



Ancient paths

The map patterns in her work, although abstract in appearance, are accurate and can still be read, Michelle Byrne tells **Carissa Farrell**

Michelle Byrne began her sculptural practice during the halcyon years of the 1990s when access to work-space in the industrial brownfield sites of the Dublin Docklands was plentiful and sculptors could find a wealth of mechanical and manufacturing waste with which to work. Byrne recalls being able to ‘climb scrapheaps’ in the old Hammond Lane scrapyard to find old metal and wood with a sense that everything had intrinsic value, history and the potential for transformation. As she says: ‘I loved that the objects and materials I used had a back story.

Materiality, form and process were important to my practice. The materials’ surface continuing to change, the copper greening, the metal rusting, this I found exciting.’

Byrne made use of these ‘back stories’ as she remodelled, beat and welded materials so they could retain their distressed industrial legacy. Her 1992 degree show in GMIT marked a distinguished prelude to this period. She presented four medium to large-scale apparatuses made of bitumen soaked wood, coopered by metal joins and plates to form a kind of mythological machinery of unknown purpose (Figs 2&3). At

such an early point in her career, these robust forms demonstrated conceptual depth and maturity. They also indicated where her life-long interests lay and a sense of her internal aesthetic language that has re-emerged over and over throughout her career.

Byrne continued to bring classical elements into later work in the 1990s. *Wedge* (Fig 8) and *Tower Wedge* (Fig 5), exhibited at ‘Sculpture in Context’ at the Conrad Hotel in 1996, each roughly represent a tapering stele/obelisk capped with a counterbalancing crest that arcs into a curved horn on one side and hammer head on the other. Resembling a pumpjack, it is not clear whether these objects are functional or ceremonial as the two works are contrasting interpretations – one in patinated bronze and the other in a two-toned beaten metal.

Just as a pre-historic stone tool’s purpose determines its universal structure, differing tastes and aesthetics define its appearance. Her *Blue Wedge*, made from box-shaped base metal, is charged with a poise that draws the link between these ancient styles and the industrial environment in which Byrne was working. It is made in two parts as though they are gliding towards each other, incorporating a tall slender column with an internal hollow channel into which the second wedge slots neatly. Equally this second wedge houses another



1 Making *JOURNEYS*

2 MICHELLE BYRNE
UNTITLED 1992
250x100x100cm
steel, wood & heshin

3 *UNTITLED* 1992
wood, steel, copper &
aluminium

4 *JOURNEYS*
2012 limestone
90x220x180cm



5 TOWER WEDGE
1996 60x40x20cm

6 MAP WALL 2008
bronze, 25x30x15cm

**7 JOHNGOLIA and
THE RIDGE** 2010
granite & steel

8 WEDGE 1995
bronze 20x20x8cm

pumpjack head in an inverted t-shaped channel. This jigsaw approach foretells Byrne's current practice and her interest in the process of making things fit; of slowly mapping, joining, slotting and cutting in a way that gratifyingly acknowledges the viewer's interpretation of the work.

Sculptors working in Ireland in the 1990s and early 2000s had the benefit of support from the Sculptors' Society of Ireland and a host of annual sculpture exhibition and symposium opportunities, some of which are still going today. In 1999 Byrne again exhibited a series of works at 'CODA' at Dublin Castle. Titles like *Ballcock Tower* and *Windows* give away the origins of these works as found industrial materials. *Windows* takes the form of an upright tapering wedge whose four faces are interspersed with rectangular openings that hint at, but do not reveal, the object's inner



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workings (Fig 11). Metal dowels extend out with charming ball-shaped knobs at their ends, ensuring that *Windows* carries a remarkable resemblance to a *Dalek* from *Dr Who*.

The early noughties saw the beginning of the end of city centre working for many artists as the rapidly growing economy devoured and demolished brownfield sites, pushing the creative community into smaller buildings carved up into little boxes or out of the city altogether. Byrne relocated to rural Co Carlow in 2005 and describes this time as a key transition period that opened new possibilities in her practice: 'My work changes at this point. I now was surrounded by lush green rolling hills, mountains and valleys of the Blackstairs Mountains miles apart from the industrial docklands. I started to look to the landscape, topography and geology of the area.'

Crucially Byrne also joined The Nine Stones artists'



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collective, comprising a strong line up of established artists that includes Remco de Fouw, Rachel Joynt and Annabel Konig. Byrne counts herself very lucky to be part of such a creative area, citing the 'value of collaboration and support from neighbouring artists'.

The artistic transition that Byrne talks about most likely stems from the sheer marvel of the Carlow landscape, a hidden gem of a Tolkien-like shire set into the slopes of the Blackstairs under the protection of Mount Leinster. At 2010's 'Sculpture in Context' in the Botanic Gardens, Byrne presented work that bridged the transition from city to country. *Johngolia* and *Ridge Stone* are two granite rocks (found) wrapped in close-fitting latticed steel coverings wrought into the pattern of aerial landscape maps (Fig 7). *Johngolia* roughly approximates the shape of a headless male torso



9 INIS 2013
limestone & plaster
36x22x12cm

10 VIA MAGNA
2014 limestone
40x20x15cm

11 WINDOWS 1999
200x60x60cm

12 Making Derdimus Tower 2019 limestone
400x65cm

wearing a metal jumper, complete with a collared opening stretching the steel work around where the neck should be. *Ridge Stone's* covering takes the form of a helmet capping a smaller piece of pear-shaped granite. They are carefully placed in relation to each other, a theme that Byrne describes as key to her process: 'I was interested in the relationship between two objects. An object that relied on the other as a support structure.' While there is a tension between *Johngolia* and *The Ridge*, it is punctured by an element of humour in their anthropomorphic nudging towards each other. Nevertheless, it is a strong homage to the relationship between people and the land. This very notion becomes the

core of Byrne's now-expanding oeuvre, which layers ideas about archaeology; lost topography; the curious, irregular shapes of fields that are unique to Ireland; and the importance of waterways in relation to settlements and villages. She further developed her range of 'mapping' objects using metal frameworks cast in bronze and, in a significantly innovative way, by etching and channelling out beautiful limestone plates, spheres and ovoids.

In February 2012 Byrne was awarded a Per Cent for Art commission for St Mary's National School in Thomastown, Co Kilkenny. In the same year, the maquette for the commission won the ESB Connor/Moran Award for Outstanding Sculpture at the RHA Annual Exhibition. The commission was an enormous undertaking and a test for Byrne to scale up her process to tackle a five-tonne slab of limestone. Over six months, she cut and ground down over two tonnes of limestone to achieve the basic ovoid shape, followed by the difficult and often tedious process of sandblasting a map of Thomastown into the surface of the stone. The final work, *Journeys*, is a sublime technical achievement and a conceptual triumph, perfectly suited to a school environment where every child can gain a new perspective of the place where they live and, with luck, find their house among the fields, roads and rivers (Fig 4). Byrne describes 2012 as 'most definitely a pivotal year in my practice'.

Byrne presented 'Via Magna', a solo exhibition at the Olivier Cornet Gallery in 2014. This was an opportunity

to bring together a substantial body of work where she was ‘exploring our past and present relationship with the landscape, in particular looking at settlements, boundaries, land divisions and the connecting route’. The exhibition contained multiple works in limestone, bronze, ceramic and plaster. *Borris* is a perfect sphere in limestone onto which Byrne has sandblasted a distilled map of the Borris area, with fields, roads, dwellings – even a circular rath can be identified superstitiously locked in the middle of agricultural land. *Inis* is a flat, limestone ellipsoid, whose surface is covered with hundreds of tiny field and road divisions of Ennis in Co Clare (Fig 9). The title work from the show, *Via Magna*, is an ovoid limestone piece that refers to the Esker Riada, a raised bank of gravel deposited by melting glaciers at the end of the Ice Age (Fig 10). The Esker Riada or Slí Mór was an important medieval trade and pilgrimage route from Dublin to Galway that now forms part of the M4. *Via Magna*, *Borris*, *Inis* and many other of Byrne’s stone and bronze sculptures in this exhibition constitute compressed repositories of multiple histories, geology and culture that she has conjured into tangible form. They are utterly irresistible, tactile and very desirable.

Byrne completed her most ambitious public art commission under the Per Cent for Art scheme for Kilkenny Co Council this year. The sculpture is located in Derdimus, a townland just outside Kilkenny City. *Derdimus Tower* is a four-tonne, tapering Kilkenny Limestone tower that makes

THIS VERY NOTION BECOMES THE CORE OF BYRNE’S NOW-EXPANDING OEUVRE, WHICH LAYERS IDEAS ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY; LOST TOPOGRAPHY; THE CURIOUS, IRREGULAR SHAPES OF FIELDS THAT ARE UNIQUE TO IRELAND

reference to the oldest built structure in Kilkenny, St Canice’s Tower (Fig 12). As Byrne explains: ‘The relief surface pattern is taken from a detailed study of an 1830s Ordnance Survey map of the Kilkenny area and depicts the network of fields, the river, lanes and roads of the city and its surrounding area. The map pattern, although abstract in appearance, is accurate and can still be read.’

Michelle Byrne experienced another year of consolidation in 2019. At her home in Carlow she has two studios, for working with metal and stone respectively, but she is renovating another outhouse to use exclusively for research and experimentation. After a long run of successful but demanding public art commissions, Byrne is taking time for herself: ‘I plan to allow myself the time in the studio to develop new ideas. It is crucial to not only put in the studio hours, but to allow yourself the freedom to experiment and explore, free from commissions and exhibitions. That’s where the new ideas and work comes from.’ ■

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