



Cristin Leach's physical world opens up when she attends the final in a trio of exhibitions by the Cork sculptor Maud Cotter

# Slow down to shape your ideas of space

Maud Cotter makes sculptures that are often best described as drawing in three-dimensional space. The Cork artist draws with 6mm steel bars, which she bends by hand; with cardboard, wood, plastic, pieces of found and engineered material – all assembled to produce what is often more of a continuing question, rather than an answer, about how we can exist consciously in physical space.

Her show at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin is the final iteration in a trio of exhibitions mounted under the collective title *a consequence of*. The work,

## THE CRITICS

made between 2016 and this year, has morphed and progressed through *a consequence of – without stilling* at Limerick City Gallery of Art in 2018 and *a consequence of – a breather of air* at The Dock in Leitrim in 2019. This final Dublin show includes some gallery-specific new work.

My patience with waiting for moments of transcendence from art has waned with the pandemic. It might take time to build it back up. Cotter's work requires slowing down, close attention, comfort with the discomfort of not hearing an immediate solution go "click!" Many months separated from

live or in-person culture, and from each other by screens, adds a particular challenge to the task of encountering new exploratory objects such as these in real physical space.

Meaning lies in the form and materiality of Cotter's work. In the entrance foyer at the Hugh Lane a large sculpture like a juggernaut almost fills one side of the lobby. The details draw you in: connection points with three butterfly nuts on bolts screwed through to hold this solid, airy frame together. It's a tube, a vortex, a time-travel portal, the skeletal remains of a jet engine. The nuts are mostly arranged with two facing one way, one the other. Is this relevant?

Chances are it is. Cotter is

a thoughtful artist. Her gestures are deliberate. This show is navigated by reading the pencil-drawn titles of the works on the walls of the gallery and following pencil-drawn arrows around corners to find new works.

The lobby piece is called *matter of fact*, but the implication is that there are no tangible facts, and there are continuing questions about matter. There is a slightly tongue-in-cheek but quite genuine question here too: does any of this matter? There's a double wordplay in the "consequence" of the exhibition series title – what are the consequences of our actions, perceptions, the habitual patterns we make?

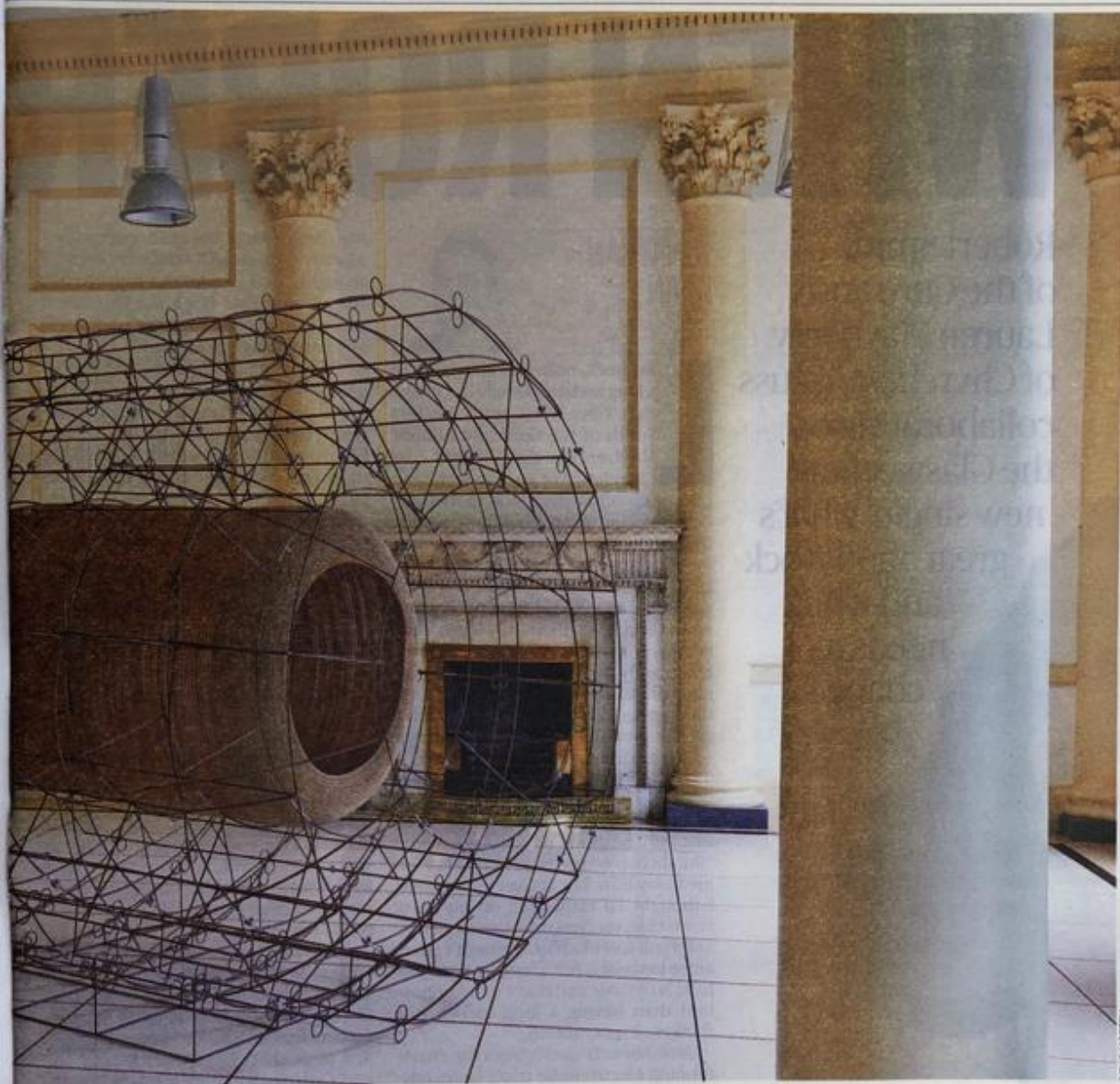
Honeycomb cardboard and

other repeat-form structures are part of Cotter's signature style, with the rigidity provided by recurring structure, and form. These are structures that are strong in one direction and not in another; crushable only if you know where to push. Bending a 6mm steel bar by hand is a dance with the tension contained in the molecules of the material. Pieces that appear to have been industrially constructed are in fact intimate, human-scale. This might be why *matter of fact* has nest-like qualities. You could crawl inside the inner cardboard space and be encased by the open metal drum in which it sits.

The show takes its title from Gerard Manley







Hopkins's *Pied Beauty*, a poem made of abundant sounds, tripping musicality and unapologetic gushing. Cotter's work is nothing like that, being careful, neat and precise. Yet it does inspire writing like that to describe it. *Perch* is a small sculpture attached to the edge of an inset window space in the gallery wall. A composite foam strip, a Styrofoam block, an aluminium slatted shape; soft, precarious, wedged. Mutable but insistent.

There are wires, tubes, mirrored surfaces, bent metal bars, forms like stirrups or footholds climbing the wall, which is draped and adorned with pieces of foam, wire, plastic. In a place where there is a gap between architectural

**Transformative** Cotter's without stalling, left, and, above, matter of fact

**“The best structures are rigorous, but not explicit**

elements of the gallery, she has inserted turquoise-painted rods that travel at right angles around a corner and end in rust-coloured tips topped with the sliced-off neck ends of hot-water bottles, which are sprouting deflated party balloons. There's an implication of childhood: comfort, party, celebration, construction, a tin can phone line, perhaps; elements dissected and reassembled. There's also the fact that these are used as hot-water bottles. People have slept with them. It's called *slit*.

Parts of this show feel unresolved. *The moon is falling* reads like an idea still in need of another take. The display-case elements are difficult to see and connect

with. But there is deliberate distancing going on in the way Cotter deconstructs and reassembles things. And there is, if you slow down long enough to let it hit, a profound sense of somewhat uncomfortable familiarity.

Cotter adds objects to the world as a kind of practice in orchestrating environments that vibrate with uncertainty. She does this to flick a switch and deliberately keep it open, so anyone who encounters the work is asked to become receptive to potential new perceptions, new thinking, whatever might emerge.

*Without stalling* smells good, even with a mask on. It's made from cleanly hand-cut repeat forms in thin plywood, constructed and

engineered to bend without splitting and then slotted together to hold a fish shape, a torpedo shape, a submarine form. They are stacked in a way that makes them seem curiously immovable, piled up. Are they trapped, amassing, stockpiled? Are they preparing for an unknown fate? Or is this a pile of treasure, talismans, a hoard of precious bait? The sculpture is large and almost fills the room. It's curved to form a rudimentary shelter, a wind break, the beginnings of a place. Cotter leaves the pencil marks of the construction, evidence of making, on each one. It's a shoal, a barrier, a refuge, a display. The tails are not all uniform. There are circles marked on them, with one or two marked through with a line, like days counted in prison, on a calendar, of a life lived. Or by a maker with a pattern in her head using a convenient in-the-moment measure to keep track of construction progress, to tally each piece as she makes it.

*A breather of air* is the show's biggest installation. It's an assemblage that resembles two stick-metal brides dragging cardboard boulders by their long plastic trains. Humanoid forms. It could be a representation of two lungs too, of course.

*& bone/visited* is a sculpture like a proposition. Vaguely medical, vaguely construction-related, vaguely personal, it's pointing to an anxiety about how humans engineer objects and environments, and it only offers visual satisfaction from one particular angle.

The best of Cotter's structures are rigorous, but not explicit. They don't offer definite solutions to the difficulty and problem of finding yourself in physical space. She creates art that makes sense in glimpses, when the circumstances are right; in moments that flicker in and out from the corner of your eye. It's not an easy leap of faith to make, but this is sometimes beautiful, sometimes frustrating and occasionally transformative work. ■

*Maud Cotter, a consequence of – a dappled world is at the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, until Aug 8*