

THE EMERGENCE OF A DOMESTIC AVANT-GARDE IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH ART: THE PARADOXICAL HOUSE/HOME

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Introduction

Although the domestic has been critically observed in relation to British artists in the 1990s, it has not been considered cross-culturally in terms of Irish artists.¹ Considering many female Irish artists were coming of age in the 1990s, as part of a newly enlightened media-aware generation, conscious of feminist ideas and changing attitudes towards women both in Ireland and internationally, this paper argues that consequently, the domestic, as a subject-matter or material culture, became the vanguard for a 'domestic' artistic movement to develop.²

By establishing a domestic aesthetic, artists sought to highlight and explore the multiple signifiers entrenched in domestic space and iconography, by subverting traditionally held assumptions of the role of women within the home and thereby, it is argued, established a challenging, innovative art discourse. It is proffered that this phenomenon materialised in Irish art from the late 1980s onwards, partly as a reaction to these changes and as a reaction to women's traditional association to the home, which was particularly contradictory and contentious in the Republic of Ireland.³ The paper suggests a 'turn to the domestic'⁴ for Irish artists in some instances pre-dated their British contemporaries and traces this evolution, with special regard to the work of Irish artist Alice Maher and her response to the philosophical writings of Gaston Bachelard. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the emergence of this domestic art movement in relation to contemporary Irish artists, within the wider context of societal change, and cross-cultural exchange.

The 'Paradoxical' House/Home

On whatever theoretical horizons we examine it; the house-image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being.⁵

The increasing fascination of contemporary artists to explore the domestic as a home, both as an interrogation of spatial relations and as a metaphor for the self, is arguably due to the contradictory meanings that this space encapsulates. Thus the domestic avant-garde's foundation starts with the house, or rather the space within the home, where 'the stage for the theatre of the family, a place where people are born and live and die,'⁶ is played. Or, as Walter Benjamin eloquently wrote, the house is 'a box in the world theatre.'⁷ As these quotations exemplify, from the beginning the house/home sets up a contradiction as either a space where the most intimate of

human drama is lived, or as a space of refuge from the outside world, both of which have become potent signifiers for artists.

This idea of the domestic space (as a house/home) can also be construed as 'interiority' and a sense of subjectivity for the artist. Thus the house/home form can act as a metaphor for the construction of subjectivity in their artwork via the house/home object.⁸ The domestic space therefore is implied by work that architecturally depicts a house form or work that presents a conceptual abstraction of 'home' in a more ambiguous fashion.

The emergence of interest in place and space theories in the last few decades and the interest in the home/domestic is arguably attributable to the increasing alienation that has arisen due to rapid urbanization.⁹ This was especially dramatic in Ireland as, compared to its continental neighbours, it escaped the initial vestiges of modernity.¹⁰ Therefore theories expostulated during high Modernism, such as those by Walter Benjamin, Gaston Bachelard and the surrealists, especially André Breton, who theoretically attempted to articulate the resultant effects of modernity a century ago, are useful theoretical tools in understanding contemporary Irish art. Benjamin suggested the obsession with the home was a modern concept based on individualism and, in Ireland, this obsession has become a current phenomenon as artists seek to engage with the issues that have manifested due to the cultural shift from a rural to an urban society. Consequently, the domestic as a subject-matter has become a metaphor for the self in a manner that landscape served previously.¹¹

In *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, Bachelard describes the interior of the house, which is considered the home or the domestic sphere, as a cosmic space of memory, imagination and identity.¹² Bachelard's theory suggests the home is both a cosmic or comprehensive space and is defined as an attempt to retrieve or search for place-relations that can be accessed outside of, or prior to, between or beyond places that are humanly constructed or controlled. The house, therefore, depicts memory and is an intimate space.¹³

Joan Ockman writes that this philosophical meditation on oneiric space 'appeared at a moment when phenomenology and the pursuit of symbolic and archetypal meanings in architecture seemed to open fertile ground within the desiccated culture of late Modernism'.¹⁴ As Irish culture has recently been fragmented by technological advancement, increased urbanization and immigration, Bachelard's ideas resonate. Although written over four decades ago, and with specific relation to the literature of poetry, the current fascination for the home and the domestic in Ireland mirrors the changes he acknowledged in France at the height of modernity when he wrote that the house image had become a primary signifier of the contemporary state.¹⁵ If, as he wrote, the land and the landscape articulated an earlier generation's quest for identity, it is the house, the domestic that is the metaphor for contemporary artists:

All great, simple images reveal a psychic state. The house, even more than the landscape, is a 'psychic state,' and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy.¹⁶

Reverie, that is the creative daydream, occupied the central position in Bachelard's philosophy. His was an aesthetic that intentionally provided a metaphysic of the imagination and an aesthetic object, such as a house, was an object only insofar as it enabled a subject to enter into a receptive, self-aware and cosmic state of being, thus subjectness and objectness are intimately and archetypically intertwined.¹⁷

Bachelard argued that our earliest and most formative memories are not ordered temporally but spatially and the house or houses of our youth determine this ordering. He deals extensively with the example of the verticality of the house and the different qualities from the attic to the cellar. Whilst he privileges the past in his discussion of personal space, akin to nostalgia, he also includes the future, since he contends that people imagine an alternative place for themselves often in terms of an abode. In addition, he discusses hiding places within the house of one's youth that secure the sense of worth that children need to develop.¹⁸ Bachelard's associations between the house, memory and the imagination, his nostalgia for a rural, pre-industrial past, and a desire to question everything have been influential in establishing a domestic aesthetic which first subverted but ultimately celebrated human relations within art works.

Alice Maher's Conceptual Houses

For Alice Maher her use of materials, art historical references and forms, present the home as both a cosmic space and an intimate space, often rendering the domestic as a place of childhood memory and of the self. Her knowledge of Bachelard's ideas has been acknowledged both by the artist and critics of her work.¹⁹ Since the beginning of her art practice, Maher has been creating forms that resemble houses, either depicted architecturally as a house or alluded to conceptually. In either representation, they are charged places and do not represent the home as a neutral space but explore the house/home as a sign that subverts the commonplace association that the domestic is a place of comfort. She often uses memory as an active agent of the imagination and the viewer is encouraged to project himself or herself onto the visual narrative and contribute to the interpretation, which Heinrich Wölfflin has described as 'psychological empathy'.²⁰

The theme of the home and its possible subversions are often referenced through the use of the materials she chooses and further developed by the conflicting roles of interior and exterior space. These space relations are not simply defined as binary opposites but are construed in a complex fashion. In one of her earliest works *Tryst*, an installation made in 1989, Maher constructed four jousting tents made from used bed sheets.²¹ The shape of the tents, which are peaked at the top, resemble constructions from the medieval period and coupled with the colourful Chagallesque figures floating on the canvas, evoke a dreamy, fantastical, sublime, universe. However, the realization that these tents accompanied jousting tournaments signifies conflict and ultimately subverts the original interpretation. As an installation work, the artist was aware of creating a relationship between the object, the space, and the viewer. By

encouraging the audience to engage with the work from multiple viewpoints, or kinaesthetically by moving from inside to outside, the work is consequently subverted and transformed depending on the position of the spectator. Initially from the outside, we view the tent form as medieval but on entering find ourselves in the interior of a womb-like space resonating from the sanguine paint.

Wolfflin argued that to interpret the spatial form aesthetically we have to respond to this moment vicariously physically and through our senses. The extension and movement of the body is associated with a feeling of pleasure or displeasure, which spectators interpret as the experience characteristic of the form itself.²²

It would appear that these tents signify paradoxical messages of pleasure and displeasure as they represent the home as both peaceful and warlike or disruptive. The work, therefore, demonstrates that the home, the domestic, is both emblematic of creativity and possible destruction. As spectators our perception changes as we move from the exterior into the interior space. Considering family battles are often played out in secret, behind closed doors, it also serves as a reminder of Foucault's theory that power relationships occur in any space that is lived communally, such as the home.²³ For the theorist, Beatriz Colomina, the domestic space has always been a scene of conflict. She states:

We all know but rarely publicise, the house as a scene of conflict. The domestic has always been at war. The battle of the family, the battle of sexuality, the battle for cleanliness, for hygiene and now the ecological battle.²⁴

These contradictions are further rendered from the title of the work. *Tryst* means 'a meeting', especially a secret meeting, or from the Old French, a lookout post, further illustrating the possible duality that the work explores by emanating both clandestine and open relationships which is indicative of family life.²⁵ The tents therefore act as multiple signifiers for the whole gamut of domestic relations from battle to bliss. The materiality of the work also suggests that it is a holder of memory and familial rituals. Bed linen itself implies a material intimacy in that we sleep, dream, fornicate, make love, give birth and are sick on them and the artist has deliberately transformed them into a painterly canvas to depict an expressionistic narrative. Recalling Benjamin's assertion that the home is a theatre, the work bears an emotional quality in its figurative forms and colourful bold red tones, emitting further the emotionality of family relations and rituals.

Fionna Barber suggests the sheets represent the 'shadow work' of women. As women's housework is in maintaining the fittings of home, such as doing the laundry, as well as discretely eliminating the daily soils of everyday life, these domestic chores as generally thankless and unacknowledged.²⁶ Usually invisible in their daily use, by constructing the sheets into visible tents, the artist is deliberately visualising the domestic by literally subverting the sheets and attributing them with a value as a piece of art. Subsequently, by transforming the sheets into an artistic canvas, the ordi-

nary has become the extraordinary and the familiar domestic has been rendered unfamiliar.

For Maher the tents also present the idea of home as a transient place, as tents depict shelters, homes that are not permanent but mobile. In an interview, the artist has said she deliberately used tents because of this migratory quality:

Tents are amazing structures, they are like a house, but they don't have the oppression of a house, as they are not stuck in one spot.²⁷

They are also used to present figurative work that was not confined to a fixed frame. By her material choice, the artist has thus contested both traditional ideas of the home and of art practice. For Irish women, who had so long been tied by law to the home, the choice to create an unfixed home is poignant. In a recent conversation, the artist also mentioned that one of the reasons she used snail shells in her exhibition *Rood*, (2005) was that she marveled at the snails' ability to have a mobile home, as if the need to be free from a fixed abode was of paramount importance. This furthers a desire by the artist to escape the confines that the Irish Constitution, which in Article 41 in the constitution of 1937, singled out women's special role as:

2.1° In particular, the State recognizes that, by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good can not be achieved.²⁸

In 1995 for an exhibition called *Compulsive Objects*, Maher's choice was to create the form of a house. This engagement with the subject highlights her 'compulsive' need to grapple with ideas rendered from the domestic and resulted in the construction of her iconic piece, *House of Thorns* (1995) (Fig. 1). From the Freudian definition of 'uncanny' here is what appears to be a charming house rendered sensational and horrific due to the covering of sharp rose thorns.²⁹ From a religious iconographical reading the shape of the house is similar to one of the earliest Christian architectural structures in Ireland, Gallarus Oratory in Co. Kerry, (Fig. 2).³⁰ That this ecclesiastical form is covered in thorns, further suggests Christian iconography as the thorns imply the suffering of Christ. The portrayal of this conceptual piece as a house that symbolizes the church further underlines the suffering and sacrifice of Irish women who had been ideologically imprisoned to their role in the domestic space by religious theology.³¹ The work also emotes general domestic disturbances as well as alluding to literary associations.

In tales, such as *The Sleeping Beauty*, the prince has to battle with the thorny wood to enter the castle and awaken the princess. For Bachelard, the house protected the reverie and, for Maher, her conceptual house, covered in an armor of prickly thorns, might represent the need for the artists to shelter their intimate creative space and to safeguard their ability to enter into artistic reverie/imagination. Therefore, the

most intimate space, the interior, is protected by this aggressive, tactile house. This reaffirms Bachelard's idea that hiding places within the house of one's youth secure the sense of worth that children need to develop.³²

Taking into account that the artist painstakingly gathered the thorns, which surrounded her childhood home in rural Tipperary, to construct the form from a vernacular material, the time pondering and remembering the past are considered part of the conceptual process and thus the material represents a memorial aspect, or as Bachelard would suggest, is charged with memory associations.³³

The miniaturisation of the house further suggests childhood and memory. Barber has written that Maher's miniatures act as a signifier of a type of female in her work that is the girl-child.³⁴ This girl-child is a recurring theme in Maher's work, often considered her alter ego and, for Barber, the figurative miniature female form signifies a feminist slant to the work. The creation of a house form that is reduced in scale and covered in the visceral material of thorns could be interpreted as a means to recreate childhood memories that are secret, hidden and harmful to intruders. As this house can cause pain to trespassers, Barber views this place as the intimate female universe of the domestic and may denote domestic disturbances, as the domestic gone awry.³⁵ However, this also refers to Bachelard whose analysis of the miniature suggests one's responses to a scaled-down object are similar to the psychological process which takes place when we dream.

In point of fact, imagination in miniature is natural imagination which appears at all ages in the daydreams of born dreamers.³⁶

This reminds one of the *Sleeping Beauty* fairytale as mentioned, where the dreamer in this instance signifies the artist.

Medb Ruane suggests that Maher's conceptual house was referring to the 'dis-ease' of the domestic an *unheimlich* or unhomely response to the home akin to the surrealist disgust with modernity.³⁷ Yet this interpretation depends on whether one is inside or outside the house, as Duchamp famously said, it is the viewer who finishes the art work by their interpretation.³⁸ Henri Lefebvre has noted that both Bachelard and Heidegger associate the idea of the house with 'the terrible urban reality that the twentieth century has instituted.'³⁹ This argument thus takes the opposite view of Ruane's analysis in that the reverie of a maternal, womblike, and stable home, sheltering and remote is, as Anthony Vidler has suggested, a symptomatic response to the experience of an *unheimlich* modernity, or in Maher's case post-modernity that views the domestic as an ideal place.⁴⁰

Therefore, this work also creates paradoxes and is ultimately dependant on the viewers' interpretation. Maher's *House of Thorns* could thus be read as representing a romanticised historical past, a quest by the artist to create a rural past, far from the increasingly hostile contemporary urban world. Indeed, Ruane suggests that

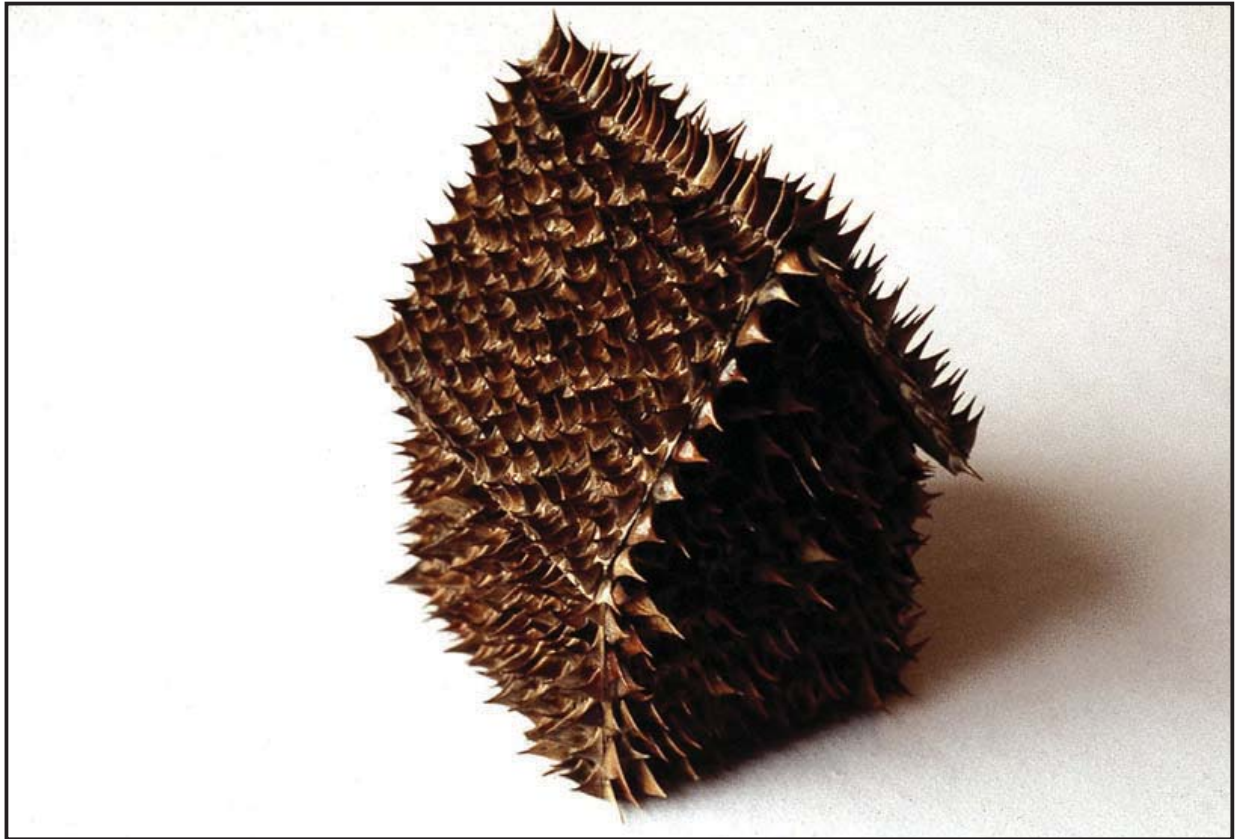


Figure 1 Alice Maher, House of Thorns, rose thorns, wood, 9x10x15cm, 1995. Courtesy of the artist and the Green on Red Gallery, Dublin.



Figure 2 Gallarus Oratory, Dingle Peninsula, Co. Kerry, Ireland, sixth to twelfth century. Photographic Credit: Seamus Kelliher.

nostalgia for a rural past is part of Maher's continual exploration of 'the margins', that Maher's quest for 'rurality' is a 'uniquely contemporary form of marginalization.'⁴¹

According to Wolfflin's theory we experience a feeling of pleasure or displeasure from the characteristic of the form itself. Therefore, the thorns may be read either as a protection from the vagaries of the external world, that the interior space is safe, or the contrary, that the internal world, the domestic, is disturbing. In other words, the artist is either idealising the domestic (as the place we love), Bachelard's *topoanalysis*, or demonizing it (as the place we hate), Foucault's *heterotopoanalysis*, which is indicative of the contradictory role that the domestic space had been for Irish women of Maher's mother's generation.

In 2001, Maher produced an art book called *Necklace of Tongues*, literally a sketchbook of ideas. In the book, she wrote with her left hand repeating words akin to surrealist automatism. She recalls: 'Once I listed all the dreams I could remember and gave them titles.'⁴² These random sketches are crude depictions of all the houses she had lived in and appear to be drawn in a primitive, childlike fashion. These stream of consciousness drawings are remarkable for their simplicity with very few windows and emote a privacy that depicts the domestic space as a sacred space that has to be protected by the artist in a manner reminiscent of both Tryst and House of Thorns. In form, these 'houses' appear to stumble toward the shape of a traditional Irish round tower, or keep and Maher writes: 'A keep as a room in a castle or a fortification and this reflects the tower-shape of it.'⁴³ Although drawing on memories of childhood, Maher has said that:

There are moments from memory in some. The etchings open up a space into memory and push two elements together, just for a moment. And memory isn't biography, it's not as simple as that.⁴⁴

However, it is interesting that these sketches are of houses, individualised by the city location, that relate to part of the artists' factual life journey. Again this echoes Bachelard's idea that the earliest and most formative memories are not ordered temporally but spatially, and this ordering is determined by the house, or houses of our youth. That the artist drew houses is particularly noteworthy, both as a signifier of memory, as the house is one of the first images children make, and as a form that represents the subjective space. In these works, we view only the exterior lines of the house; the interior is kept hidden and secret for the viewer to write the narrative.⁴⁵

This inclination to protect the interior/domestic space, which Barber would signify as the female/self, is also evident in another installation piece entitled *Keep* (1991) (Fig. 3). Whilst it may not appear in the traditional form of a domestic house, the drawings in *Necklace of Tongues* at times resemble keeps, suggesting that, for the artist, they are symbolic of the home. Made from a nine-foot structure of ropes of



Figure 3 Alice Maher, Keep, human hair, cotton thread, hemp, light steel, 270x130cm, 1991. Courtesy of the artist and the Green on Red Gallery, Dublin.



Figure 4 Alice Maher, Helmet, lambda print, 610x610mm, edition 4, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and the Green on Red Gallery.

hair, *Keep* is cylindrical in shape, and mounted onto a steel structure with cotton thread that in form resembles a round tower. The work again plays on the inside/outside, the public/private dichotomy, which can be identified as a recurring motif in her work. A memorial aspect is suggested as the piece is created from collected hair, as this natural material contains personal histories gathered from the genetics of the material. Barber notes that the work also requires the viewer to step inside a secret place similar to *Tryst*, yet to enter we have to physically touch human hair, which adds a fetish-like surrealist quality to the experience.⁴⁶

Once more the artist has referenced the medieval past, as a keep is a tower in a medieval castle. A link to this time, the Golden Age of Irish art, might also suggest that the tower represents the golden age of childhood. However, a keep also means a dungeon, which is a far more sinister place, as well as a myriad of other possibilities, such as to 'keep' a secret, to continue, to have and so on. Domestic spaces harbour secrets, family histories present a continuum and most of us possess in our psyche a place we call home.⁴⁷ By charging the sculpture with all these associations, the work takes on Bachelard's ideas of a house from the cellar to the garret, once again echoing multiple signifiers.⁴⁸

The literary associations are many but the story of *Rapunzel*, who was locked in a tower by her father, represents a domestic disquiet and underlines her confinement to the interior space, again suggesting the claustrophobic imprisonment that being chained to the domestic realm can represent. The construction of the sculpture from hair suggests the possibility of escape from the enclosure, just as Rapunzel escapes her imprisonment by utilising her own tresses. One could read from this that contemporary Irish women have the ability to free themselves from the ideological linkages of the past to the domestic realm. Hair can also act as a barrier behind which one can hide and also suggests that, by occupying the domestic, the realities of the public world can be escaped from. The home can thus be a place of refuge from the turmoil of a rapidly changing world.⁴⁹

There's No Place like Home

Though *Keep* is more inclined towards demonstrating the domestic space as an entrapment, despite the ambiguous signs, Maher's *Portraits* series from 2003 appears to be searching for a return to a safe, womb-like space. This concept of the idyllic home further illustrates the paradoxical relationship the artist has inherited in relation to the domestic space. The line from *The Wizard of Oz* 'There's no place like home' seems appropriate. Like Dorothy, it would appear that Maher is searching for her lost, rural, childhood home, which for her is Co. Tipperary, not Kansas.⁵⁰

However, if Dorothy wanted to return to 'home sweet home' and escape the fantasy of Oz, Maher appears content in the imaginary. Salman Rushdie has written that rather than the home being a fixed reality, our imagination is our reality and the only home we make for ourselves is by ourselves, in our reverie,⁵¹ which echoes

Bachelard. Maher's work tends to evoke these contradictions and an awareness that the place called home may not be in the real, but elsewhere, as Julia Kristeva suggests an 'abject place,' where both fact and fiction are suspect.⁵² Maher articulates this visually in the multiple associations that emanate from the public/private contradictions created in her work by using domestic iconography such as house forms.

Still, in these *Portraits*, Maher appears to be trying to retrieve something from her upbringing, as she embeds herself into material memorabilia from her childhood rural environment, heavily laden once more with religious iconography. She wraps her neck in lamb tongues in *Collar*, symbolising the Lamb of God, buries her head in the *Mound* of moss, springs water in *Fountain* and is sprinkled with berries in *Fruit*. The title *Bloom* may refer to cultural and natural memory, as it refers to Joyce's fictional character in *Ulysses*, reflecting an ongoing interest in Irish literature and folklore, and Chaplet might refer to her memories of Catholicism as it implies rosary beads. By literally covering her torso and face with these talismans, it is as though the physical alignment to material mnemonic associations, she can return home, if not by clicking her ruby red slippers, by creating herself as art, an art that ultimately seeks the domestic to reflect memory. In other words, the artist has created a new language for the self via domestic iconography.

As Carol Mavor mentions, Bachelard's influence is especially evident in the works, most notably in *Helmet*. (Fig. 4) In this piece, Maher holds a conical helmet made of snail shells in front of her face, as if she is either going into or coming out of this protective 'home' space.⁵³ However, Mavor suggests that rather than a return to the home, the work implies the artist has outgrown the home and is entering the public world thus decrying the old adage that 'a woman's place is in the home'. She uses Bachelard's observation that the snails are 'a dream of a home that grows in proportion to the growth of the body' to illustrate her point. That Maher has outgrown the proportions of this 'home' suggests she is 'flying' the nest.⁵⁴ Yet the homing instinct in these works is also very strongly communicated as Bachelard writes '...an empty shell, like an empty nest, invites day-dreams of refuge...' ⁵⁵ and the ultimate refuge for Bachelard is the home:

If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. ⁵⁶

Nest in particular illustrates this homing instinct as the contented expression on the artist's face suggests that this is the ultimate haven or refuge. That a nest suggests a home is evident by the metaphorical associations of the word. A small bird's nest is placed in front of the artist's bare body, the vulvi-form suggesting an alignment to the first home we experience, the womb, as though the artist, in her 'birthday' suit, can return to the place of her birth, the ultimate human journey, or personal Odyssey within the room/womb that we are/were safest. Bachelard believed that a state of well-

being takes us back to ‘the primitiveness of refuge’⁵⁷ and these works appear to echo that concept. There is a fusion of strength and vulnerability in this work that creates a subtle, visceral tension. By trying to return to home, in whatever guise, the artist is protecting her creativity that is cherished in these homes, in the private space, the interiority of self, that she has created reminiscent to a domestic space similar to *Tryst* and *House of Thorns*.

Migrating Ideas – Kathy Prendergast’s Tent Installation

Kathy Prendergast, a contemporary of Maher, is another central figure in the creation of a domestic aesthetic and has also constructed house forms in her work that suggest memory and migration. Having moved from Dublin to London in 1983, the idea of geographically searching for a lost home appears to have become a theme for the artist and was articulated in *The Body Map Series* which began at this point. In an installation piece called *Another Country* (1988), the artist built a wall from chalk making a division between here and there that could be read as Ireland and England indicating a conscious awareness of the act of emigration.⁵⁸ The installation piece called *as small as a world and as large as alone* (1991) makes reference to the house as a home. Sheila Dickinson cites the title as taken from an E.E. Cummings’ poem⁵⁹ and the work encapsulates a sense of the homesickness that can accompany the act of emigration.⁶⁰ Made from a one-man tent and contorted to simulate a mountain range, Dickinson notes that this work, unlike *Land* (1991), is the only tent in the series that is unmarked by map drawings and concludes that the title and the solo travel equipment evoke human isolation and insignificance: ‘By building a portable landscape to carry with her as she moves, Prendergast articulates a sense of journeying, of being uprooted.’⁶¹ However, it is not only the land that the artist has constructed but also a tent/house that, as Bachelard states, is redolent with memories. The external landscape may be important but the internal domestic is equally emotive. By utilising a tent the artist is making a reference to the domestic/home or interior and has explained the work embodies ‘my own landscape, my own history, my own emotional baggage’ – thus adding an emotive, humanist quality.⁶²

By leaving the tent uncharted, the work maintains a privacy and intimacy that shelters the interior space, a metaphor for the self. However, it also includes a zipper that creates a relationship between inner and outer spaces suggesting, like Maher, the paradox that the domestic place denotes as one of reverie and refuge or potential constraint. The inclusion of the zipper also suggests a sense of freedom and choice is possible for contemporary women. Considering the domestic orientation of many of her other works the relationship of land/external and home/ internal are recurring motifs. In an interview with Aidan Dunne, the artist said:

My work is not about nature although I use images from nature, mountains, maps [sic] I am trying to find a ‘poetry’, a sense of the extraordinary in the ordinary, to make a mountain-tent that can be your own personal mountain, that can be as big as a world but also fit inside a room, that is an image of itself, but also something more.⁶³

Both Maher and Prendergast conceptually appropriated tents to articulate the paradoxical nature the domestic denotes in society. By utilising the tent as a symbol for the home/domestic it acts as a metaphor and signifier of memory and self. These works curiously pre-dated the English artist, Tracey Emin's infamous work, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* or as it is otherwise known *The Tent* (1995)⁶⁴ which has been cited by Julian Stallabrass as evidence of young British female artists turning to the domestic for inspiration in the 1990s⁶⁵ and thus highlights the innovative nature of Irish artists in regards to the initiation of a domestic art movement.

Inside Out – Rachel Whitread and Maud Cotter's 'Houses'

Further evidence that an engagement with the domestic was an increasing phenomenon in the 1990s and was being articulated by artists in both Ireland and Britain can be viewed in the work of Rachel Whitread and Maud Cotter. Each artist constructed a conceptual house that renegotiated the domestic into a new visual language that both subverted traditional feminine roles in the home and then celebrated the ritualistic and memorial aspects of domestic life indicative of the third wave of feminism. Rachel Whitread's *House*, (1993) connected issues of public and private space by transforming the domestic space, or as mentioned by Bachelard the first space we encounter, into an iconic house sculpture. This piece has been described as 'personal architecture', not as a metaphor for the artist, but as a memorial to the occupants of the house whom provided the subject for her piece.

The dichotomy of the public and private is breached by Whitread's transformation of domestic space into a monument to itself. Private emotions and memories acquire public and collective meanings when House is seen as a symbol of homelessness.⁶⁶

Although the work is depicted as an actual house in terms of scale and construction, Whitread has subverted the interior and exterior space. Although we view an architectural house form, viewers are presented with the interior space of the home/domestic. In other words the domestic has been literally turned inside out and the usually invisible domestic has been monumentally visualised. The artist was trying to memorialise traces of the past history of the occupants of the house before their eviction and therefore by emphasising the interior space reiterates Bachelard's assertion that the object becomes subject. The work also embodies Benjamin's idea that:

To live is to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasised. [sic] The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. ⁶⁷

Whitread has metaphorically shaped these memories as symbolised by an architectural sculptural object, first by subverting the spectators' concept of inside and out-

side space and, second, by emphasising, visualising and celebrating the lives of the previous occupants and thereby incorporating a humanistic concern within the representation.

Similarly Maud Cotter created *House*, (2005) an architectural sculpture for the Courthouse in Washington Street in Cork. In the press release, she commented:

I want to bring a reminder of domestic dwelling into play with the other spaces of the Courthouse: corridors, cells, chambers, courts.⁶⁸

Thus the artist subverted the exterior and interior space by constructing a house form inside the court building and in so doing reintroduced aspects of the domestic into what would be considered a building that represents public, as opposed to private, space. By juxtaposing conventionally held notions of public and private space, the work sets up a dialogue between architectural forms and functions but also extends the introduction of Bachelard's idea of oneric space into the equation. Rather than creating a contradiction between a Court building and a house/home, that could be contested as polar opposites, the architectural pieces appear to be setting up multiple signifiers and blurring boundaries between interior and exterior space. The work also calls for the spectator to address the human rituals that occur within the domestic space and echoes Whitread's concern to make visible lived human relations.

Conclusion

By appropriating the house/home as a multiple signifier, artists have established the domestic space as one that illuminates the contradictions that are inherent in gendered spatial relations and, by renegotiating the boundaries, implied a shift of consciousness with regard to the domestic, from the banal to the exotic. This renegotiation has been a result, it is argued, of increased urbanization and a generation of artists raised in a time of equal rights that evolved through Feminism. This has been achieved by creating a new visual language, which subverts common associations of domestic space but ultimately explores the emotive humanistic qualities that that space signifies.

Paradoxically the domestic, which was considered the antithesis of modernity, has become a radical concept to explore contemporary art and forms the basis of a contemporary art movement which has been observed in Britain, but it is argued, was also occurring in parallel to contemporary Irish art. This has been traced by analysing the contradictions unveiled in the domestic space within the interior of the house/home image as articulated by Alice Maher and further suggested by an interest in the domestic between Irish and British artists from the 1990s onwards.⁶⁹

NOTES

¹ See Gill Perry and Paul Wood, *Themes in Contemporary Art* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), 238; Hal Foster, ed. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004); Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London: Verso, 1999) [hereafter Stallabrass, *High Art*]. A number of art historians, including Hal Foster, Gill Perry and Julian Stallabrass, have addressed the emergence of a domestic art movement especially with reference to the YBA (Young British Artists) who came to light in the 1990s in London, UK. See Katy Deepwell, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* (New York: I B Taurus, 2005). Although the author mentions the rise of Irish women artists in the 1990s in her work, the domestic as a subject matter in its own right is not analysed.

² Richard, B. Finnegan, and James L. Wiles, eds. *Women and Public Policy in Ireland: A Documentary History, 1922-97* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005) [hereafter Finnegan and Wiles, *Women*], 4. The introduction of television in the 1960s, the transformation of the education system in 1965, the Commission on the Status of Women in Ireland in 1972 and entry into the EEC in 1973 are all cited as radically transforming Irish society.

³ Paula Murphy, "Madonna and Maiden, Mistress and Mother: Women as Symbol of Ireland and Spirit of the Nation" in ed. James Christen Steward, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland* (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999), 90.

⁴ Stallabrass, *High Art*. He referred to this phenomenon as 'a turn to the domestic' in this work.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1964) [hereafter Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*], 3.

⁶ Beatriz Colomina, 'The Split Wall,' in *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 73.

⁷ Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) [hereafter Sidlauskas, *Body*], 2.

⁸ Michael Foucault, *The Core of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, Vol.3, trans. Robert Hurley and Allen Lane (New York: Vintage Books, 1984, 1988), 12. Michael Foucault suggested that the sense of self, as something held inside, was a modern concept.

⁹ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Towards a New Understanding of the Place World* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), 273-319.

¹¹ Sidlauskas, *Body*, 1 who states: “‘The nineteenth-century, like no other, was addicted to the home.’ So wrote Walter Benjamin in 1936, and his elaborations on the theme surface in most accounts of urban, middle-class life of this period. According to Benjamin, the domestic interior was nothing less than ‘the universe for the private citizen’.”

¹² See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

¹³ See Wesley A. Kart, *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2004).

¹⁴ “Book Review: Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 6 (1998): 1, 1 available at <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/6books_ockman.pdf> (last accessed, 10 June 2007).

¹⁵ Michelle Norris and Declan Redmond, eds., *Housing Contemporary Ireland: Policy, Society and Shelter* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2005), 2 where it is stated that: ‘The past decade has witnessed a sharp rise in demand for housing, the result of a combination of economic, demographic and social factors [SIC] apart from a natural increase in population there has been significant in-migration to Ireland that has driven the demand for housing’. In 2002 the rate of new house building in Ireland was the highest in the European Union, 14.7 per 1,000 inhabitants.

¹⁶ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 72.

¹⁷ Cristina Chimisso, *Gaston Bachelard: Critic of Science and the Imagination*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 6-15. Bachelard’s enquiry into science and the imagination suggested that human imagination was inspired by classical cosmology and alchemy, which only at the beginning of the nineteenth century was overtaken by rationality. Initially a scientist, Bachelard’s analysis shifted to philosophy as he suggested science was anything but rational, linear and cumulative and needed irrational ‘obstacles’ to ensure creative progress. For Bachelard then, cosmic refers to the irrational, the unknown, the otherworldly, which he regards as particularly poignant in the ‘poets’ or ‘artists’ soul.

¹⁸ See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

¹⁹ See Gill Perry, “Tales, Trails and Transformations: The Works of Alice Maher” in Alice Maher, *Natural Artifice* (Brighton: Brighton Museum and Art Gallery, 2007) [hereafter Perry, *Tales*], 14 and Carol Mavor. “A Dream of a House” in Alice Maher, *Portraits* (Portadown: Millennium Court Arts Centre Portadown, 2003) [hereafter Mavor, *Dream*].

Both critics mention Bachelard in relation to Maher’s work. Also Alice Maher in conversation with the author, 24 February 2007, mentioned the philosopher in relation to houses and snails.

²⁰ Sidlauskas, *Body*, 4.

²¹ Sheila Dickinson. “Interview with Alice Maher,” *Women’s Studies Review* 8 (2002): 53-70 [hereafter Dickinson, *Interview*].

²² Sidlauskas, *Body*, 57.

- ²³ Stuart Elden, *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History* (London, Continuum: 2001), 119. 'Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any experience of power' can be applied to the domestic space, as it is a place of communal life.
- ²⁴ Beatriz Colomina. "Domesticity at War" *Assemblage*, 16 (1991): 15-27 quoted in Sidlauskas, *Body*, 33.
- ²⁵ Patrick Hanks, ed. *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 1558.
- ²⁶ Fionna Barber, *Familiar: Unfamiliar Distillations, Alice Maher* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1995) [hereafter Barber, *Familiar*], 13.
- ²⁷ See Dickinson, Interview.
- ²⁸ Paula Murphy. "Madonna and Maiden, Mistress and Mother: Women as Symbol of Ireland and Spirit of the Nation" in ed. James Christen Steward, *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth-Century Ireland*, (London: Merrell Holberton, 1999), 90.
- ²⁹ Medb Ruane. "A Sting in the Tale" in ed. John O'Regan, *Profile: Alice Maher* (Galway: Gandon, 1998) [hereafter Ruane, *Sting in the Tale*], 5-43. Ruane notes that this work has a surrealist quality in the uncanny use of materials, that Alice Maher often uses materials for their literal, symbolic and transformative possibilities.
- ³⁰ Although not cited as a conscious influence by the artist, the architectural iconography of this building is well known and may have been a subconscious reference.
- ³¹ See Finnegan and Wiles, *Women*.
- ³² See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.
- ³³ See Ruane, *Sting in the Tale*.
- ³⁴ Perry, *Tales*, 14.
- ³⁵ See Barber, *Familiar*.
- ³⁶ See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.
- ³⁷ Ruane, *Sting in the Tale*, 6.
- ³⁸ Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (London: Lawrence King, 2005), 109.
- ³⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 120-121.
- ⁴⁰ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays on the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 63-66.
- ⁴¹ See Ruane, *Sting in the Tale*.
- ⁴² Alice Maher, *Necklace of Tongues* (Tipperary: Coracle Press, 2001) [hereafter Maher, *Necklace*].
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ See Ruane, *Sting in the Tale*, 15.
- ⁴⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 72. The author mentions the work of the child psychologist, Francoise Minkowska who studied children's behaviour and found that primarily children's first drawings are of houses.

⁴⁶ See Fionna Barber, *Keep* (Belfast: The Old Museum Arts Centre, 1992) [hereafter Barber, *Keep*].

⁴⁷ Patrick Hanks, ed. *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 801.

⁴⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 211-232.

⁴⁹ Barber, *Keep*. The author presents a thorough analysis of mythical association related to the Rapunzel legend and the material significance of human hair.

⁵⁰ Alice Maher, in conversation with the author, 24 February, 2007. This is the author's interpretation, the artist has made no reference to this source nor mentioned it specifically in conversation. According to the artist the interpretation is open to the audience.

⁵¹ Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: BFI, 1992).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9-65.

⁵³ See Mavor, *Dream*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 107.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁸ Conor Joyce, *Kathy Prendergast: A Geography* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1990), 12. The author writes that The Body Map Series was a quest for the interior.

⁵⁹ From "Maggie and Millie and Molly and May" in E.E. Cummings, *The Complete Poems: 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage (NY: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1994).

⁶⁰ Sheila Dickinson, "Sensing the Sculpture of Kathy Prendergast," *Eire-Ireland* (1999): 229 [hereafter Dickinson, *Sensing*]. The author observes that this work exemplifies the exile's nostalgia.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² John McBratney, "Something More Exciting than Ordinary Living: The Art of Kathy Prendergast" *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 13 (1997): 180-87, quoted by Dickinson in *Sensing*.

⁶³ Aidan Dunne, "Kathy Prendergast." *The Tribune Magazine*, 18 June, 1995.

⁶⁴ www.whitecube.com (accessed 4 July, 2007). In 1995 Tracey Emin sewed the names of all her lovers into the interior of a one-man tent, which is an example of Bachelard's subject/object where the tent/home has become the intimate space for the depository of memories. See Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, eds *Feminist Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001) [hereafter Carson and Pajaczkowska, *Feminist*], 54 where it is stated: 'Tracey Emin's tent was a temporary structure with strong connotations of home and the womb.'

⁶⁵ See Stallabrass, *High Art Lite*.

⁶⁶ Carson and Pajaczkowska, *Feminist*, 70.

Walter Benjamin, "Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century" in ed. Edmund Jephcott, *Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), quoted in Sidlauskas,

Body, 4.

⁶⁸ Press Release: *Maud Cotter, "House"* (Cork: Courthouse, 2005).

⁶⁹ Emer McNamara, *Tryst* (Limerick: Belltable Arts Centre, 1990). A growing interest by artists in the domestic, interior world is evident from the late 1980s onwards. In a statement made in 1990, Emer McNamara observed: 'Though culture, nation and home supposedly play a large part in the Irish-psyche, few artists in this country produce work which reflects this.'