

O'Doherty, Eamonn

by Lawrence William White

O'Doherty, Eamonn (1939–2011), artist, musician and teacher, was born on 18 June 1939 in Derry city, one of two sons and two daughters of Thomas O'Doherty, primary school teacher, and his wife Sara (née McElwee), from Co. Tyrone; his three siblings all became teachers. Reared in Derry's West End Park area, in his youth and early manhood he 'lived a rather rickety life ... a wild existence in and around Rossville Street before the troubles ... a kind of skid row ... energetic and vibrant' (*Derry Journal*, 30 October 2007). Educated at St Columb's College, Derry, in the early 1960s he moved to Dublin and, 'in a bid to avoid teaching' (*ibid.*), took a BA in architecture at UCD (1965). His resolution notwithstanding, he eventually combined his degree with the family profession, and lectured for many years in architecture at Dublin Institute of Technology. A visiting scholar at Harvard Graduate School of Design (1973–4), he taught at the University of Jordan, the University of Nebraska and the École Spéciale de l'Architecture, Paris, and was an external examiner at Dún Laoghaire School of Art and the École Supérieure d'Arts Graphiques, Paris.

From the early 1960s O'Doherty exhibited drawings and lithographs in Dublin galleries, later including paintings and small sculptures, the latter mainly in metal but occasionally in stone; his work appeared in small group shows and in such major exhibitions as the Independent Artists, Living Art, Oireachtas and the RHA; he was a prize winner at the Claremorris Open Exhibition, Co. Mayo (1981). Only in his mid 40s did he turn to the large-scale, commissioned public sculptures for which he became primarily known, executing some thirty such works in locations throughout Ireland, and several others abroad. Adapting his highly eclectic style to the exigencies of each individual commission, he created sculptures in varying degrees of abstraction and others in more traditionally figurative modes.

His first public artwork was 'Galway hookers' (1984), Eyre Square, Galway, commissioned for the city's quincentenary; the elegantly stylised, rusty-red steel forms represented the sails of the eponymous fishing and trading vessels unique to Galway Bay and environs, thus referencing the city's maritime heritage. Placed in a diamond-plan, cut-limestone basin with multiple water jets, the sculpture initially divided opinion with its abstracted modernism, but has endured as a striking feature of Galway's main civic space.

The controversy aroused by 'Galway hookers' paled in comparison to that surrounding O'Doherty's next major project, the 'Anna Livia' water feature (1988) in O'Connell Street, Dublin. Situated on the thoroughfare's median strip, the work was commissioned by the Smurfit Group to honour their founder, Jefferson Smurfit (qv), and to mark Dublin's putative millennium year. In collaboration with consultant engineer Seán Mulcahy, O'Doherty sculpted a bronze female nude representing

the feminine personification of the river Liffey, placed within a 94-ft-long (28.5-m) stone water feature designed to suggest the course of the river from its source in the Wicklow mountains through the city quays and into Dublin Bay; the reclining figure, with long flowing tresses and swathed in aquatic plants (thus concealing the starkness of its nudity), was lapped by cascading water. Polarising critical and public opinion, the structure was lambasted for its design, scale and execution (said to resemble an oil tanker, a mausoleum, a Lego bathtub), and its exemption (on its adoption as a Corporation project) from the planning process. Laughing off the wisecracks, and embracing (some sources say originating) the monument's most enduring nickname, the 'Floozie in the Jacuzzi', O'Doherty refuted most of the serious artistic criticisms, while conceding that the hurried execution of the work imposed by the terms of the commission occasioned a lack of refinement in certain details. The structure soon attracted such anti-social behaviours as littering, loitering and drug-dealing; O'Doherty (whose design intended the provision of ample seating space to address the dearth of open-air seating in Dublin city centre) insisted that such problems represented 'not a failure of art but ... of city management' (*Ir. Times*, 6 August 2011). In 2001 the structure was dismantled to accommodate plans for a regeneration of O'Connell Street. The 'Anna Livia' statue was re-erected in an artificial still-water pool in the tiny Croppies Memorial Park, facing the Liffey on Wolfe Tone Quay (2011). While generally accorded a more favourable reception in this less centrally located site, the statue, divorced from its original stone setting, levitates incongruously above the water in an orthopaedically perilous posture.

Winning a national competition involving submissions from twenty shortlisted Irish sculptors to mark Dublin's year as European City of Culture, O'Doherty executed 'Crann an Óir' (Tree of Gold) (1991) on Central Bank Plaza, Dame Street, a formalised, gilded bronze tree crown atop a slender pole, surrounded in part by a sectioned granite arch. Conceived as symbolising the steady growth of the national wealth under the protective and transparent husbanding of the Central Bank, the work was unveiled by Taoiseach Charles J. Haughey (qv) on 30 November 1991. (Ironies therein abound when eyed from the 2010s.) It was announced in August 2016 that, owing to its site-specific character, the statue would remain in place amid the move of the Central Bank to new offices in the Dublin Docklands and the sale to developers of the bank's former headquarters.

O'Doherty's other public sculptures in abstracted idioms include 'Swans (Passage)' (1994) on an elevated site at Antrim Area Hospital, Co. Antrim, a 16-ft-high (5-m) stainless-steel work depicting the long necks, small heads and gigantic wings of four swans in flight, referencing the swan colonies on nearby Lough Neagh; and the bicentenary sculpture (1997) at Belfast Royal Hospital, comprising 16-ft-high kinetic aluminium tapers.

In a more traditionally figurative style, O'Doherty executed the memorial (1996) to James Connolly (qv), opposite Liberty Hall in Beresford Place, Dublin. 'The emigrants' (1990), in his native Derry (moved from its original location in Waterloo

Place to a more apropos site on the city waterfront), comprises a young man and woman with two children striding ahead of an elderly couple who bid them farewell; the fiddle and book carried by the children indicate the cultural contributions of Irish emigrants to their new overseas homes. Consciously sentimental, the work references Derry's status as a major port for post-famine emigration. In a gesture of cross-community reconciliation, O'Doherty in 1993 fulfilled a commission from the Apprentice Boys of Derry to restore the statue of George Walker (qv), military governor of the city during the 1689 siege, which had been destroyed atop its 1828 pillar by an IRA bomb in 1973. O'Doherty's 'Great hunger' memorial (2001), V. E. Macy Park, Westchester County, New York, consists of three elements: an Irish family group of five bronze figures; the stone ruins of the homestead they left behind; and a bronze feature of potatoes metamorphosing into skulls as they spill from an overturned basket. The memorial was acclaimed by the American Institute of Architects as an outstanding work of public art.

Over the last two decades of his career O'Doherty fulfilled many commissions from local authorities for artworks along roadsides or in civic spaces within towns. These include 'To the Skellig' (1995), Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry, a formalised, crescent-shaped bronze currach raised on stilts, bearing four monks sailing to the island monastery; 'Fauscailt'/'The pikemen' (1998), along the N25 Wexford to New Ross road in Barntown, Co. Wexford; 'Damsel' (2005), along the N25 in Kilmeaden, Co. Waterford; 'Girl at a loom' (2007), Sion Mills, Co. Tyrone, commissioned by a cross-border cultural initiative; 'Another season' (2008), Clane, Co. Kildare, a 2.5-m bronze depicting a butterfly perched on a garden trowel. Especially striking was 'Na hOileánaigh'/'The islanders' (2006), Inishturk, Co. Mayo, a 2-m bronze circle encompassing a concave half-disc, the top half of which was removed to create a void, thus representing the sea and the horizon, through which a currach is rowed by three islanders.

O'Doherty won the Connor/Moran award for sculpture at the RHA annual exhibition (2006) for a small zoomorphic bronze. In a competition involving seventy-seven artists from eighteen countries, he was selected to contribute a work to the Peer Gynt Sculpture Park, Oslo, Norway, illustrating a scene from the play by Henrik Ibsen; his sculpture, 'The thin priest with a fowling net', described as 'epicene, Fellini-like ... gaily perverse' (Lynch, 85), depicts the 'catcher of souls' appearing near the play's conclusion. His last public sculpture was 'Protogonos' (2010), St James's Hospital, Dublin, a 20-ft (6-m) polished bronze cylindrical construction named after the hermaphroditic Orphic deity of generation and representing the rod of Asclepius and the double helix of the DNA molecule, thus blending mythic, medical and scientific concepts.

An enthusiast of Irish traditional music, O'Doherty played flute, tin whistle, guitar and mandolin. He toured Danish folk clubs with Andy Irvine in 1966, and was briefly road manager of Irvine's band Sweeney's Men. He composed songs, including 'Joe McCann', honouring an Official IRA man killed under dubious circumstances

by British paratroopers in 1972. He co-authored, with Allen Feldman, *The northern fiddler: music and musicians of Donegal and Tyrone* (1979), the product of an Arts Council of NI fellowship to conduct fieldwork; O'Doherty contributed the book's introduction, and drawings and photographs of musicians and locales. (Photography was an abiding artistic interest throughout O'Doherty's career.) An exhibition of his music-related photographs occurred in 2002 at the Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin (where they are repositied), and then travelled to Los Angeles, New York city and Virginia. He also co-wrote a book on environmental planning for amenity, recreation and tourism (1970).

Restless in nature, leftist in politics, O'Doherty was fiercely critical of cultural elitism, and occupied an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the Irish arts establishment. Notwithstanding the familiarity of his individual sculptures to large swathes of the general public, he himself was virtually anonymous as a public figure. His background in architecture affording him a keen sensitivity to the harmonious relationship between that art and sculpture, he never allowed the latter to be subservient to the former. Bald and goateed, witty, gregarious and bawdy, he was the image of the creative bohemian outsider, and 'an inventive and tireless raconteur' (McCann, *Derry Journal*). He married Barbara Ní Brolocháin; they had three daughters and one son. Their home in Dublin's Donnybrook area was a convivial gathering place for artists, musicians, writers and assorted free spirits. In 2003, a year after his retirement from teaching to concentrate exclusively on his artwork, he moved to Milltown House, Ferns, Co. Wexford, which he meticulously renovated, installing a studio in converted stone stables.

A sporadic exhibitor, not till 2008 did O'Doherty have a proper solo show of his work. At a two-person exhibition at the Graphic Studio Gallery, Dublin, in June 2011, he showed small bronze sculptures and lithographs, primarily depicting catholic religious with emphasis on ritual and dress, which he described as 'tinged with absurdity, but ... a gift for the painter or sculptor' (Graphic Studio website). Ill for some time with throat cancer, he died suddenly on 4 August 2011 in Gorey District Hospital, Co. Wexford. His remains were interred in Woodbrook Natural Burial Ground, Killane, Kiltealy, Co. Wexford. An exhibition of his drawings and maquettes for public sculptures, and small works in varied media, was held posthumously at Dublin's Kevin Kavanagh Gallery in latter August 2011.

GRO (death cert.); *Ir. Times*, 10, 24 Feb., 5 Mar., 18, 24 June, 14 July 1988; 3, 13 May 1996; 21 Nov. 2001; 5, 6, 26 Aug. 2011; *NY Times*, 24 June 2001; *Derry Journal*, 25 Sept., 3 Oct. 2007; 11 Aug. 2011 (tribute by Eamonn McCann); 29 Aug. 2015; Brian Lynch, 'Eamonn O'Doherty: genius loci', *Irish Arts Review*, xxv, no. 1 (spring 2008), 84–7; *Irish Medical Times*, 3 Feb. 2010; *Ir. Independent*, 5 Aug. 2011; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 5 Aug. 2011; *Sunday Independent*, 7 Aug. 2011;

Connacht Sentinel, 9 Aug. 2011; *Gorey Guardian*, 9 Aug. 2011; Allen Feldman, 'Eamonn O'Doherty and the gaze of common places', *Field Day Review*, ix (2013), 22–37; artists' database, National Irish Visual Arts Library, www.nival.ie; www.graphicstudiodublin.com; Gormley's Fine Art, www.gormleys.ie; Irish art, www.visual-arts-cork.com; www.publicart.ie; 'Galway hooker', National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, www.buildingsofireland.ie; Kildare County Arts Service, www.kildare.ie; 'Great Hunger Memorial', www3.westchestergov.com (internet material accessed May–June 2017)

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