

Wejchert, Alexandra

by Bridget Hourican

Wejchert, Alexandra (1921–95), sculptor, was born 16 October 1921 in Cracow, Poland, daughter of Tedeusz Wejchert, who ran a shipping business in Gdansk. In 1939 she went to study architecture in Warsaw University and there experienced the German invasion of Poland, which haunted her for life. Graduating in 1949 she worked as architect and town planner in Warsaw, and also took a degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in 1956 before moving to Italy. In 1959 she had her first solo show in the Galeria dell' Obelisco, Rome, and, after returning to Warsaw, was represented in the 'Fifteen years of Polish art' exhibition at the National Museum in 1961. At this stage she was still working as an architect but was opposed to the social realism of Soviet architecture, so in 1963 decided to concentrate exclusively on art, including graphics. Her chance to leave communist Poland came in 1964 when her younger brother, the architect Andrej Wejchert, won the international competition to design Belfield campus for UCD. She accompanied him and his wife to Dublin, on family invitation in 1965.

Her first show in Dublin was a solo exhibition of thirty paintings in the Molesworth Gallery in November 1966, and the following year she showed, from her studio in 14 McCoy Park, Dalkey, 'Blue relief' at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. These wall reliefs or 'sculpted paintings' were the precursors of her free-standing sculpture. At the 1968 Irish Exhibition of Living Art, she won the Carroll Open award of £300 for 'Frequency No. 5'. The judge was the well-known Jesuit critic, Cyril Barrett (qv) (1925–2003), who wrote: 'she searches neither to seduce the eye, nor to follow fashion' (Knowles, 229). The same year she held a solo exhibition in the Galerie Lamert, Paris, where she became a regular exhibitor. Her work at this period was used as the setting for a concert of electronic music. The critics Paule Gauthier and Dorothy Walker (qv) noted the rhythmic quality of her designs.

In the 1970s she began winning commissions for public art. A wall relief in the arts building at UCD, completed 1971 in wood and acrylic, is flowing and wave-like. That year the Bank of Ireland bought 'Blue form 1971' and the next year 'Flowing relief', a work done in timber with acrylic finish. 'Life' (1973), two wall sculptures and one free-standing, in anodised aluminium, was a homogenous triptych destined for the entrance hall of the Irish Life headquarters in Abbey St. It was disassembled in the late 1980s during refurbishment and was never reinstated. Other work for banks include a stainless steel structure, untitled (1980), for the Lombard and Ulster Bank in Dublin, and 'Freedom' (1985), commissioned for AIB in Ballsbridge. In stainless steel and 11.5 m (37 ft) high, it is among the most ambitious large-scale exterior sculptures in Ireland. As with much of Wejchert's work, it flows upwards in a single movement and expresses dynamism and unity. Insofar as it emphasises liberty and freedom, her work is political and a reaction to her early experiences of the German

and then Soviet occupation of her country. In 1975 her image of hands reaching towards a dove bearing an olive branch won the competition for a stamp marking International Women's Year.

She made her home permanently in Ireland, becoming an Irish citizen (1979), a member of Aosdána (1981), and a member of the RHA (1995). Noted for her charm and gracious manners, she counted artists, critics, and public figures among her friends. Her work was also celebrated internationally – she was the only Irish sculptor to feature in Louis Redstone's global survey *Public art, new directions* (1981). From 1989 she was taken up by the Solomon gallery and featured in a number of their shows, including a solo exhibition (1992). She refused to have a retrospective, holding that it was like a funeral and too expensive. Some of her most important work was for Irish universities. In 1992 she won a competition for an outdoor sculpture in the University of Limerick, with 'Geometric form', 7 m (23 ft) high in stainless steel. The scale of her work was in contrast to her small, delicate physique.

In 1995 the anatomy department of UCC commissioned 'Flame' in recognition of the altruism of those who donate their bodies to medical research. It was her last work; she died suddenly 24 October 1995 at home in Tivoli Road, Dún Laoghaire, and was survived by a son, Jacob. The critic Brian Fallon wrote after her death that she was 'directly in the line of mitteleuropean abstraction and constructivism, a master of form without being a formalist . . . she combined modernist austerity with baroque sinuosity and a special quality of aspiration expressed in her flamelike, upward writhing shapes' (*Ir. Times*, 24 Apr. 1996).

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Louis Redstone, *Public art* (1981); Roderic Knowles, *Contemporary Irish art* (1983); Douglas Hyde Gallery and NGI, *Irish women artists from 18th century to the present day* (1987); *Ir. Times*, 24 Apr. 1996; Ann M. Stewart, *Irish art societies and sketching clubs: index of exhibitors 1870–1980* (1997); Dorothy Walker, *Modern art in Ireland* (1997); Judith Hill, *Irish public sculpture: a history* (1998); Snoddy; [www.arts council.ie/aosdana](http://www.arts council.ie/aosdana) (accessed Sept. 2005); [www.jesuit.ie/studies/2002](http://www.jesuit.ie/studies/2002) (accessed Sept. 2005)