

Antosik-Parsons, Kate. Biographical Entry: Louise Walsh. Paula Murphy, ed. *Art and Architecture of Ireland: Sculpture Volume III (1600-2000)*, Dublin and New Haven: Royal Irish Academy and Yale University Press, pp. 352- 354.

WALSH, LOUISE (b. 1963). Walsh was born in Cork, where studied at the Crawford School of Art and Design (1985) before receiving an MA in Fine Art from the University of Ulster (1986). Louise Walsh's art addresses issues of feminism, sexuality and community arts. She joined the Northern Irish Women Artists Action Group (April 1987), a group that was formed as a result of the feminist concerns raised by the *Irish Women Artists From Eighteen Century to Present Day* exhibition (1987, NGI, HL and DHG). Her participation in the group exhibition *Identities* (1987, Arts and Research Exchange, Belfast) signalled a clear alignment of her work with other feminist women artists concerned.

Walsh's early sculptures investigated issues of women and power through assemblages of natural materials and found items that combined together in zoomorphic representations of women. Drawing upon imagery found in the Book of Kells and Celtic folklore which connected the horse with the goddess of sovereignty that conferred kingship, *Harvest Queen* (1986), commented on the status of women in Irish society and suggested a location from which they could articulate their power. In an intimate series of untitled drawings (1989) which highlight Walsh's superior drafting abilities, women are depicted as giving birth while life spills out onto the floor. In a series of assemblage works - *Athene* (1989), *The Other* (1989) and *Mother Work* (1989) - the focus of the body as a source of raw power is further developed using mythological references. Walsh's collaborative installation with Pauline Cummins, *Sounding the Depths* (1992), continued this focus on the female body.

Installed in a cell for *In A State* (1991, Kilmainham Gaol) the site-specific *In-laws, Out-laws* (1991) consisted of plaster snakes set in a glass box in the floor and images of two same-sex couples kissing passionately, while the images of writhing snakes were projected onto their bodies. Purportedly driven out of Ireland by Saint Patrick, the reptiles' banishment was a symbol of Christianity's triumph over the pagans, however in this work, the snake was reclaimed as a symbol of power and oppression. The timing of this installation was particularly apt given that despite being found in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights (Norris v Ireland 1988), homosexuality was not decriminalized in Ireland until 1993. In later works such as *Marion Dancing in Her Grotto* (1999) and *Mary, Our Lady in Heaven I* (2000), Walsh employed strategic representations of sexual difference to subvert dominant Catholic ideology.

The lost wax bronze *Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker* (1992, Belfast) consists of two larger than life female figures who reflect the social and economic status of women as low-paid workers. Originally commissioned by the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland) for Amelia Street, Belfast, an area once known as a red-light district, the work became a source of controversy. Now sited on Great Victoria Street, Walsh's progressive commentary, on the social history of women's work fuses the public and private in a powerful critique on present day society. Walsh's sculptures actively occupy space by demanding that viewers engage with them.

Walsh is known for her public work with various different communities throughout Ireland which often includes important participatory elements. For the commission *Sweets and Snails* (1998), she worked with children from St Finian's Housing Estate, Lucan, Co. Dublin, creating two figural bronze sculptures and signs to highlight the presence of children and the consequent importance of safety. The children participated in a series of art and safety

workshops to produce the images for the signs which were mounted at newly installed speed ramps. Walsh organised an exhibition so that all workshop participants, not just those chosen for the signs, received community recognition.

*Circuit* (2003) was commissioned by the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. A poem commissioned from Martin Mooney was sandblasted on to six columns, while a large rotating bronze snake was on the final column. The coiled reptile referenced the rod of Asclepius, an ancient symbol of medicine and healing; in shedding its skin, the snake is symbolic of renewal or rejuvenation. Viewers encircled the columns to engage with the text and physically manipulated the snake before entering the building, a metaphor for taking 'healing' into their own hands. *The Hybrid Love Seat* (2008), a Per Cent for Art commission jointly funded by the Roads Procurement Agency and St. James' Hospital, Dublin, is a forty-foot railed seating area that functions as a boundary wall between the Mary Aikenhead flats and the James Street Luas stop. The seat, composed of several large semi-circles, unifies rather than divides the space. Mounted atop the railing pillars are bronze sculptures of hybrid creatures created by teenagers from the local community. Participating in a series of drawing and modelling workshops, the teenagers were encouraged to develop their artistic skills as well as contribute to the permanent sculpture.

In a commission for the Department of Social Development in Northern Ireland (2006-2011), Walsh celebrates the contributions of women workers to the shirt factory industry in Derry. Still in the fabrication stage, the large-scale installation, a partial Singer sewing machine, ranging from seven metres to eleven metres in height, will be sited on the Waterside Roundabout at King Street. The location, straddling the roundabout, permits viewers, on foot and by car, to experience the landscape and the sculpture in different ways. On the side where the needle touches down, a ridge representing a shirt collar inscribed with personal stories collected from local factory workers highlights the oral history research component that records important and unacknowledged local history.

Walsh's solo exhibitions include *Louise Walsh* (1990) Arts Council Gallery, Belfast; *Offering* (1997), a video and sculptural installation, Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick. She has been the recipient of several awards including Major Bursary Award, ACI (1991, 1993, 1998); Gulbenkian Foundation Award for Artists Work (1996); ACNI Grant (1989); ACNI Equipment Grant (1988); Peter Moores Foundation Bursary (1985-1986). In addition she has completed several residencies including Artist in Residence (1998, WERRC, University College Dublin); Artists Work Programme (1996, IMMA); Available Resources (1991, Orchard Gallery, Derry).

Walsh began lecturing part-time in Sculpture at Limerick School of Art & Design in 1989 and was appointed Lecturer in 1994. From 1996 she has taught part-time in Sculpture at NCAD and was appointed Lecturer in 2002. Kate Antosik-Parsons

#### Selected Reading:

Moira Roth, 'Two Women: The Collaborations of Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh, or International Conversations Among Women', *Sounding the Depths: A Collaboration Installation by Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh* Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992; Dorothy Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland* Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997; Hilary Robinson 'Disruptive Women Artists: An Irigarayan Reading of Irish Visual Culture,' *Irish*

*Studies Review*, 8: 1, pp. 57 - 72; Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*  
New York and London, 2005.