture and Customs of Ireland* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006) 85.

<sup>346</sup> Deepwell 187.

<sup>347</sup> Kelly. *Thinking Long* 149.

<sup>348</sup> Deepwell 187.

<sup>349</sup> Kelly. *Thinking Long* 149.

twisted snakes on their faces, which appear like tattoos. Walsh said, “although my snakes are under the surface, I want them to be visible, numerous, struggling and unchained.”<sup>350</sup> In this installation, Walsh’s art can be seen to be evolving from “self to community”, i.e. from finding her own voice as a woman and lesbian exploring her personal situation to addressing the population at large. In this case Walsh expresses the voice of the gay community in openly addressing issues which had previously been repressed. As Walsh said, “this work has been an important catalyst for me to move out of making three-dimensional figurative sculptures to making something more clearly referring to ideas.”<sup>351</sup>

The *Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker* (1992), shown in Figures 5.12 – 5.14, is perhaps Walsh’s most famous creation. It is located on the busy Great Victoria Street in downtown Belfast and is listed in tourist guides as one of the city landmarks. While famous, it is somewhat ironically unsigned, which could have been an artistic statement with Walsh wanting to give the sculpture complete attention, but Walsh said that the reason was simply: “I forgot”.<sup>352</sup> Unsigned or not, the statue is consistent with Walsh’s work to give a voice to those who have been silent, in this case, low-paid woman workers.

The history of the *Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker* is somewhat complex and reflects Walsh’s vision and determination to establish meaningful public art. In 1989, the Belfast Development Office opened a competition for upgrading Blackstaff Square in downtown Belfast. A winning landscape architect’s design included a sculptural exhibit with an explicit brief: “Two colourful life-size cartoon female figures waiting at the corner. One figure [is] looking and laughing at a small dog below an adjacent tree, while the other figure looks expectantly towards Great Victoria Street. The subject matter, broadly speaking, [represents] the social history of the area [which is that of a red-light district].”<sup>353</sup> Louise Walsh was asked to contribute to the upgrade of Blackstaff Square. Rather than prostitution, Walsh focused on the women who worked in the area. She found that the “ten lowest-paid jobs in Northern Ireland, [were] largely done by women, and . . . most of the work done by women was unpaid or

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<sup>350</sup> Kelly. *Thinking Long* 149.

<sup>351</sup> Deepwell 189.

<sup>352</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>353</sup> James Odling-Smee. “Prostitution of Art.” *Fortnight*, 274 (June, 1989) 26.

unrecognized.<sup>354</sup> Low pay, not prostitution, became the subject of the piece. Walsh “wanted to explore the forces which may push women towards prostitution – namely, their generally low rates of pay . . . Prostitution is prostitution, and to represent it in caricature says more about men’s attitudes. They pay for it.”<sup>355</sup>

Walsh presented a design that “was not intended to be a monument that glorifies prostitution, but a carefully thought out tribute to all of Belfast’s women”<sup>356</sup> only to see it rejected by the Belfast Development Office and Belfast City Council, with one councilor saying that “the work was a terrible disgrace, that the sculpture was a monument to prostitution.”<sup>357</sup> In fact, the proposed sculptures followed Walsh’s drive to develop an awareness of the socially unrepresented as she did in *In Laws, Out Laws*. Walsh followed the spirit of the brief, signaling the history of poverty, low status and exploitation of prostitutes and women workers. The humour was not intended in the “nudge and wink of the pub, but the delight of recognition.”<sup>358</sup> Despite the media and political controversy, and despite having the sculpture banned from public property by the Belfast City Council, Walsh persevered and the work was subsequently re-commissioned by a private developer and finally sited on Great Victoria Street outside the train station – a more prominent place than the original Blackstaff Square location.

The *Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker* features two figures who differ in age and occupation. The older woman touches the back of the younger woman giving support and empathy. The mother, a housewife, wears the paraphernalia of her job: baby pacifiers for earrings, a baby bottle across her left breast, a shopping bag across her stomach, clothes pegs as fingers, unending knitting, a hanger on her back holding her neck and a sieve and spatula on her bottom. The younger one wears pants covered by an apron, and has a telephone-elbow, hairbrush ringlets, a typewriter on her stomach and an old telephone dial on her right breast – symbols which suggest her work as a secretary or hairdresser. Walsh builds on the images by inserting advertisements, statistics and proverbs around their bodies such as, “Almost 40 per cent of women working for income in Northern Ireland are part-time

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<sup>354</sup> Deepwell 185.

<sup>355</sup> Deepwell 185.

<sup>356</sup> Odling-Smee 27.

<sup>357</sup> Deepwell 185.

<sup>358</sup> Judith Hill. “Subversive.” *Fortnight*. 318 (Jun. 1993) 41.

workers. These women are almost always badly paid. They work without health benefits, holiday entitlements or pension schemes.”<sup>359</sup>

Hilary Robinson, feminist scholar, has viewed the figures in the context of mother-daughter relationships and the healing power of social justice. These sculptures are held in high esteem by Belfast women. One said, “my mother always touches them as she goes for the bus.”<sup>360</sup> The inspirational role of the Sheela-na-gig in this important art may be seen through the Sheela’s spirit of defiance, feminine pride and strength. As the Sheela gave support to Walsh’s voice, so Walsh has given voice to these unknown women. In Walsh’s words,

It’s all about trying to recover a hidden history. The *Unknown Woman Worker* is a play on the *Unknown Soldier* . . . I was interested in how many women’s histories have been lost. How many women get celebrated for the work that people do standing on their shoulders. That piece of work is linked with the Sheela because it is another part of women’s history and helps to provide a more complete representation of women as mothers, workers and in other roles that do not get recognized as they should. The Sheela is an unknown woman worker . . . There was a need for me in the 1980s to find images of women who were transgressive and not bogged down by the church. The Sheela was a very primal image [representative] of fighting women who were their own leaders and had power over their own destinies . . . I didn’t feel [the women were] coming from a history of victims, but women who survived through themselves.<sup>361</sup>

The inspirational role of the Sheela-na-gig and the spirit of “giving voice” is shown even more explicitly in the installation *Sounding the Depths* (1992) (Figures 5.15 and 5.16). The work was presented at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin during the summer of 1992. In it, Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh experiment with photographic and video techniques and thematically explore the inner images of the female body.

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<sup>359</sup> Hill 40.

<sup>360</sup> Hilary Robinson. “Representing Women: Feminist Readings of Recent Irish Visual Culture.” *Fortnight*. 375, Supplement: What Do You See? (Dec. 1988 – Jan. 1999) 11.

<sup>361</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

Aidan Dunne spoke of the lead-up to this project: The artists met in 1987 “at a meeting organized by Jenny Haughton who presented the Louise Walsh/Alice Maher exhibition and was the Director of ‘Alternatives to Violence in Ireland’ that led to the establishment of the Women’s Art Action Group, with Cummins as a founding member. IMMA offered them an ‘In Residence’ studio for their work in late 1991.”<sup>362</sup>

In the exhibition catalogue, Cummins said that;

. . . the shared reflection of the work could be read as sexual images – but even more they are really inner images. The work came through a coming together of the themes Louise and I were investigating at the time we decided to work together. I was interested in cockles and their tongue-like bodies – I was intrigued by their shell hardness, and their inner softness, and the choices we all have when to be open or closed. Louise was always interested in the mouth.<sup>363</sup>

Walsh was also interested in shells and hands and they be seen in some of her early drawings such as *Athene*. Cummins wanted to represent the process of becoming a mother, showing how women are treated when giving birth. “I felt that the most immediate way to present this was through slides and soundtrack, with music about birth and women’s voices.”<sup>364</sup> Cummins said that “we looked at lots of images of women’s bodies . . . Our bodies have been appropriated through advertisement and in the media women are seen as objects to be consumed.”<sup>365</sup> The mouth for Walsh embodies a powerful symbol, that is “giving voice to the body and the torso area is the seat of emotions and power.”<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Dunne. “Nudes with Feminist Kick.” *Sunday Tribune*, Hugh Lane, 5 May (1992) n. pag.

<sup>363</sup> Moira Roth. “Two Women: The Collaboration of Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh or Internal Conversations Among Women.” *Sounding the Depths: A Collaborative Installation by Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992) 5.

<sup>364</sup> Helen Meany. “Reclaiming the Female Body. Larger than Life: Helen Meany Talk to Two Artists Celebrating Womanhood.” *Irish Times*. 30 March (1992) n. pag.

<sup>365</sup> Meany n. pag.

<sup>366</sup> Meany n. pag.

The installation was a catharsis for Walsh, moving from reactive experiences about “being cornered and attacked about feminism, to being seen as ‘the Other’.”<sup>367</sup> During this painful process of letting go of defensive self-repression, Walsh visualised “letting the energy flow, loosening the tongue, baring the teeth, stretching the lips, making sounds, beginning to talk.”<sup>368</sup> Walsh believed that *Sounding the Depths* also transcends the message of giving voice to the body as a means to abandon self-repression and to bring forth self-expression by loosening the tongue as a strategy for creativity, for living, for moving forward. The female body in this work represents “humanity and not just femaleness,”<sup>369</sup> -- but it is definitely a result of women’s artistic creativity.

Cummins and Walsh described their ideas for the installation to Moira Roth prior to the exhibition, telling of a small ante-room having photographs of compressed, prim mouths that “will be obsessive and repressed in its atmosphere.”<sup>370</sup> They envisioned a video-tape at the end of the corridor and of imageries of shells and seabed soundings from fishing boats, together with images that will lead, in some way, to “a wild shouting/laughing mouth.”<sup>371</sup> The end room would be spacious, with complex lightning and sounds and large Cibachrome photographs of women placed on black walls – each woman with an open mouth on her belly or chest. Most significantly for this thesis, Moira Roth’s reaction to this description evoked imagery of Sile Na Gig, that ancient Celtic icon of female sexuality with its gaping vagina.<sup>372</sup>

The artists explained that *Sounding the Depths* maps a journey from restriction to self-discovery and power, yet this simplified reading has several layers of meaning that grow from their life experiences. To experience and feel is the core of the work.<sup>373</sup> Aidan Dunne described the installation as “cumulative images and sounds of a

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<sup>367</sup> Roth 5.

<sup>368</sup> Roth 6.

<sup>369</sup> Mary Armstrong. “An Interview with Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh.” *Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (MA: Carles S. and Isabella V. Cullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 1997) 118.

<sup>370</sup> Roth 14.

<sup>371</sup> Roth 14.

<sup>372</sup> Roth 14.

<sup>373</sup> Armstrong 118.

simple progression, from tension to release, from pain to pleasure."<sup>374</sup> Dunne considered the work in terms of three distinct spaces: At the entrance is a tight-lipped mouth and clenched hands made from a composite of images. In the second room, a video is projected on a large screen that creates the essential narrative of the installation: cockleshells grind together; there are fingers of two hands and a mouth. The enlarged image of the mouth gradually opens onto a superimposed nude female torso and becomes a face. One sees hands that seem to pull apart the lips. There is then a release of the tension, relaxation and laughter. The images are bathed in a warm, reddish light and forms emerge from darkness. In the third room, there is a large colour print of mouths superimposed on torsos. Dunne found that "the persistent evocation of opening, notably the way the hands prise apart the lips of the mouth, suggests a link with the Sheela-na-gig, those icons of bold sexual display."<sup>375</sup>

Judith Higgins, art critic, approaches *Sounding the Depths* in the context of Mother Earth and birth, with references to the themes of self-discovery and emotional development. Cummins spoke of women being afraid to expose themselves -- thus "Louise and I felt it was necessary to abandon this defensive self-repression. We wanted to make images for Irish women, or perhaps for all women . . . images to announce that we will go from strength to strength."<sup>376</sup> For Higgins, the transitional passageways symbolize the emotional stages from repression to release, with strong allusions to sexual union and to birth. The journey starts with the repressive and defensive imagery of the cockleshell together with fingers pinched tight and martyred female mouths. The birth passage, from oppression to self-love, shows the moments of painful labour with the twisting mouth and hands writhing together while the midwife gazed down at the mouth and with gently moving hands persuade it to open. Suddenly the closed mouth gasps and breaks into laughter with its pink tongue dancing inside while the artist's head lifts triumphantly. There is an undercurrent of sounds - gurgling water, seabed soundings from fishing boats, moist interior noises of saliva and ardent breathing, female laughter – it is the nonverbal language of this newborn, laughing self. In the darkened room,

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<sup>374</sup> Dunne. "Nudes with Feminist Kicks" n. pag.

<sup>375</sup> Dunne. "Nudes with Feminist Kicks" n. pag.

<sup>376</sup> Judith Higgins. "Art From the Edge (part 1). (Report From Ireland) *Art in America*. (Dec, 1995) n. pag.

'the womb', with its images of naked women and laughing mouths in their belly projects the creative message: "A wound has been opened revealing our insides and inner feelings."<sup>377</sup>

Higgins states that in this work, Walsh and Cummins have replaced "Mary and Mother Ireland by an ancient Celtic fertility icon, the round-bodied, sensuous and fierce figure of a Sheela-na-Gig."<sup>378</sup> Thus these female images connect with important issues of Irish women's identity, politics, and religion and reference the troubled status of the Irish women artists while the body is defiantly reconstructed to reclaim a lost tradition of strong women.

The literary critics Adele Dalsimer and Vera Kreilkamp tell how, in the pre-Christian Celtic world, the female goddess, depicted as warrior, mother, beautiful woman or aged crone, represented the land and the King's spiritual and legal dominion over it. These earth goddesses were represented in Celtic literature as aggressive, voracious and powerful sexual women. Dalsimer and Kreilkamp believe the Sheela-na-gig images provide a connection to these Celtic figures. In that spirit, Walsh and Cummins can be seen as having promoted the status of Irish women through the image of the female body. The body voices her inner self through an image that recalls both the "grotesque imagery of the sexually voracious Sheela-na-gigs and the ancient Celtic legend of Deirdre, the loveliest woman in all Ireland who, as an unborn child, cried out from her mother's womb and announced the coming sorrows of Ulster."<sup>379</sup> For Walsh, *Sounding the Depths* explored the self at several levels and continued her evolution from personal liberation to the development of larger, more public art which supported women in reclaiming themselves, their bodies and their voices.

A point of contact relevant to this thesis occurred in 1994 where the Sheela-related narratives of Eamonn Kelly (see Chapter 2), Barrie Cooke (Chapter 3) and Louise Walsh intersected. Eamonn Kelly was giving a lecture on the Sheela-na-gig as part of the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) exhibition *From Beyond the Pale: Artists at the Edge of Consensus* (Sept. 23, 1994 – Jan. 15, 1995). Walsh recalls attending the lecture and how women in the audience were angered by Kelly's perspective on the Sheela-na-gig:

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<sup>377</sup> Higgins n. pag.

<sup>378</sup> Higgins n. pag.

<sup>379</sup> Adele Dalsimer and Vera Kreilkamp. "Re-Dressing Mother Ireland: Feminist Imagery in Art and Literature." *Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (MA: Charles S. and Isabella V. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 1997) 40.

There was a very dry lecture by [the Keeper of Antiquities] from the Irish National Museum. He came and gave a talk and said they were . . . just these small things. There was no way of proving [their origins and meaning] and that the Sheelas are just decorations. All these women in the audience got really cross. They said: 'They are just nothing! We are sick of being told they are nothing.' All of these women were being really protective of them. They were really emotional symbols. People were saying: 'We don't care what archaeologists think. We know how they speak to us. Go away. We need them. We want them. They are ours. They are our symbols.'<sup>380</sup>

Eamonn Kelly had also spoken of this episode in the context of describing the high level of emotion that he had observed in some feminists who had appropriated the Sheela images and were offended by the more scientific archaeological investigations and explanations. As an example, Kelly mentioned the same 1994 lecture at the IMMA and said that he could feel the hostility in the group as he spoke, which became more apparent with the commentary and questions following his lecture. Calm was restored, said Kelly, only when the respected Seamus Heaney, who happened to be in the audience, raised his voice to defend Kelly's perspective.<sup>381</sup>

*Offerings* (1997) is an installation which also references the Sheela, albeit less directly. The installation was presented at the BellTable Arts Center in Limerick. Walsh addresses the experience of letting someone go while still caring for the person. According to Eileen Coates, artist, the exhibition was an experience of spaces: a video, a box containing cast crystal forms of cupped hands, cello music, and the sound of a swan beating winds.<sup>382</sup> For Coates, the sequences of the "Swansong" video of hair being washed, combed and cut mixed with images of hands moving through the air "conflate the imagery of hands together and of lips parted in a way that becomes suggestive of the labial folds of the vagina."<sup>383</sup> Coates says that the space of sound and farewell words gives a "sense of loss as the

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<sup>380</sup> Walsh. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>381</sup> Eamonn Kelly. Personal interview. June 2011.

<sup>382</sup> Eileen Coates. "Louise Walsh, Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick, October-November 1997" *Circa* 61 (Jan - Feb, 1992) 53.

<sup>383</sup> Coates 53.

viewer is confronted by an irreversible act. A new identity of strength and independence is established in this scene which is at the heart of the exhibition."<sup>384</sup>

The theme of "giving voice" is present in many of the public works by Walsh. *Imagine* (2000) considered the perspective of youth, their disillusionment, their fear and their frustration. Amid these emotions, Walsh gathered a spirit of hope and embodied this in a public art piece that was built with her youth partners on the project. We see elements of the Irish landscape in ancient rocks that are used to present the spirit of enduring beauty, reconciliation and forgiveness amid a region that has more recently been known as a site of bloodshed. The work is situated on the border between counties Leitrim and Fermanagh, where there are two small villages named Blacklion in County Cavan and Belcoo.<sup>385</sup> The work was initiated by the Lough MacNeane Sculpture Trail Committee with the aim of promoting reconciliation between the communities of Leitrim, Cavan and Fermanagh through sculpture and visual arts. The project takes into account the long years of political turmoil and strife, and the communities and families divided by the border road closure and the natural barriers of the Lough.

Louise Walsh was selected to create this sculpture and recruited a group of teenagers from schools in the adjacent communities. A theme that surfaced in discussions with the students was the desire to express "an end to sectarian violence and conflict in Northern Ireland. They felt that this millennium was for them and the children of the future. They wanted past atrocities to be left in the past, and everybody to take responsibility for making a peaceful future together."<sup>386</sup> The site for Walsh's sculpture has a strong connection with the surrounding communities because every summer, children would come to the lake for swimming lessons and the measure of a good swimmer was to reach the crannog [a Bronze Age man-made island] situated 250 yards from the shore. Walsh said that the teenagers choose this island as a "symbol of utopia or Tir na nOg, and also symbolized the future of Ireland itself."<sup>387</sup> The result of these ideas is a sculpture, shown in Figure 5.17, that consists of three pieces of stone each with a hole cut into it, lined up to view the crannog. Into the frontal rock is inscribed the words: *Imagine: an island where all could*

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<sup>384</sup> Coates 53.

<sup>385</sup> Deepwell 192.

<sup>386</sup> Deepwell 192.

<sup>387</sup> Deepwell 192.

*live in peace. Make it real.* The local community collaborated in the installation of this work. And this feeling of collaboration and forgiveness is apparent today when one sees a young couple with their child playing around the stones and showing the little girl the crannog or Tir na nOg.

Another example of public art that gives voice is *Circuit* (2003), Figure 5.18, which addresses the experience of hospitals, where patients can feel overwhelmed by the medical system in their moments of need and vulnerability. Walsh was selected in 1997 to integrate art work into the fabric of the new Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. *Circuit* is seen at the entrance of the hospital on the columns that reach the second floor where the head of a snake that forms part of the sculpture can be seen through the window of the cafeteria. At the corner of the entrance are two closely-spaced columns that Walsh describes "like a pair of twins holding up the corner."<sup>388</sup> Around these columns is a poem written by Martin Mooney and etched into the stone. Mooney's words are a reflection of the spirit of the place, "Helixes arranged by size, all machined and polished like a set of coiled up chimes. A kind of DNA for song for work and care is what it makes me think of."<sup>389</sup>

Walsh had returned to her use of the symbol of the snake, but this time in the context of medicine. The serpent on the staff, the Aesculapius wand, is an ancient symbol associated with astrology, the Greek god Asclepius, and the international symbol in medicine and healing. The snake is arranged in a helix, like DNA. But while these giant snakes may also be images of intimidation and fear, Walsh subverts their domination by allowing the observer to look them in the eye (from the second floor cafeteria) or to grab their tail and physically move them, establishing the patient's position of control.

Walsh said, "I wanted people to have the power and holding their own healing in their own hands. The snake was a symbol of healing and it is also a scary symbol, so I wanted people to have some access to a powerful image - to hold it and to be able to move it . . . to grasp this huge serpent by the tail and be able to make it move and take control physically on entering the hospital."<sup>390</sup> To do this, the snake is attached to three tracks to allow it to

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<sup>388</sup> Louise Walsh. "Reflecting on an Evolving Practice." *Irish Feminist Review*, Vol. 3 (2007).  
<[http://www.louisewalsh.org/yahoo\\_site\\_admin/assets/docs/LW](http://www.louisewalsh.org/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/LW)>

<sup>389</sup> Walsh, n. pag.

<sup>390</sup> Walsh, n. pag.

rotate. The tail of the snake is the size of a human hand; thus a person would be able to rotate it downstairs, while the people who are sitting at the cafeteria in the second floor, pondering their lives and sickness, are reminded by the head of the serpent that they see at eye level that they do have control of their lives, and healing, and care.

Would Louise Walsh have made the same art in the same way had the professor in art college, the one from Galway, not presented her with the crazy image of the Sheela? Certainly it would be overstating the influence of the Sheela to say that it was a unique and pre-eminent force in shaping Walsh's thinking. It is probably more true, to register the Sheela as one of a number of significant influences in Walsh's life and art. The Sheela presented Walsh with a strong, mystical and confident female figure in her early years. It has an obvious presence in her *Mother* sketches. The Sheela then returns very clearly in *Sounding the Depths*. One might argue that the Sheela helped Walsh to find her voice – a debt Walsh repays in her public works as she reaches to the *Unknown Woman Worker*, or the youths of Blacklion, or to the infirm entering a hospital to find their voice as well.

The last artist considered in the thesis, Eilis O'Connell, also produces public sculpture and has also been influenced by the Sheela. The Sheela will be seen to have a subtler role in inspiring O'Connell's art. However this is not to say that O'Connell was less sensitive to the social issues in Irish society, but rather that O'Connell's formalist approach is less tied to specific contemporary issues. As such, it is fascinating to see how the form of the Sheela can inspire a quite different artist in a quite different way.



Figure 5.1 *Untitled*, 1986. Sculpture, Mixed Media. Joan Fowler, MA Fine Art Exhibition, University of Ulster, Belfast, Sep. 4-11, 1986, *Circa 31* (Nov - Dec. 1986) 35; Print.



Figure 5.2 *And the Boat We Make Shall Keep Us Safe*, 1987. Preliminary Drawing. Louise Walsh: Artist in Residence (Exhibition catalogue), The Otter Gallery, Belfast 11- 30 May, 1987; n. pag., Print.



Figure 5.3      *Untitled Struggle*, 1989. Graphite on paper. 87.5 x 61.2 cm. "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself." *Issues: Four Artists, Marrie Barret, Rita Duffy, Alice Maher and Louise Walsh*. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition, 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990. n. pag., Print.



Figure 5.4      *Mother Work*, 1989. Charcoal on paper. "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself." *Issues: Four Artists, Marrie Barret, Rita Duffy, Alice Maher and Louise Walsh*. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition, 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990; n. pag.; Print.



Figure 5.5 *Untitled*, 1989. Drawing Mixed Media. 107.5 x 157.5 cm. "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself." *Issues: Four Artists, Marrie Barret, Rita Duffy, Alice Maher and Louise Walsh*. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition, 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990; n. pag.; Print.

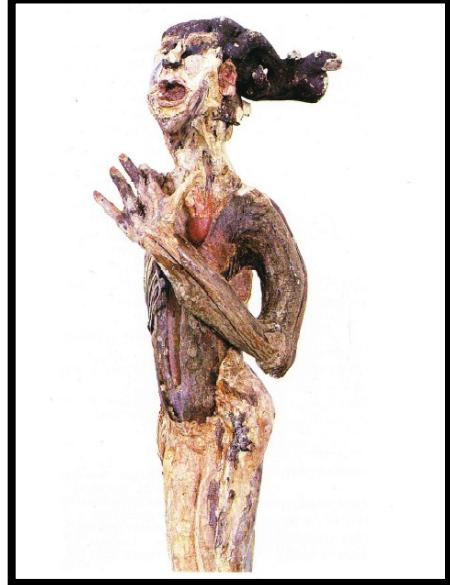


Figure 5.6 *Athene The Other*, 1989. Mixed Media. 80 cm high. "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself." *Issues: Four Artists, Marrie Barret, Rita Duffy, Alice Maher and Louise Walsh*. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition, 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990; n. pag.; Print.



Figure 5.7 *To Have and To Hold*, 1989. Sculpture installation. Mixed media. 215 cms high. "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself", *Issues: Alice Maher and Louise Walsh*. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition; 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990; n. pag. ; Print.

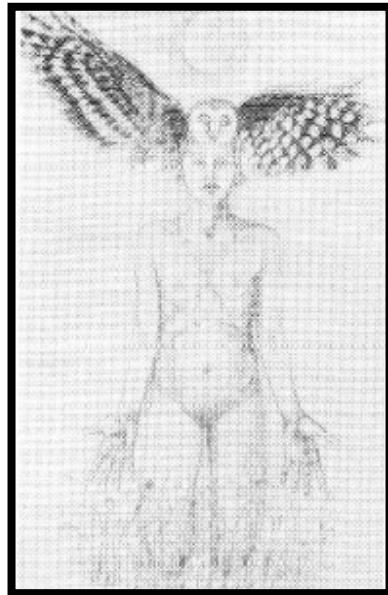


Figure 5.8 *Mother Work* 1989. Charcoal on paper; "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself", *Issues: Four Artists, Marrie Barret, Rita Duffy, Alice Maher and Louise Walsh*. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition; 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990; n. pag. ; Print.



Figure 5.9

Mother Work. *For My Daughter Who Will Be A Warrior*, 1989. Mixed media. "Louise Walsh: My Work is Myself", Issues: Four Artists, Marrie Barret, Rita Duffy, Alice Maher and Louise Walsh. An Arts Council of Northern Ireland Exhibition; 9 Nov. – 2 Dec. 1990; n. pag. ; Print.

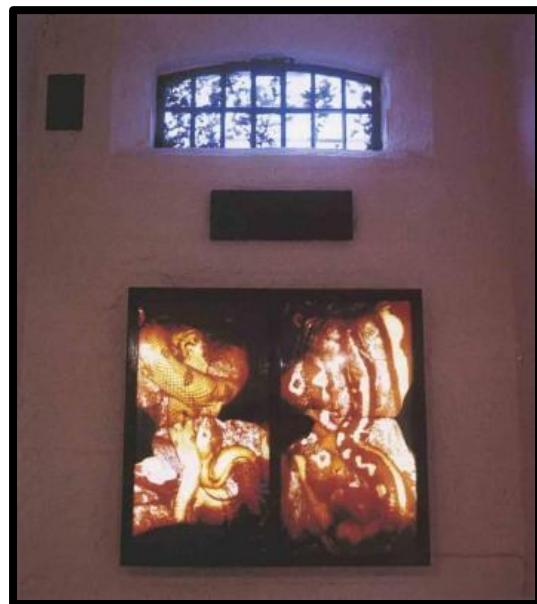


Figure 5.10

*Outlaws Inlaws*, 1991. Installation shot in a cell at the Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin. Light Box, Glass, Plastic. Web. <[http://www.louisewalsh.org/outlaws\\_inlaws\\_1991/](http://www.louisewalsh.org/outlaws_inlaws_1991/)>



Figure 5.11      *Outlaws Inlaws*, 1991. Installation details. Web.  
[http://www.louisewalsh.org/outlaws\\_inlaws\\_1991/](http://www.louisewalsh.org/outlaws_inlaws_1991/)



Figure 5.12      *Monument to the Unknown Women Worker*, 1992. Public Sculpture, Bronze. Larger figure 2.10 cm high. Smaller figure 1.95 cm high. Picture taken with the artist. Belfast, Northern Ireland. "Moving Statues." A radio documentary on Radio L-RTE. RTE Stills Photograph. NIVAL Library Archives. Print.



Figure 5.13 *Monument to the Unknown Women Worker*, 1992. Public Sculpture, Bronze. Outside Great Northern Centre, Great Victoria Street, Belfast. Side Detail (left). Close-up of taller woman (right) (Photographs by Robert Gooding).



Figure 5.14 *Monument to the Unknown Women Worker*, 1992. Public Sculpture, Bronze. Back detail. Louise Walsh, Reflecting on an Evolving Practice, *Irish Feminist Review*, Vol. 3, 2007; 3; PDF file.

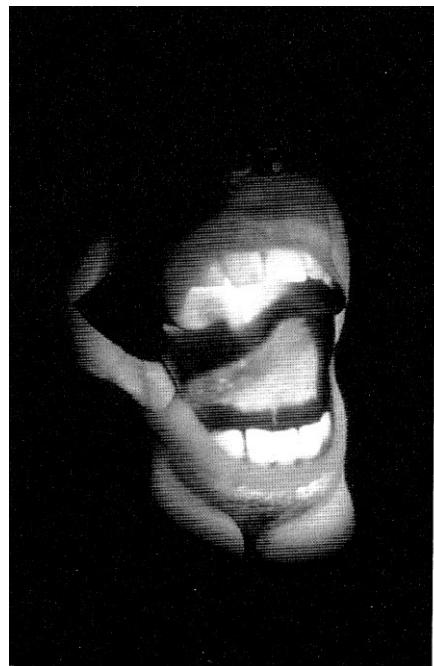


Figure 5.15 *Sounding the Depths*. Video installation with large composite images. Exhibition catalogue (The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 1992) 21; Print.



Figure 5.16 *Sounding the Depths*, 1992. Video installation with large composite images and the artists, Louise Walsh and Pauline Cummins. Aidan Dunne. "Nudes with Feminist Kicks, *Irish Times*, 5 April 1992.



Figure 5.17      *Imagine*, 2000. Three Stones, Blacklion Lake, County Leitrim, Ireland. Image of the crannog through the stones. (Photographs by Robert Gooding).

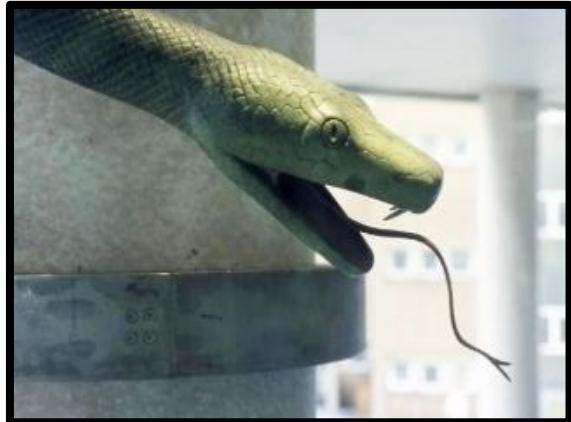
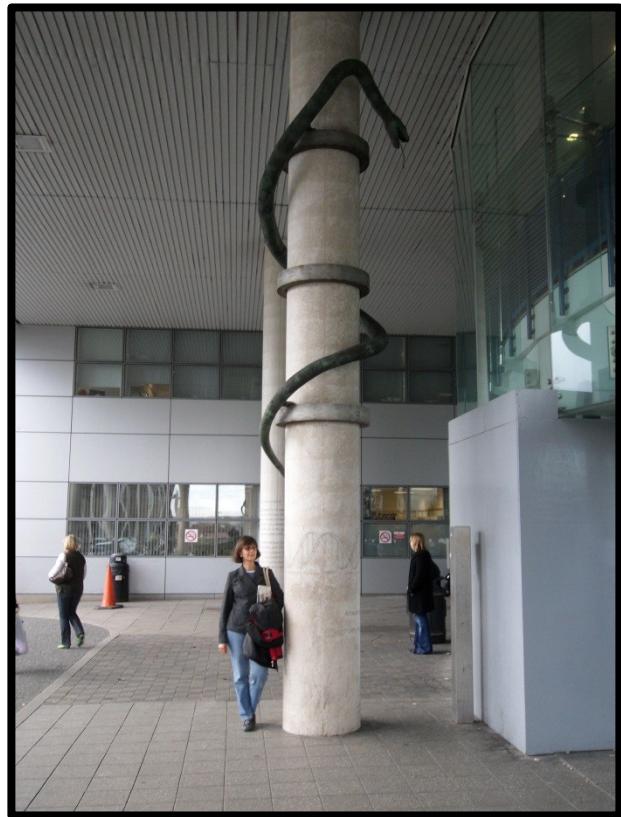


Figure 5.18 *Circuit*. 2003. Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Photo on left by Robert Gooding; Photos on right from Reflecting on an Evolving Practice, *Irish Feminist Review*, Vol. 3, 2007; 4; PDF file.

## Chapter 6 Eilis O'Connell: The Sheela-na-Gig and a Sense of Space

Eilis O'Connell's sculptural works are essentially formalist, which is to say she follows "an approach that emphasizes line, colour, tone and mass at the expense of the significance of subject matter."<sup>391</sup> A formalist approach does not feature the social context of the art work, but instead provides an "aesthetic response as mediated through sight alone . . . the strength of this approach is that it can embrace all art forms since a formalist response to any item or artifact from any culture or period makes no distinctions in relation to cultural context."<sup>392</sup>

Formalism does not, however, preclude a defined inspirational source. O'Connell has said that much of her work draws its force from the human body, and in particular, the female body. Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith, senior lecturer at University College, Dublin and an specialist in Contemporary Irish Visual Culture, tells of how O'Connell's knowledge of the female body is based on O'Connell's "interest in antique and prehistoric images of women, most especially the medieval Sheela-na-Gig carvings depicting women displaying their genitals. Yet she is quick to point out that her work has never been specifically concerned with "exploring female gender."<sup>393</sup> O'Connell's discussion of gender, scale and theme leads her to say "You have to use your [own] body as a measuring device. A tool, it is essential . . ."<sup>394</sup>

O'Connell confirmed that the Sheela-na-gig has been a source of inspiration in her work and that gender has been problematized: "My work was always very abstract, so I used an elliptical shape, usually as the entrance to a void. I think that came from the Sheela-na-Gigs. I choose not to discuss that aspect of my work because I didn't want to engage in the gender politics of the time, I felt that it was trendy; everything was so polarized back then."<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon. *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000) 27.

<sup>392</sup> Meecham 27.

<sup>393</sup> Caoimhin Mac Giolla Leith. "Priviledge Forms: The Sculpture of Eilis O'Connell." *Profile 3: Eilis O'Connell* (Kinsale: Gandon Editions and the artist in association with the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, 1997) 8.

<sup>394</sup> Johnny Hanraban. "Notes on a Conversation with Eilis O'Connell, Kathy Prendergast and Vivienne Roche." *Edge to Edge: Three Sculptors From Ireland*. Ed. John O'Regan (Dublin: Gandon Editions, Oct. 1990 – Sept. 1991) 6.

<sup>395</sup> Eilis O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2011. E. mail.

A more complete understanding of the influence of the Sheela-na-gig, and in particular, the characteristic of the exposed vulva requires a broader review of O'Connell's art and critical commentary. Eilis O'Connell is an Irish-born sculptor and, like Barrie Cooke, a member of the Aosdána. As listed in her Aosdána biography, O'Connell has exhibited broadly since the early 1970s in solo and group shows. Her career has developed around public commissions, including thirty large-scale works sited mostly in the United Kingdom. Some of her most important commissions are *Secret Station*, a sculpture in bronze fibre-optics and steam for Cardiff Bay Arts Trust sited at the Gateway, Cardiff in 1992; *Vowel of Earth Dreaming its Root*, a large outdoor sculpture in Kilkenny limestone for the London Docklands Development Corporation in the Isle of Dogs, and *Pero's Footbridge* for the Bristol Chamber of Commerce in 1999. In 2002, O'Connell exhibited a large outdoor bronze from the Goodwood collection at the Venice Biennale and the Guggenheim Museum.<sup>396</sup>

Eilis O'Connell was born in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1953 and lived just across the border in County Donegal until the age of ten:

I was only born in Derry because that was the nearest hospital. My father was a customs officer and we lived at Bridgend, on the edge of County Donegal and County Derry. My mother was from the North and my father was from the South, so we lived in a kind of "No-Man's Land" between two territories. You could choose what you were. There were people whose kitchens were in the south and their bedrooms in the north. I had a rural Irish background, and all that went with it: the Irish step-dancing with your arms pinned against your sides; all that being trapped. There was only room for your feet – try to move your arms and you were killed. They have turned it into an art now!<sup>397</sup>

O'Connell described her childhood as a typical rural Irish one with space to play and freedom to explore her surroundings. The early free years in the Donegal countryside can be seen as a source of places and objects that were later referenced in her artistic work. In 1963, at the age of ten, O'Connell and her family moved to Cork.

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<sup>396</sup> Aosdána: An Affiliation of Creative Artists in Ireland. Web. June 2009.  
<<http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie/Members.aspx>>

<sup>397</sup> Ruane Medb. "A Conversation with the Artist." *Profile 3: Eilis O'Connell* (Cork: Gandon Editions in association with the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, 1997) 15.

Life in Cork was more restricted - in the surroundings, the social structures and the schooling system: "My childhood seemed to end then. Suddenly, I lived in suburbia, wore a uniform and went to a convent school. At that point, my education was dominated by Catholicism and all the repression that went with it. It was intolerable."<sup>398</sup> One can speculate that O'Connell's childhood experiences re-emerged in her art and were manifested in forms derived from familiar objects such as gourds or farm tools and as "found objects."

O'Connell studied at the Crawford College of Art in Cork (1970-74). As was the case with Louise Walsh, it was at college where O'Connell first heard of the Sheela-na-gig, albeit ten years before Walsh. Like Walsh and Cooke, O'Connell said that the Sheela was not well known at that time: "[Sheelas] were not on show anywhere, so I imagined what they looked like. The idea of showing the vulva seemed quite outrageous as Ireland was so conservative and puritanical back then."<sup>399</sup> Yet for O'Connell, as an art student, the Sheela "was something that I found exciting . . . I was attracted to the element of mystery surrounding them and the anonymity of their makers."<sup>400</sup> O'Connell felt that the Sheelas were not about sexual identity, but "they still remain a mystery to me," and she adds that, "We don't know why they were made. Historically they are important because we have so little non-ecclesiastical three-dimensional works from that period . . . I think they could be interpreted as sculptures about giving birth [with] each maker interpreting the subject differently."<sup>401</sup>

When O'Connell first saw a Sheela, she was disappointed, however:

. . . they were not as dynamic as I had imagined them. By that time I had developed a huge interest in African art and there was no comparison in terms of imagination. I assumed that the Sheelas would be really well-carved. What I did find interesting was the way the anatomy was rearranged. In one Sheela [Birr, County Offaly, National Museum of Dublin] the breasts are

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<sup>398</sup> Ruane 15.

<sup>399</sup> O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2011.

<sup>400</sup> O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2011.

<sup>401</sup> O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2011.

actually placed between the elbow and underarm like a separate appendage. That is quite surreal and reminds me of many African carvings.”<sup>402</sup>

O’Connell studied under the supervision of John Burke (1946-2006), a Clonmel-born sculptor (County Tipperary), who had made his reputation as a sculptor of large-scale public works in welded steel.<sup>403</sup> Burke’s enthusiasm for working with found objects in metal inspired a new wave of abstract sculptors such as O’Connell. O’Connell pursued graduate studies at the Massachusetts College of Art and graduated in 1975.<sup>404</sup>

O’Connell’s work has been widely exhibited since the 1970s and her career has focussed on large-scale public commissions. The art historian, George Noszlopy points to O’Connell’s “distinctive sense of place” as a critical component of her work.<sup>405</sup> This quality is examined in *Tower of Light* (1998) in Bilston, West Midlands, England. In making this sculpture, O’Connell was inspired by both the origin of the Bilston’s name (from “Beli” the sun god of the Druids) and Bilston’s coat of arms which has the image of the lighted lamp of Faith carried by a woman.<sup>406</sup> O’Connell’s approach to sculpture and her most significant aesthetic experience are thought to be related both to her early life trips around the Irish landscape and her knowledge of the historical connections. In 1993, O’Connell explained to art critic Charles Hall that:

. . . the first thing I saw which really struck me, when I was a kid, was a place near where I lived called Grianan of Aileach (County Donegal). It’s a prehistoric stone fort, a ring fort, with steps going up diagonally at each level within four concentric walls. This place and others like it were my first experience of sculpture, although it only translated as ‘art’ in my final year of college. I had a lot of friends who were archaeologists, and I had a summer job doing archaeological ground plans [drawn records of features and artifacts done in the horizontal plane]. It was in the

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<sup>402</sup> O’Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2011.

<sup>403</sup> Vivienne Roche. “Obituary: John Burke.” *Circa* (119, Spring - 2007) 25.

<sup>404</sup> Eilis O’Connell. “Teacher’s Notes.” Web. <<http://www.crawfordartgallery.ie/images/educationimages/ArtistsBio>>

<sup>405</sup> George T. Noszlopy and Fiona Waterhouse. *Public Sculpture of Staffordshire and the Black Country: Public Sculpture of Britain* (Liverpool: University Press, 2005) 278.

<sup>406</sup> Noszlopy 20.

1970s, the first time these things, these 3,000 year-old structures, had really been documented. I had a Morris Minor, and we'd take 'mystery tours'. We'd always find forts or standing stones or stone circles. Earth art was already going on, and I was thinking 'people in the States are trying to make these things, and we already have them.' I wrote my thesis about megaliths in Newgrange and the Boyne Valley as if they were pieces of sculpture, from the aesthetic point of view. It's one of those places where, on the solstice, light comes in through a slit over the door and lights a bowl in the cross-shaped chamber.<sup>407</sup>

These structures are landmarks of the Irish landscape and confer a distinct identity to place according to art critic Charles Hall. Hall believes that O'Connell's interest in public sculpture is derived from her love of ancient Irish structures, which confers an identity to those places. For O'Connell, it is this "sense of a sculpture or building's capacity for drawing its energy from its environment and returning it in some kind of distilled form [that] powers her continuing interest in the whole idea of public sculpture."<sup>408</sup>

While O'Connell has international training and influences, there remain strong elements of Irish-based inspiration. Dorothy Walker, an Irish art critic, points to the great carvings at Newgrange and the Early Christian Bronze Age artefacts in gold and bronze as fundamental Irish influences. According to Walker, O'Connell brings into her art a combination of formalism and natural or organic material "held in a delicate balance by an inner, inherent authority rather than by an outer, imposed, rigid order."<sup>409</sup> O'Connell mixes reliefs of slates with organic materials which are taken from the Irish countryside. Walker proposes that there is an Irish quality as being "fresh, rough and sophisticated, applying the terms to different manifestations of Irish life and culture from traditional music to Irish

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<sup>407</sup> Charles Hall. "The Undomesticated Space." *Eilis O'Connell* (Dublin; London: Gandon Books in association with the Gallery at John Jones, 1993) 25.

<sup>408</sup> Hall 26.

<sup>409</sup> Dorothy Walker. "Traditional Structures in Recent Irish Art." *The Crane Bag*. Vol. 6.1, James Joyce and the Arts in Ireland (1982) 42.

brown bread.”<sup>410</sup> For Walker, the sculptures of O’Connell integrated those qualities with a clear sense of critical self-judgement.<sup>411</sup>

O’Connell’s choice of materials reflects the Irish landscape and her origins. The stones that O’Connell has used in her artwork are associated with personal memories and origins. O’Connell explains that, “these were stones from the bottom of the sea, with fossils in them and marked by water, and people used to use them in their houses.”<sup>412</sup> The stones also relate to her rural home in Donegal and reflect her approach of blending the formal approaches to sculpture with her more personal memories and inspiration. Thus O’Connell claims: “In general I am definitely trying to make some kind of statement about where I am from.”<sup>413</sup>

According to Liam Kelly, Professor of Irish Visual Culture at the University of Ulster, a sense of movement is present even in O’Connell’s earliest works where her forms “implied movement rather than static geometrical repose; they were non-compliant.”<sup>414</sup> Dorothy Walker recognized the progression in O’Connell’s work from “large abstract constructions in painted steel, extremely accomplished, but [then] moving towards more organic concepts, using slates to make a most impressive environment.”<sup>415</sup> *Slate Columns* (1979) is evidence of this phase and consists of a semi-circle of nine pillars of staked slates arranged progressively according to height, which carried a unique mysterious shimmering appearance and a reminder of the Irish megalithic sacred stone circle landscape.<sup>416</sup> Kelly believes that this work also serves as an example of the shift by O’Connell “from a restrained late modernism (minimalism) to the luxuriant object.”<sup>417</sup> Within these early works, there were signs of how O’Connell was gently

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<sup>410</sup> Walker 42.

<sup>411</sup> Walker 42.

<sup>412</sup> Hall 25.

<sup>413</sup> Hall 25.

<sup>414</sup> Kelly 112.

<sup>415</sup> Walker. “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman.” *The Crane Bag*. Vol. 4.1, Images of the Irish Woman (1980) 111.

<sup>416</sup> Walker 111.

<sup>417</sup> Kelly 112.

subverting minimalism by questioning language and material. Kelly describes how this work seems to “appear, as if overnight, like some organic growths extruding something vital from the earth, full of the power of their precarious essences.”<sup>418</sup>

Inspirations that run through O’Connell’s work include: her sense of space, her sense of the body, and in particular the female body that she blends within her formalist sculptural approach.<sup>419</sup> O’Connell not only affirms that there is something fundamentally female about her sense of space but also explains how: “I often use the vagina shape from the Sheela-na-gig. I was amazed by Anish Kapoor’s use of it once. The real vagina is the entrance of the womb, a cavern, a cavity, whereas in this piece it was just a hole with no enclosed space. It was interesting, but it opens into something.”<sup>420</sup> O’Connell’s comment on Kapoor’s work speaks not only to her own approach to sculptural space, but also to the controversy regarding her works and their relationship to gender and the human body.

Concerning the theme of the body, O’Connell states that:

I’m always very surprised when my work starts to make body references – I don’t set out with that in mind. My subconscious works its way into the process of making. That’s why my work in general tends to be about the female body, because that’s what I know best. Sometimes people mistakenly read phallic references in my work simply because an element is pointed or stands upright. Well, all human beings stand upright. I don’t know what it’s like to be in a man’s body. I know what I know.<sup>421</sup>

In response to a question about the enclosed interior spaces that appears in some of her works as hollow, O’Connell said:

Yes, they are, and the chamber inside is a very important aspect of my work. Sometimes the apertures are quite small, so the inside remains dark and unknown. That sort of trapped space gives the work an internal energy which empowers it. A lot of my work has multiple elements and

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<sup>418</sup> Kelly 112.

<sup>419</sup> Hall 28.

<sup>420</sup> Hall 29. Anish Kapoor, born in 1954, is a British sculptor of Indian birth.

<sup>421</sup> Armstrong. “Interview with Eilis O’Connell.” *Re/Dressing Cathleen* 125.

the space between them is as important as the elements themselves. I'm interested in the way the eye catches a rhythm when we look at the different parts of a piece while we physically move around it.<sup>422</sup>

The small work, *Cathoid* (1996), shown in Figure 6.1, features a hollow space in the form of an ellipse. Luz Mar Gonzalez Arias, a philologist at Oviedo University, Spain, provides the following analysis of O'Connell's use of the vagina shape from the Sheela-na-gig in the context of female sexuality and visual space in this work. Gonzalez Arias explains that the space of the central tear in the sculpture follows inside the depth of it forming a hollow cavity representing those unknown regions of female sexuality. This invisible corporal dimension is contained in a space which extends through the length and width of the entire work and has as much importance as the exterior surface, which is exposed to the viewer's sight. Thus the viewer who observes O'Connell sculpture is unable to "access all its extension, therefore the traditional visual pleasure of the viewer is suppressed in favour of the sense of touch."<sup>423</sup> O'Connell thus connects with the medieval Sheelas and their open vaginas, according to Gonzalez Arias, in order to demonstrate that the interior of the body is also part of the sexual identity of a woman. The Sheelas are feminine sculptures suggesting important interior spaces which cannot be seen, but only imagined. O'Connell points to the religious and social context of the images and how the inspiration of the Sheela empowers her work:

. . . it's impossible for me to use an elliptical shape and not to think of body references and Sheela-na-gigs. Until recently, they were kept from public viewing in the Irish museums, which demonstrates the level of repression the Catholic Church has imposed on the Irish people . . . the [hollow] chamber inside [the sculptures] is a very important aspect of the work. Sometimes the aperture is quite small, so the inside remains dark and unknown. That sort of trapped space gives the work an internal energy which empowers it.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Armstrong, *Re/Dressing Cathleen* 125.

<sup>423</sup> Luz Mar Gonzalez Arias. *La otra Irlanda: La estética postnacionalista de poetas y artistas irlandeses contemporáneas*. Trans. Sonya Ocampo-Gooding (Universidad de Oviedo, 2000) 184.

<sup>424</sup> Gonzalez Arias 184.

A selection of O'Connell's public works can be used to illustrate other important themes in her work: The work *Hot with Inward Heat* (1990) (Figure 6.2) came into being after O'Connell was offered a one-person exhibition, *Ancient Rain* at the Artsite Gallery, Bath in 1999. O'Connell recalls that:

I decided to make a site-specific sculpture for the courtyard. I was intrigued by the Roman Baths and their history. I was told how, in winter, the steam from the hot springs comes up through the pavements. The springs had been worshipped even before Roman times as a sacred healing place, and the source still gushes with hot water, coming from deep below the earth's crust. I read an Old Saxon poem which describes the spring as being 'hot with inward heat' and I thought of making a sculpture like this, a sculpture that would breathe steam. The sculpture was a temporary installation at Artsite and has since been exhibited as part of *Inheritance and Transformation*, the opening exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin [in 1991].<sup>425</sup>

Sarah Kirchoff, a conceptual graphic designer, explains that "site-specific art" is a broad grouping of numerous categories including Public Art, Destination Art, Installation Art and Land Art and the specificity of the art is based on the particular viewing context. Therefore site-specific art does not just sit on top of the landscape, but it is deeply rooted within it "not depicting the landscape but engaging it . . . not simply of the landscape but in it as well."<sup>426</sup> Site-specific artists such as Eilis O'Connell take into account the final destination, environment and context when considering the art work's size, scale, colour, orientation in space and transparency (e.g. use of glass, different opacities and colour).<sup>427</sup>

O'Connell read an Old Saxon poem called *The Ruin* in preparation for *Hot with Inward Heat* and her study of the Roman Bath. The poem is found in the *Exeter Book*, an ancient victory tale of the armies of Ceaulin of Wessex over the Roman cities including Bath, Bathancastra, Gloucester and Cirencester in 557. Charles Edward Davies

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<sup>425</sup> Eilis O'Connell. *Eilis O'Connell* (Dublin; London: Gandon Books in association with The Gallery at John Jones, 1993) 12.

<sup>426</sup> Sarah M. Kirchoff. *The Influence of Context on Message-Making and Audience Reception in Graphic Design*. Graphic Design MFA Program, School of Design, College of Imaging Arts and Science (New York: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2008) 7.

<sup>427</sup> Kirchoff 148.

(1827-1902) was an antiquarian and city architect of Bath. He discovered and excavated the Roman bath and later wrote a book where he cites a passage from the poem:

There stood arcades of stone;  
the stream hotly issued --  
with eddies widening up to the wall encircling all the bright bosomed pool;  
there the Baths were – hot with inward heat: native's bounty that!  
So they caused to flow [into a sea] stone the hot stream.<sup>428</sup>

O'Connell not only incorporated the history of Bath in her site-specific work, but also connected with the essence of the female body through her use of the ellipse, which references the open vagina form of the Sheela-na-gig. The Sheela might also provide a connection with the cult of the Celtic goddess Sulis and the *Aquae Sulis*, located at the spring of the Avon River near Bath. Rev. Thomas Leman (d. 1826) noted that "the original name of Bath was Aquae Sulis (not Solis)."<sup>429</sup> Sulis' influence covered the southwest of England where her name is remembered. The altars at Bath were "dedicated to the Goddess Sulis."<sup>430</sup> For the Romans, she was named *Sulis Minerva* influenced by the sun, *Solar Minerva*. The origin of the Minerva's British title, *Aquae Sulis* references the hot springs which are influenced by the sun and the city itself. Therefore the designation of the city and the Goddess became as "Waters of the Sun."<sup>431</sup> Gonzalez Arias also noted that in *Hot with Inward Heat* that the female body has been transformed into a new context of space within which a new energy has been embodied. O'Connell presents long fissures over the surface of the vertical silhouettes. Two cones, cut in the middle, stand side-by-side and steam comes from the upper part, out of "oval windows from which air is expulsed and lost in the air."<sup>432</sup> The work has an ambiguity in representing both the mouth and the vagina. The energy of the emerging steam gives depth to the

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<sup>428</sup> Charles Edward Davis. *Guide to the Roman Baths of Bath: with a plan of the present and former discoveries* (Bath: Lewis Sons and Tyte, 1884) 10.

<sup>429</sup> *Proceedings of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, 1852. Vol. 2. (London: G. Bell, 186, Fleet Street, 1853) 93.

<sup>430</sup> *Proceedings* 93.

<sup>431</sup> *Proceedings* 93.

<sup>432</sup> Gonzalez Arias 185. Trans. Ocampo-Gooding.

passive female body suggesting a dark interior or dark space where the steam originates, but that cannot be perceived by the eye. In this context, ‘*Hot with Inward Heat*’ assumes “a conceptualization of the body as an existential situation able to influence in the exterior reality being presented as one more landscape element, which is transformed with the gases coming out from the buccal-vaginal cavities.”<sup>433</sup>

*Outside In* (1990), shown in Figure 6.3, was also presented at the *Ancient Rain* exhibition (1999). This work can also be seen to have a connection with Sulis at Bath. O’Connell creates a patinated steel surface in an ellipse form, drawing attention to both the feminine form and the inner space of the sculpture. As mentioned previously, the ellipse and the void are acknowledged by O’Connell to be connected with the Sheela. In 1991, O’Connell said how “in some pieces I think of a sort of womb-like space, and I often used an abstract vagina shape as an opening into an interior of the sculpture so the inner space has become very important as well.”<sup>434</sup> This womb-like space, O’Connell notes, could be related to the spiritual-religious context of a place or as a personal place which provides a protective and nurturing environment. O’Connell explains that *Outside In* was inspired as a “therapeutic way of dealing with the fear [of sleeping over a room full of dead bodies when she was living over a funeral parlour]. It is very enclosed and the same size as my body and when I get upset, I imagine myself inside it and I feel very protected by it.”<sup>435</sup>

*Wrapt* (1993) (Figure 6.4) is a large curling birch sculpture with a lit interior space that was presented at the exhibition *Re/Dressing Cathleen* at the McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College in 1997. It is also suggestive of the feminine body and Sheela-na-gig. In this particular exhibition, *Wrapt* was placed in an environment of sculptural elements, including a rusted steel spike that projects from the wall. Katherine Nahum, art historian, observed that “the slit, suggesting vagina, eye and navel, is poised just so within the central wall element, apparently made of wood and longer than the floor piece. It is bounded by right angles and an ellipse exquisitely joined to the straight edges.”<sup>436</sup> The spike appears as the “materialization of the negative space of the slit.”<sup>437</sup> The collection suggests

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<sup>433</sup> Gonzalez Arias 185. Trans. Ocampo-Gooding.

<sup>434</sup> Hanraban 6.

<sup>435</sup> Hanraban 8.

<sup>436</sup> Nahum. 66.

fragmentation, which Nahum suggests may signal emotional fragmentation – or “historical disruptions of land as female and more recent concerns about the control of women’s bodies.”<sup>438</sup>

The sculpture is presently located at Lismore Castle in County Waterford. O’Connell tells how *Wrapt* is more about “the space outside the body. It’s large. You can walk around it or go inside it. I tend to make sculptures that have protective spaces within them, almost like armour.”<sup>439</sup> In its location at Lismore Castle, the sculpture is seen to have a “relationship between solid and void, between body and spirit.”<sup>440</sup>

*Enmeshed* (1994) (Figure 6.5) is small sculpture made of brass and woven brass wire that also has a clear connection to the Sheela form. According to Nahum, O’Connell’s works can embody the theme of “entrapment inside and freedom outside”<sup>441</sup> – a theme that can be applied to *Enmeshed*. For Nahum, this sculpture resembles several things: a large barnacle, a basket and a breast with a perforation at the center to fashion a vagina. The use of the vagina shape taken from the Sheela-na-gig, says O’Connell, is best “understood as the entrance of the womb, to an enclosed, vital space.”<sup>442</sup>

*Earthed* (1994) was also presented in “Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists” in 1997 and has aspects that connect with the form of the vagina. *Earthed* (Figure 6.6) is a three-piece sculpture that was patinated, painted in rusted steel and exhibited in a rectangular twenty-four inch tall space. The long and organic central piece contains a vertical slit that runs parallel to its left, straight edge that echoes *Wrapt*.<sup>443</sup>

One sees a wide variety of O’Connell’s works being inspired by the Sheela’s imagery during the 1990s, including the *Steel Swelling* (1993) (Figure 6.7), *Suomenlinna Series* (1990) (Figure 6.8), *Low Mound* and *Insideless*. In these works, O’Connell used poetic qualities to emphasize the inner concerns of the body as expressed by “the

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<sup>437</sup> Nahum 66.

<sup>438</sup> Nahum 66.

<sup>439</sup> Peter Murray. “Statuesque Splendour at Lismore.” *Irish Art Review*. Vol. 19. 2 (Autumn, 2002) 123.

<sup>440</sup> Murray 123.

<sup>441</sup> Nahum 66.

<sup>442</sup> Nahum 66.

<sup>443</sup> Nahum 66.

presence of vaginal forms and breast-like shapes."<sup>444</sup> The *Inside/less* sculpture presents an organic element, made of a cowrie shell that art historian, Martin Gaughan, feels is:

. . . an enigmatic, fetish-like presence into the slit in the rounded form. Here one has the sense of some dialectical, interruptive move – the cowrie shell as a *vagina dentata* but also eye, the presence of a set of cultural signifiers, of her interest in the Sheela-na-gig carvings and sexual explicitness, the fetish but also the resonances within Western culture of Freudian discourses, the relationship between sexuality and seeing.<sup>445</sup>

The public work, *Secret Station* (1992-93), connects with both the future and the past of Cardiff Bay in Wales. In 1991, the Cardiff Bay Art Trust organized an international competition on behalf of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation for a freeway entrance to the industrial development park as part of the area's redevelopment scheme. After being shortlisted on the basis of drawings, O'Connell made a working model for her proposal using miniature fibre optics and a small steam generator. In its larger scale, due to engineering problems with the cone standing on its narrow end, O'Connell opted for a different and more practical arrangement to better show the effects of the fibre optics and steam elements. The title and inspiration of this work were derived from a poem by Seamus Heaney,<sup>446</sup> from his first volume *Death of a Naturalist* (1966):

The Diviner

Cut from the green hedge a forked hazel stick / That he held tight by the arms of the V:  
Circling the terrain, hunting the pluck / Of water, nervous, but professionally  
Unfussed. The pluck came sharp as a sting. / The rod jerked with precise convulsions.  
Spring water suddenly broadcasting / Through a green hazel its secret stations.

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<sup>444</sup> Martin Gaughan. "Eilis O'Connell, Arnolfini, Bristol Oriel, Cardiff, Martin Tinney Gallery, Cardiff." *Circa*. 68 (Summer, 1994) 59.

<sup>445</sup> Gaughan 59.

<sup>446</sup> O'Connell 18.

The bystanders would ask to have a try. / He handed them the rod without a word.

It lay dead in their grasp till, nonchalantly, / He gripped expectant wrists. The hazel stirred.<sup>447</sup>

This site-specific work is situated on a tract of land opposite a roundabout in the redeveloped area near the docks that were once an industrialized zone. O'Connell explains that:

. . . during the day, the cones puff out steam in alternating rhythms, and at night the arcs are lit up by intense fibre optic light, changing slowly from one colour to the next (deep blue, turquoise, viridian, lime green). This new energy-efficient lighting system hints at the possibility of regeneration for the area through the development of new technologies. A city's industrial period is part of its cultural history, and *Secret Station* serves as a landmark to both Cardiff's past and future.<sup>448</sup>

The sculpture pays homage to the old world, such as steamships associated with Cardiff Bay in its heyday as a major coal port as well as to the future through contemporary fibre optic technologies. Mac Guiolla Leith examines this work with the view that since the eighties, O'Connell's sculptures were filled with sexual masculine connotations. Joan Fowler counters this point of view, saying that "the difficulty of accounting for a shift in O'Connell's work from an early interest in monolithic verticality – which might be deemed an essentially masculine mode - to a more bulbous organicism and a ground-based horizontality [is] more conventionally equated with the feminine."<sup>449</sup> For O'Connell, this view of categorizing sculpture in terms of masculine and feminine forms represented an oversimplification of forms between verticality and horizontality which she opposes because it "would confine women to certain forms of sculptural practice, scale or orientation, and preclude them from investigating others."<sup>450</sup> Thus Mac Guiolla Leith believes that O'Connell's public works [1997] should not be viewed as "masculine monumentality, despite their commanding presence in the landscape . . . *Vowel of Earth* . . . and *Secret Station*, for example, are the potentially destabilizing stone wedged into the base of the former, and the vulvar slit in the side of

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<sup>447</sup> Heaney. *Death of a Naturalist* (Faber and Faber, 1969) 36.

<sup>448</sup> O'Connell 18.

<sup>449</sup> Mac Guiolla Leith 9.

<sup>450</sup> Mac Guiolla Leith 9.

latter from which steam emanates, as well as the precariously balanced, illuminated arcs of steel which compromise the aspirations of its towering twin cones.”<sup>451</sup>

Nahum also speaks of the “monumentality” of O’Connell’s sculptures which have been termed phallic, but for Nahum the sculptures recall the ancient past of the place and the upright female figure, whose form suggests aspects of an ancient priestess. Nahum says how O’Connell often “pairs similar or echoing uprights that stand in tense relation to one other.”<sup>452</sup> Observing the relation of the sculpture to the space, to the land, and to the way that it conveys emotional or controversial thoughts, Nahum describes *Secret Station* as follows: “two patinated bronze cones rhythmically emit steam from slits during the day, and at night, a fiber-optic system throws changing colored light in opposing arcs that crown each cone; the light then reaches into the darkness. O’Connell has created a dynamic sculpture that activates the environment and alludes to the city’s industrial as well as ancient past.”<sup>453</sup>

The public work *Loop* (2008) is part of eight large sculptures known as *Biomorphia*<sup>1-8</sup> commissioned by the Cass Sculpture Foundation for Eilis O’Connell to explore the formal possibilities of composite technology. *Loop* and the other sculptures of *Biomorphia*<sup>1-8</sup> were joined by forty to fifty pieces in an exhibition at the 2012 London Olympics. O’Connell’s commissions had always been site-specific art works and this was an opportunity to be free of site restrictions. As O’Connell said, “This new body of work . . . is important because it is the first time I have been able to make big works with no particular place in mind.”<sup>454</sup> In addition, the use of composite materials helped to liberate O’Connell’s practice from the constraints of steel. *Loop* was initially inspired by the form of a particular type of wave known as “the barrel” in which the top travels faster than the bottom. O’Connell might not have been able to capture the fluidity of this form in steel.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Mac Giolla Leith 9.

<sup>452</sup> Nahum 63.

<sup>453</sup> Nahum 63,64.

<sup>454</sup> *Biomorphia 1-8 Foreword Eilis O’Connell* (Cass Sculpture Foundation, London 2012) Eilis biomorphia loop. 1. PDF file.

<sup>455</sup> *Biomorphia 1-8*, 10.

In *Loop*, it seems as if O'Connell also goes in a journey along her memories of the knotted, sinous and "over and under" imagery of the Chi Rho monogram page of the Book of Kells. It serves to exemplify her ability to capture and immortalise a fleeting moment while retaining its energy and movement. The scale of *Loop* is reflective both of the austerity of minimalism as well as the simplicity of the Irish ring forts.<sup>456</sup> *Loop* is the result of a carefully thought-out geometric approach that follows a single curved plane that is twisted in space – that requires a muscular twisting followed by rapid movement, and which is made possible by the composite materials. O'Connell has invested her feminine spirit in this art work and has created a leaf-shaped negative space that draws upon the Sheela-na-gig imagery of a tear-shaped vulva.<sup>457</sup>

At the heart of *Loop* is the notion of enclosure and protection which references a womb-like shape which represents a vessel rather than the female sexual organ. The womb provides a tangible shift from an open to closed space that nurtures and comforts the life within. It reflects a feeling of the Sheela-na-gig as a protector from evil spirits and death. O'Connell has drawn into *Loop* the simplified form of the Sheela-na-gig vulva and transformed it into something delicate and protective despite the dominant scale of the sculpture.<sup>458</sup> In 2011, O'Connell experimented with the senses in the exhibition *Haptic*, which means "relating or pleasant to the sense of touch,"<sup>459</sup> at the Royal Hibernia Academy, Dublin. Another very sensual and delicate form in O'Connell's understanding of scale is *Sacrificial Anode* (2007) in a "rounded female form"<sup>460</sup> in which the emphasis is on the inner space of the body, bringing her inspiration from the medieval carved female Sheela-na-gig figure.

The inspirational role of the Sheela-na-gig in Eilis O'Connell's art is clear, but somewhat complex. On one level, the Sheela provides the elliptical shape and the "hidden space" that may be seen as found objects and are applied by O'Connell in certain sculptures. A deeper inspirational force, which connects to the Irish monuments,

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<sup>456</sup> *Biomorphia*<sup>4</sup> *Loop* Eilis O'Connell n.pag. Web. Jan. 2010 <<http://biomorphia.com/loop>>

<sup>457</sup> *Biomorphia*<sup>4</sup> *Loop* Eilis O'Connell n. pag. Web. Jan. 2010 < <http://biomorphia.com/loop/maquette/> >

<sup>458</sup> *Biomorphia*<sup>4</sup> *Loop* Eilis O'Connell n. pag. Web. Jan. 2010 < <http://biomorphia.com/loop/> >

<sup>459</sup> Kenia Hara. *Designing Design* (Zurich: Lars Muller Publishers, 2007) 68.

<sup>460</sup> Cristin Leach. *Contraposto: The Website of Irish Art Critic*. "200 Words: On Eilis O'Connell." 17 Feb 2011. Web. <<http://cristinleach.com/?p=146>>

body images and ancient imagery is also possible, but cannot be applied to O'Connell's art in a straightforward way. As O'Connell says, [regarding spiritual creativity and its connection to her work] these are big deep issues, "I don't think that my creativity is consciously connected to my spirituality. To me it's just part of my everyday being. I am an atheist and wary of religious connotations, however I do think of myself as a positive spiritual being in a collective consciousness working for the greater good."<sup>461</sup>

It was perhaps in being drawn by this deeper level of spirituality that Eilis O'Connell visited the Ballyourney Church to observe the devotional ritual to Saint Gobnait on the Patron Day, February 11, 2011. She provided the following description in support of this thesis:

I live quite near Ballyourney and on Friday a friend and I went to St. Gobnait and witnessed an amazing thing. On [St. Gobnait's] birthday, February 11<sup>th</sup>, they take out a small wooden carving of her. Huge crowds of people go to Mass and perform a most unusual ritual. The small and very eroded sculpture lies on a table near the alter. They bring ribbons and in a very orderly way, each person measures the length of the sculpture with the ribbon. Each part of the ribbon must touch the sculpture. Then the neck is measured; then the waist; and finally the feet (what used to be the feet) are rubbed with the ribbon.

The ribbon acts as a conductor of goodness and health for the year ahead. We didn't go to the Mass, but went walking to her burial mound where again there were many people doing the pattern, that is basically saying the rosary in a certain order, then drinking from the holy well. I was really impressed with the variety of people there: old and young and all this on a normal working day. I was so glad that we went as it reaffirmed my belief in ritual as a binding social force.<sup>462</sup>

Would O'Connell have created the same art if she had not seen a Sheela-na-gig? This was the question asked for Cooke and Walsh to assess the inspirational impact of the Sheela. Throughout the current chapter there have been references, by various critics and O'Connell herself, to the Sheela and her accentuated vulva and the

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<sup>461</sup> O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 23 Dec. 2010. E-mail.

<sup>462</sup> O'Connell. Personal correspondence. 15 Feb. 2010. E-mail.

connection to O'Connell's work which feature slits and openings. The question then becomes how these features are inspired by the Sheela rather than the female body in general. It may be that while the female body has its natural suggestion of fertility, sexuality and maternal protection, the Sheela adds a sense of confidence, strength and mystery that builds on its history and its Irish character to inspire a similar strong character in O'Connell's works.

Eilis O'Connell's creations are of great beauty and connect with our innate sense of aesthetics. There is also a spirituality in her works. They challenge the visual noise which surrounds us in our lives and inspire a discipline to seek out the beauty in natural forms. While quite different than the art of Barrie Cooke or Louise Walsh, there is a common objective to seeing the natural flow, the natural passions, the natural freedoms and natural beauty. It is curious that the ugly Sheela could have such a role, and the inspiration that these artists received has merited this study, leading to the broader conclusions of this thesis.



Figure 6.1      *Cathoid* (1996); Cast glass; 30 x 30 x 15 cm. Green on Red Gallery, Dublin. *Profile 3 - Eilis O'Connell* (Gandon Editions and the artist, in association with the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, 1997) 36; Print.



Figure 6.2      *Hot with Inward Heat* (1990). Painted steel, steam generator. 241 x 1.1 x 0.9 m. Artsite Gallery in Bath, Somerset, England. *Eilis O'Connell* (Gandon Books, Dublin in association with The Gallery at Johns Jones, London, 1993) 17; Print.



Figure 6.3      *Outside In* (1990); Patinated steel; 183 x 44 x 35 cm. *Eilis O'Connell* (Gandon Books, Dublin in association with The Gallery at Johns Jones, London, 1993) 24; Print.



Figure 6.4      *Wrapt* (1993); Laminated birch, painted and polished; 201 x 180 x 262 cm. Studio Work. *Eilis O'Connell* (Gandon Books, Dublin in association with The Gallery at Johns Jones, London, 1993) 51; Print.



Figure 6.5 *Enmeshed* (1994). Welded and brass, woven brass wire; 41 x 20 x 16 cm. Green on Red Gallery, Dublin. *Profile 3 - Eilis O'Connell* (Gandon Editions and the artist, in association with the Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, 1997) 26; Print.



Figure 6.6 *Earthed* (1994). Patinated, painted and rusted steel; (1) 22-1/2 x 10-1/2x 2-3/4 in. (2) 43 x 11 x 3 in. (3) 22-3/4 x 7-3/4 2-1/2 in. Private Collection, Ireland. *Re/Dressing Cathleen: Contemporary Works from Irish Women Artists* (McMullin Museum of Art, Boston College, 1997) 116; Print.



Figure 6.7      *Steel Swelling* (1993), painted and welded steel; 20 x 20 x 10 cm. *Ellis O'Connell* (Gandon Books, Dublin in association with The Gallery at Johns Jones, London, 1993) 57; Print.



Figure 6.8      *Suomenlinna Series No. 7* (left) 1990, bronze and water, 21.5 x 19 x 11 cm  
*Suomenlinna Series No. 5* (right) 1990, bronze; 17 x 41 x 10.5 cm. *Ellis O'Connell* (Gandon Books, Dublin in association with The Gallery at Johns Jones, London, 1993) 38; Print.

## **Chapter 7      Summary and Conclusions**

The word “inspiration” originated in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century around the same time as the first Sheelas were being created in Ireland. It is derived from the Latin word for “breath”, reflecting the breath of God and the divine influence in the writing of holy books. Like the Sheelas, the word “inspiration” has come to be appropriated from its original religious context to assume a much wider spiritual significance -- typical of the way people transform words and objects according to their times, their philosophies and their needs.

The Sheela is a carving of a naked woman displaying an exaggerated vulva. Sheelas were created from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and were located on monasteries, churches and castles. Among the various theories proposed to explain their creation, the most widely-accepted is that Sheelas were created to warn against lustful practices. It may also be that the Sheelas were created as a talisman of protection, or a fertility charm that would connect back to pre-Christian beliefs and symbols. More than one theory may apply given that Sheelas were created in a number of countries over three centuries. Regardless of the original creative formulation, Sheelas have persisted in their connection with people and have served to meet a range of needs.

This thesis has considered the power of the Sheela to inspire three contemporary Irish artists in somewhat distinct ways: connecting with diverse interests in nature, the land, strong women figures, and formalist shapes. One thus appreciates the diverse power of inspirational images, which was part of the rationale in selecting these particular three artists for this thesis. At the same time, the thesis has recognized a deeper connection among the artists. One may argue that each was working against a society of repression and seeking to give voice to issues related to the expression of sexuality or women’s rights or the inherent beauty of form. The somewhat bizarre appearance of an ugly, naked female form with an exaggerated vulva, which at the same time was couched in the respectability of its archaeological context and linked enigmatically to another age, provided the vehicle for the artists to address and advance these controversial issues. The Sheela provided a means of breaking the restrictions imposed on Barrie Cooke, Louise Walsh and Eilis O’Connell. They were then able to bring forth a more complete and more liberated view of nature, society and the female body.

A review of some larger theological and social themes provides context for the inspirational role of the Sheela. In particular, monasticism, the Doctrines of the Council of Trent, Marianism and 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist issues

give context to the changing interpretation of the Sheela image. Oral histories have been recorded in the thesis to provide a first-hand and personal appreciation of the enduring significance of the Sheela image in individual lives.

The interaction of “inspiration” and “object” is not straightforward. It is often more complex than the simple, one-directional, cause-and-effect action of an artist seeing an object and being inspired to create art. In the case of the Sheela, we have some sense of the Romanesque figures that may well have inspired and guided the masons who created the Sheelas. This was blended with local traditions and iconography to create a distinct figure that retained elements of the more ancient inspirational elements. The Sheela survived the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to suppress it - perhaps because of the local traditions that were integrated into the Sheela and that resonated with the local people. This thesis has demonstrated the inspirational power of the Sheela with three prominent artists as they created new inspirational works of their own.

Some aspects of inspiration can be defined in the context of this thesis study: “Successive inspiration” may be considered to be where one object inspires the creation of another, which in turn inspires the creation of other art – such as Barrie Cooke inspiring the poetry of Seamus Heaney. “Open inspiration” considers the benefits of an object (like the Sheela) with ambiguous origins, whose original purpose is not clearly established and thus liberates the observer from a unique, specified and “correct” interpretation. This allows artists to become attuned to particular elements of the inspirational object or to establish a “hybrid inspiration” as the inspiration combines with other inspirational forces within the artist. Also, the ongoing appropriation and re-appropriation of inspirational objects is seen with the movement of a Sheela figure from a monastery to a castle to a bedroom in one instance. While such appropriation can lead the Sheela to fit current times, there are dangers as well. The appropriation of the Sheela by modern “pop” culture threatens to trivialize the Sheela and may pose a greater threat than the attack from the Catholic Church on the Sheelas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The enduring inspiration of objects such as the Sheela may come in response to a need for hope and a need for a voice amid imposed constraints. This thesis has provided some insights into the nature of inspiration which passes through centuries and persists despite the destructive forces of repressive social structures. Elements of inspiration may be buried within the original image and may persist. Indeed a malleable and complex inspirational object may be most likely to survive. Different viewers or different artists may find very divergent inspiration. The appropriation and re-interpretation of the image serves to increase its power and relevance. As Louise Walsh and

those around her said in response to the dispassionate observations of an archaeologist considering the origin of the Sheelas: “*We know how they speak to us. Go away. We need them. We want them. They are ours.*”

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## **Appendix I An Oral History Related to the Behy Sheela-na-gig (“Red Sheela”)**

The inspirational power of the Sheela on individuals and families provides context for the Sheela’s effect on the selected Irish artists in this thesis. An example of this inspirational power is found with the Martin family who has lived on a farm adjacent the ruins of Behy Castle for generations. The Martin Family agreed to be interviewed for this thesis and spoke of their respect for the Sheela, their own traditions and beliefs. Sandra Martin provided the following text in support of this thesis work “*Dedicated to my beloved father Alfred Martin and my loving mother Charlotte Martin*”:

Our Sheela Na Gig stands proud in our little farm shed located in Behy, Riverstown, County Sligo Ireland and is probably one of the best keep secrets in County Sligo. Without a doubt she is in very good condition and is appealing to the naked eye. As many Sheelas come in different forms, I personally think she is one of the prettiest and most refined. Our Sheela has maintained her good condition due to the fact she has been erected in a shed which prevents her from weather erosion and as she receives very little attention from visitor numbers ensuring no wear and tear. The Sheela once stood in the castle behind the shed and to this day we do not know who moved her into the shed, as mentioned this shed was once a dwelling house and as the stone was so large it is believed the people who erected the house choose the stone for its size. In fact my mother’s house standing below the shed was built with the castle stone and all of the other out buildings. I think you would agree it was a blessing she was moved from the castle as she might not be here today seeing the condition of the castle and that it fell in the 1900’s. In addition it was widely believed that there were four Sheelas erected on each wall of the castle but this has never been proved unless we were fortunate enough to unearth another Sheela someday. Our Sheela is also different as she is probably the only one in Ireland that has been painted ‘brown’ with a small bit of blue in the background. This always mystifies people when they come to see the Sheela and again to this day we are not entirely sure who painted her or why. I think this just adds to her mystery and what makes her special and unique to other Sheelas throughout the country. Ireland is renowned for its selection of Sheelas and has by far the most Sheelas than anywhere else in Europe. Until this day I am unsure what their

significance had in history but from my research it is widely believed she is meant to come from the survival of a pagan, usually Celtic, beliefs incorporated into the newcomer Christianity church. There is also another theory as due to the sexual nature of Sheelas, the most obvious connection would be one of fertility. It is also believed Sheelas were placed above windows and doors to prevent the devil from entering. Despite these published theories there is no supporting evidence why Sheelas actually existed. It is mainly open for discussion and debate and is left to the public's imagination. As discussed, this Sheela has been in my mother's family for generations. Her maiden name was Charlotte O'Connor and she grew up with the Sheela as did her father before her and apparently the castle was built by the High Kings of Connaught (O'Connor's).

Ireland is full of mystery and is renowned for its myths and folklore and this is true when it comes to the Behy Sheela. My family has repeatedly told stories of unexplained events on our farm and it has always been believed the Sheela had something to do with it. When my mother was young, her father wouldn't go out past midnight as he believed the farm was haunted after this time and often mentioned horses would appear out of nowhere and run through the farm towards the castle and disappear into the dark night. My mother always knew the Sheela was there, but never thought about this figure much as a young child. However, over the years she does believe the Sheela does protect our property from intruders. This happened when a few men came late at night to steal hay from our shed (not far from where the Sheela is erected) and in the morning there was evidence that men had tied all the hay together but none of the hay could be moved. We believed no matter what the men had done that night to remove the hay from the shed they could not. This is also true for the apple tree in the field. A few people came to take apples and filled their buckets and again all the apples and buckets were left behind. It's also true that both my mother and her only sister have had very large families (with multiple sets of twins) and I always remarked as a tall story maybe it was because of Sheela. In recent years we have been upgrading the farm and were reconstructing a new shed and every day strange things would happen when we collected stones from the castle (where the Sheela used to be

erected). The trailers always turned over. This happened several times when the men were working on the shed foundations and they never could explain these events.

We always felt protected by the Sheela and we would never sell or move her from her resting place as we are proud to have this special figure on our property. We also feel that we will only receive bad luck 'till our dying day' if we move or tamper with her in any way. As the Sheela still holds a lot of secrets, many people come to pray to her to relieve them of their illness. They also pray for fertility and wellbeing and bring gifts such as candles or money. It is completely personal to each individual why they come and see her and we are happy to show them around if they ask permission first. My father really liked to know when people were visiting the property as he said he didn't want anyone getting hurt if farm machinery was being operated. He never stopped anyone going to see the Sheela as long as they asked permission and still to this day we like people to ask. It is also helpful for them, as the Sheela is hidden away in a tiny shed, and you may have a lot of looking if you didn't ask first. As a young child, I never really understood the significance of the Sheela and had always thought it was a figure of man. We often asked our mother who coloured the figure, but she had no idea and said it was this colour since she was a little girl.

In the past very few people came to see the Sheela -- just one of our neighbours who would bring some friends who were interested in history. However, in the last decade we have had several visitors from all over the world visiting our special Sheela. People are definitely more in tune and interested in these fascinating figures and their reasons for existing. We also had a man who brought many people to see the Sheela over the years and eventually he decided to write a book titled *Sheela Na gigs in Britain and Ireland* with our 'Sheela' printed on the front cover. We were given the book as a gift from him and it remains very dear to us. The Sheela sits proud in our shed for everyone to admire and we are blessed to this day to have something that dates back from Medieval Ireland of the 11th century and will be in our family from generation to generation.

## **Appendix II    An Oral History Related to the Cult of the Sheela-na-gig at Killinaboy**

A recurring theme in this thesis is the appropriation of the Sheela image and how different groups will adopt the image and apply their own interpretations to it. In some cases, this can be in at least partial alignment with the sanctioned interpretation by the Catholic Church, but often the local community develops their own interpretation. The following extracts and oral history are provided by P.J. Curtis - an Irish "author, musicologist and lecturer" who grew up in Killinaboy - through a combination of his published works and personal correspondence in support of this thesis.

What I can tell you is that the Sheela was still a figure of power as late as the early '60's, when infertile woman came to pray to Her usually in the dead of night to escape the notice of the people and especially the priests. According to my late great grand-aunt Mariah Curtis [1954] - herself a famous healer in the locality - and also my own mother Sara [1914-1989] . . . these women would present their prayers to the Sheela and walk seven times anti-clockwise around the church as part of the ritual. It was not recorded how many women had their prayers answered and their wishes granted.<sup>463</sup>

[In *The Lighting Tree*, Curtis writes memories of her great grand-aunt Maria Curtis]:

"My mother (would) invariably send these desperate women (who wished to conceive) to seek the power of the Sheela-na-gig. They did not have far to travel, for the Sheela sits over the door of the church . . . For as many years as anybody could remember, childless women who craved a son or a daughter came to this place and prayed to the Sheela directly for help. They would first kneel in front of the Sheela. Then they must walk around the church seven times and fall on their knees to beseech her to answer their prayers . . . hold a lantern high to light her face as they asked her blessing. Some left little offerings, as they would at the holy wells – coins, medals, keepsakes, that sort of thing – at the foot of the doorway where she sits. I've no doubts but that the Sheela-na-Gig heard and answered many of their prayers, for I know of many a

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<sup>463</sup> P. J. Curtis. Personal correspondence. 8 Dec. 2010. E-mail.

woman from this place who stood in front of the Sheela in the midnight hour and prayed to be blessed with a fruitful womb and who in time bore children. But I also know of many women who after bearing ten or more children came to pray and plead with her that she might grant the opposite and make them barren!'<sup>464</sup>

[P.J. Curtis writes about the devotional ritual named "Pattern" in Ireland]:

"With regard to a 'Pattern' being held in Kilnaboy, there was no tradition of any such rituals being held here . . . certainly in post-famine days. The famine took a terrible local toll and decimated not just the population, but 90% of the old local traditions -- folklore, story-telling, music, song, poetry, etc. etc. I was aware there was a history of 'patterns' in the past. (My mother sometimes attended the St. Bridget's Day Pattern at the St. Bridget's Well in Liscannor (just north of the village of Lahinch on the west coast of Clare) . . . but it was my understanding that it had more to do with the fact that the church [Killinaboy] held, at some distant time, a 'Relic' of the True Cross and not to do with veneration of the Sheela . . . or Inghine Baoith. The Catholic Church that emerged in post-Norman invasions (Counter-Reformation) would have looked at her presence on the church wall as a sacrilege but due to her important place in the hearts and minds of the people, they had to leave her in situ . . . and so – I'm delighted to say - She still sits there to this day.<sup>465</sup>

[PJ Curtis talks about his family and contribution to the history of the area]:

My own ancestors are all - since the 17th century - buried just to the right of the doorway with the Sheela. So when I shuffle off I expect her to look down on me for as long as she is allowed to remain above the doorway.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> P. J. Curtis. *The Lighting Tree*. (Dingle, Co. Kerry, Ireland; London: Brandon- Mount Eagle Publication, 2006, 2008) 38, 39.

<sup>465</sup> Curtis. Personal correspondence. 8 Dec. 2010. E-mail.

<sup>466</sup> Curtis. Personal correspondence. 8 Dec. 2010. E-mail.

My mother Sadie . . . was a traditional musician and came from a family steeped in music. Her gift was music and she passed all that to me . . . she didn't have, as you say, 'sight' . . . That was my father's area . . . It came with his Healing gifts . . . Sadie ran her little country shop . . . the first in Kilnaboy. It didn't have a name . . . (and was) just known as Curtis' Shop, selling basic groceries etc. [Mother] worked 16 hours a day; never had a day's holiday in her entire life; never got to a movie or a show or anything that took her away from the daily grind of keeping the show on the road.<sup>467</sup>

My father's family were all healers for as far back as anyone can remember [as told in P.J. Curtis' book *The Music of Ghosts*]. The healing side of the family came down on my father's side . . . His line had cures for animals and his blood Curtis relations (who lived directly below the Kilnaboy churchyard with the Sheela) had an inherited cure for humans. Mariah was the last of her line and her brother Brian was excommunicated in 1908/9 for his treating people.<sup>468</sup>

I too wonder did indeed Mariah speak to Westropp [Thomas J. Westropp, the noted antiquarian and collector of Irish folk tales] while he was in the area . . . He did write of the 'Curtis Cure'.<sup>469</sup> [From Westropp's 'Folklore of Clare']:

"Dr. G. U. MacNamara tells me that Denis Curtis near Corofin cures liver complaints, bleeding, and cows that have swallowed raw potatoes. He puts his human patients on their backs on his anvil, and pretends to strike them with a sledge hammer. This is done on three occasions, on two Mondays and a Thursday. The patients then drink forge water. All the family have the gift of healing, but only one exercises it. The family legend says that St. Patrick's horse lost a shoe near Kilnaboy, and their ancestor shod it gratuitously. The saint therefore endowed the family with the power, and people even return from America to be cured by the smith."<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> Curtis. Personal correspondence. 17 Feb. 2011. E-mail.

<sup>468</sup> Curtis. Personal correspondence. 9 Dec. 2010. E-mail.

<sup>469</sup> Curtis. Personal correspondence. 21 Aug. 2011. E-mail.

<sup>470</sup> Westropp 43.

[P.J. comments about Westropp visits to Mariah]:

"I should imagine he did indeed visit and speak with her [Mariah] . . . as the family were known and had a reputation as healers and he did visit the graveyard and the Sheela . . . and Mariah's house is directly next door to the old ruin. Maybe she mentioned that, but I was too young to know who Westropp was and as I left school for good at 14, I had to wait many years before I was to acquaint myself with his writings.

A great silence would have surrounded the infrequent visits of such men (i.e. folklorists/collectors etc.) . . . as -- given the period -- they were suspected as 'spies' or 'agents of Protestantism' in the area and the priests didn't like the people to speak with them or give them any hospitality. How ignorant and how sad.<sup>471</sup>

The Collectors and Folklorists who did visit (e.g. Westropp) would have been in the company of a personage well-versed in local history and usually a local doctor (when in North Clare, he would have been steered by Dr. MacNamara, well-known and well-respected as a historian. Being a doctor gave [the visitor] access and he would have been immune from the prying of the clergy. Otherwise it was usually the Protestants in any locality who had any interest in history and the collecting of folk tales etc. and Westropp would have, of course, had recourse to those people in every area he went visiting. I believe Mariah would have talked freely to Westropp. She had no fear of clergy and would enjoy the idea of such an educated man wanting to talk to her about her family cures, local history, etc. but I do think that a great deal of his information did come from Dr. MacNamara and a few other local historians.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> P. J. Curtis. Personal correspondence. 21 Aug. 2011. Email.

<sup>472</sup> P.J. Curtis. Personal correspondence. 22 Aug. 2011. E-mail.