



BREON O'CASEY
TRANSITIONS

PANNGOLIN

LONDON



Breon O'Casey's
sculpture studio

INTRODUCTION

"Don't get blood on the marble!" It's around 1960, in Barbara Hepworth's studio in St Ives, where her young assistant Breon O'Casey has just smashed his fingers with a hammer. O'Casey's wry account of the great sculptor's kneejerk reflex says much about them both. On Hepworth's side: the inviolable integrity of materials, the purity of forms, and her insistence, admirable or ruthless depending on your point of view, that for a serious artist the work takes absolute precedence. On O'Casey's part: a sense of humour and proportion that would never allow art's claim to be so pure that a human stain might spoil it. Materials were meant to be touched, worn, walked on. If art wasn't part of daily, accidental life, what was it for?

O'Casey's hand healed. In the four decades that followed, he turned it to jewellery and to weaving rugs, as well as continuing to paint, always considering himself primarily a painter. Then, in his seventies, after occasional abortive attempts, he began steadily to make sculpture of his own. Instead of carving in marble, he modelled in wax on a wire or wooden armature or a carved polystyrene core. In place of white stone or polished wood, he had his work cast and the bronzes finished in earthy patinas – deep reds, warm browns and soft blacks. O'Casey acknowledged that working for Hepworth had been "a great education". Her belief in the universality of abstract forms, born in the idealistic avant-garde of the inter-war decades, must have supported his sense of himself as essentially an abstract artist. So it surprised him to find that his sculptures almost all turned out to be of living or moving things – human figures, birds, foxes, plants, boats. They stand four-square, yet their vitality feels mobile and infectious. They ask, almost, to be held or used.

During O'Casey's time in St Ives, where he lived from 1958 to 1975, it was with the potter Bernard Leach, rather than with his employer and mentor Hepworth, that he felt the closest ethical kinship. Leach advocated the way of the artist-craftsman, telling O'Casey that he would "far rather see a housewife make her stew in one of my pots than have it gather dust a museum". In practice, Leach had more success with exhibition pieces than with his more workaday 'standard ware', but he never ceased to affirm the grace of objects intended to serve in the home. "To make a piece of weaving into a work of art", O'Casey noted at the end of a memoir on his progress as a self-taught weaver, "it is necessary to adapt the process of the weaving, not the function of the woven."

Leach's example finds an echo in O'Casey's sculptures in their constant, varied reference to containing. Birds are folk-tale message-bearers as well as living things whose bodies fit the egg-shaped space between two cupped palms. Sometimes, as in *Flightless Bird*, their bodies resemble sealed vessels. Boats ride the water as birds the air, at once free and freighted; in *Boat Bird* the correspondence between buoyancy and flight, air and water, becomes explicit. Human figures hold out their arms as though to support or embrace. In pieces such as *Abstract Bird*, *Stylised Bird*, *Large Figure* or *Torso*, O'Casey's unabashed primitivism, with its stress on salient features – beaks and tails, heads and hips – recalls the high days of early twentieth-century modernism. Yet his sculptures'



emotional temperature feels very different; they have a quality of warmth in which there's no trace of the brutal aura of alienation that clings to Constantin Brancusi's *The Kiss* or the stone masks Henry Moore carved in the 1920s.

For such trailblazers, art was a fight – against bourgeois and academic convention, and, with the heightening of the political stakes in the 1930s, fascist militarism. It was towards the close of this era that O'Casey received his first art education at Dartington School, where his father, the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey, had been advised by George Bernard Shaw to send his three children. The lessons O'Casey learned in his early teens could easily have given a political edge to his ideas about art. His father was a committed socialist whose plays brought Irish working-class life to the stage. His most influential teacher at Dartington was Naum Slutzky, a Russian-Jewish refugee from Nazism and former head of metalwork at the Bauhaus. By temperament, however, O'Casey was more deeply engaged by the act of making than by questions of meaning. It's a different strand of 1930s' idealism that comes through in his recollections of Dartington, "a Utopian community which combined the working of the land with the life of the spirit through the arts":

The emphasis the school placed on physical activities and skills, considering them equally important to academic skills, was crucial to me. It was at Dartington School that I learnt to saw and hammer: to think with my hands as well as my head.

Pottery classes meant going through the whole process: digging the clay, building

Breon O'Casey
working in his
sculpture studio,
c.2004

Boat Bird
2006, Bronze
Edition of 5
50 x 46 x 14 cm



and firing the kiln. No matter that O'Casey couldn't quite get the hang of throwing pots; he loved this first-to-last approach to making. Slutzky – "a short, dark haired man with massive shoulders [who] rode around the estate on a huge jet black stallion" – was a trained goldsmith. In the economic meltdown of Weimar Germany, he fashioned jewellery from cheap industrial materials such as chrome-plated copper. These pieces are simple, modest, resourceful – and beautiful – a combination that, in many ways, became O'Casey's standard for all forms of art.

After the end of the war and his stint of National Service, O'Casey attended the Anglo French Art Centre, a short-lived private academy in St John's Wood, London, where visiting tutors included Fernand Léger, André Lhote, Jean Lurçat and Germaine Richier. There followed "ten years ... in the wilderness: perhaps a necessary process in the development of an artist, but a deeply depressing time". Then in 1958 O'Casey saw a television programme about artists in Cornwall, possibly the BBC 'Monitor' documentary broadcast in August. Something about St Ives struck a deep chord; moving there, he said, was his 'salvation'. Here was a provincial place with an international horizon, a working community in which the practice of art had, through long assimilation, become a normal, valued activity. A real-life incarnation, in other words, of the more cloistered ideals of Dartington.

Though his working methods were even less directly observational than those of many of his abstract-minded St Ives contemporaries, O'Casey felt a strong causal connection



between art and the natural environment. "Art started", he later wrote, "when man first picked up a stone":

[T]his stone was on a beach. Had been formed by the sea into a smooth, rounded pebble. What a wonderful beginning! As [man's] need to use pebbles became more urgent, so his selection of them became more sophisticated. No casual picker up of pebbles now, but a searcher for the right shape, the right size.

This process of searching and finding could equally describe O'Casey's manner of selecting motifs – echoed (or enacted) in the pebble-like object, which might equally be an egg, jewel or seed, carried in the beak of *Crow II*. He seems not to have minded when people pointed out, as they reasonably did, that the forms of birds in flattened flight, which appear in his paintings, prints and jewellery, were adapted from Braque. Why not, if they felt right? When O'Casey discovered a motif that satisfied him – a leaf shape, a group of three upright forms, a fuchsia flower – he'd often return to it many times, using different colours, scales and media. His approach to materials was similarly based on a sense of what was inherently right, a kind of decorum, whether for paint, textile, silver, wax or bronze. His long-time studio assistant Guy Royle observes, "he loved working with different materials, but he didn't try to push materials where they wouldn't go."

O'Casey's sculptures evolved from animal motifs on his precious-metal brooches. Tiny silver animals led to larger sculptures, the scale increasing to life-size human figures such as his 2008 *Aphrodite*. One of his last pieces was a wax model for a small three-masted boat. It's hard to imagine an earthier water-craft; its sails resemble plough-irons, its hull a weaver's shuttle. Yet it is undeniably a boat and also perhaps – intentionally or otherwise – a vessel for O'Caseyan humour and philosophy, since, when it comes to making a boat sail, the wind is nothing without the hands.

MICHAEL BIRD

(ABOVE LEFT)
Farewell
2008, Acrylic on canvas
80 x 105 cm

(BELOW LEFT)
Brooch
c.1980, Sterling silver
and 18ct gold
Unique
4 x 5 cm

CATALOGUE





Large Cockerel
2009, Bronze
Edition of 3
107.5 x 80 x 35 cm



(LEFT)
Plump Bird
2010, Bronze
Edition of 9
41.5 x 17 x 31 cm



(RIGHT)
Winged Bird
2007, Bronze
Edition of 9
24 x 21 x 19 cm

Abstract Plant II
2007, Bronze
Edition of 5
14 x 17 x 16 cm





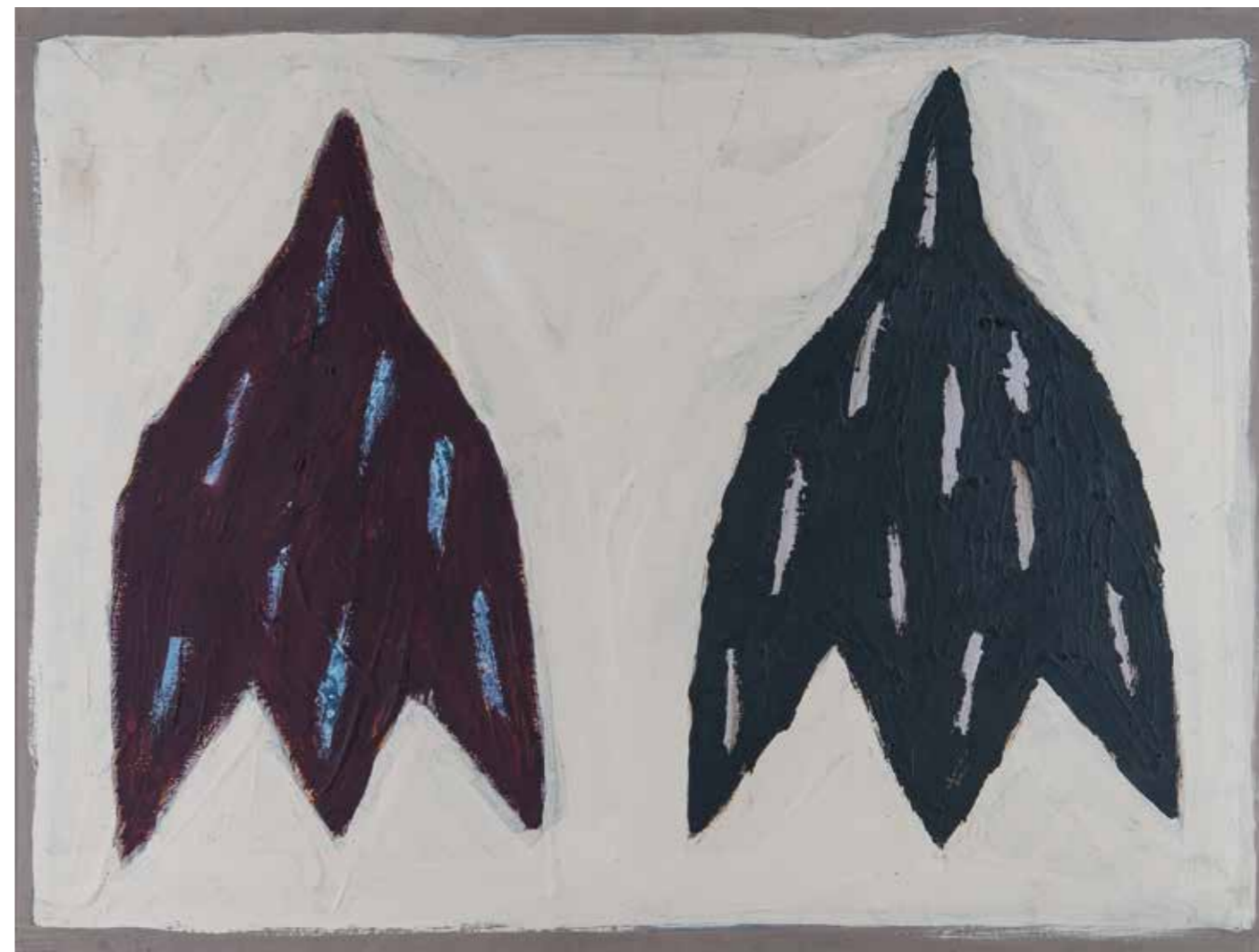
Untitled
1995, Acrylic on paper
48 x 57 cm

Flightless Bird
2008, Bronze
Edition of 5
53.5 x 47.5 x 21 cm





Abstract Bird
2001, Bronze
Edition of 5
53 x 55 x 11 cm



Fuchsia
1982, Acrylic on canvas
80 x 105 cm



Stylised Bird
2008, Bronze
Edition of 5
100 x 71 x 14 cm

Plant
2006, Bronze
Edition of 5
56 x 16 x 18.5 cm





Boat Bird
2006, Bronze
Edition of 5
50 x 46 x 14 cm

Canal
2008, Acrylic on canvas
Unique
129.5 x 92 cm





Sophia
2005, Bronze
Edition of 5
65.5 x 28 x 17 cm

Aphrodite (detail)
2008, Bronze
Edition of 3
141 x 79 x 55 cm





(LEFT)
Aphrodite
2008, Bronze
Edition of 3
141 x 79 x 55 cm

(RIGHT)
Fragment of Aphrodite
2009, Bronze
Edition of 3
52 x 35 x 61 cm



Reclining Nude
2009, Acrylic on canvas
92 x 129.5 cm





Bather II
2006, Bronze
Edition of 5
80 x 34 x 21 cm



(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT)
Figure with Arms Down II
2004, Bronze
Edition of 5
59 x 29 x 15.5 cm

Figure with Arms Up
2004, Bronze
Edition of 5
55 x 26 x 13.5 cm

Figure with Arms Down I
2004, Bronze
Edition of 5
64 x 43 x 14 cm



(LEFT)
Fox
2008, Bronze
Edition of 5
40 x 14 x 64 cm



(RIGHT)
Ring of Birds
2005, Bronze
Edition of 5
17 x 41 x 37 cm



(FAR LEFT)
Grey Bird on Tall Post (detail)
2010, Bronze
Edition of 9
61 x 21 x 15 cm

(LEFT)
Red Bird on Tall Post (detail)
2010, Bronze
Edition of 9
60 x 22 x 12 cm



Musical Fish
2002, Bronze
Edition of 5
53.5 x 80 x 20 cm



Crow II
2004, Bronze
with coral bead
Edition of 5
31 x 46 x 26 cm

BREON O'CASEY

1928 - 2011

BIOGRAPHY

1928	Breon O'Casey born in London to Irish parents
1934	Moved to Totnes, Devon to attend the Dartington Hall School
1948-1950	Studied at the Anglo-French Art Centre in St John's Wood
1959	Moved to St Ives from Torquay where he met Doreen Corscadden who would become his wife
1959-1961	Assistant to Denis Mitchell
1961-1963	Assistant to Dame Barbara Hepworth
1967	Became Vice-Chairman of the Penwith Society of Artists
1975	Left St Ives for Paul, Cornwall
1996	Began to work in sculpture
2011	Breon O'Casey passed away aged 83 in Paul, Cornwall

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2012	Lemon Street Gallery, Cornwall
2011	Mullan Gallery, Belfast Stoneman Gallery, Cornwall
2010	Beaux Arts, Bath Somerset House, London
2009	Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin Mullan Gallery, Belfast Lemon Street Gallery, Cornwall
2006	Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin Lemon Street Gallery, Cornwall
2005	Six Chapel Row, Bath Yorkshire Sculpture Park
2004	Mullan Gallery, Belfast Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin
2003	Berkeley Square Gallery, London Wexler Gallery, Philadelphia Yew Tree Gallery, Morvah, Cornwall
2002	Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin
2001	New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham, Surrey Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia
2000	Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin Scholar Fine Art, London

1998	Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia
1997	Lynn Strover Gallery, Cambridge Brewery Arts, Cirencester
1996	Black Swan Guild, Frome: Man and Materials touring exhibition Trist Ann's Gallery, Dundalk, Ireland
1995	Oriel, Cardiff St James's Gallery, Bath
1994	Wolf at the Door, Penzance Cornwall Crafts Association, Trelowarren O'Casey Craft Gallery, London
1981	Oxford Gallery, London
1979	Oxford Gallery, London
1977	Chastinet Gallery, London
1975	Marjorie Parr Gallery, London Craftworks, Guildford
1974	British Crafts Centre, London
1973	Marjorie Parr Gallery, London
1969	Brown Thomas Gallery, Dublin
1968	Marjorie Parr Gallery, London Park Square Gallery, Leeds
1960	Arnolfini, Bristol
1954	Somerville College, Oxford

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2003	New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham with Sir Terry Frost RA and Sandra Blow RA
2000	Lynn Strover Gallery, Cambridge with Jim Partridge
1999	Berkeley Square Gallery, London Tate Gallery, St Ives with Bernard Leach
1998	The Society of Arts and Crafts
1997	Bridge Gallery, Dublin: The Irish Friends of Denis Mitchell Contemporary Applied Arts, London
1995	New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham Oxford Gallery, Oxford Crafts Council, London touring exhibition
1994	Schmuck Unsere Zeif, Zurich
1993	Taylor Galleries, Dublin with Conor Fallen

1992 Little Rock, Arkansasaw
Narrow Water Gallery, Northern Ireland with Carolyn Mulholland
Korim Kiele, Helsinki

1991 Rufford Crafts Centre

1989 Crafts Council, London touring exhibition

1989 Oxford Gallery, Oxford with David Garland

1985 Victoria and Albert Museum Craft Shop, London

1976 British Crafts Centre, London

1975 Craftwork Gallery, London with Bryan Illsley

1973 Craftworks, Guildford with Bryan Illsley

1972 The Goldsmith's Hall, London

1971 Bath Festival Gallery, Bath

1971 Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol with Bryan Illsley

1970 Oxford Gallery, Oxford with Bryan Illsley

1968 British Crafts Centre, London

1966 Signals Gallery, London

1959 Penwith Society of Arts, St Ives

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arts Council of Great Britain
Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Arts Council of Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaion
Cornwall County Council
Crafts Council, London
Dartington Hall, Devon
Devon County Council
Farmleigh House - Office of Public Works, Ireland
Goldsmith's Hall, London
Granada Television
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge
Kunstsammlungen Der Vests, Coburg, Germany
Leeds Museum and Art Gallery
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Pforzheim Museum, Germany
Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery
Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh
Tate Gallery
Sommerville College, Oxford
Trinity College, Dublin
Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths, London
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Breon O'Casey: 1928-2011. Retrospective. Ruth Guilding, 2012
Breon O'Casey, A Decade, Lemon Street Gallery, 2009
Breon O'Casey, An Anthology of his Writings, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2005
A Celtic Artist, Lund Humphries, 2003
Breon O'Casey, Scolar Press, 1999
Linocuts, Breon O'Casey, 1998
Man and Materials, Breon O'Casey, 1996
Mayo, Breon O'Casey, 1995
Stars are Suns, poems by Scott Chaskey, woodcuts by Breon O'Casey, 1993
Selected Poems, Maurice English, illustrated by Breon O'Casey, 1991

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