

An Introduction to the Work of Maud Cotter

To the Inback

John Montague

Artists roam the earth as never before, seeking to unleash energies inside, or confront those outside, an enormous intuitive effort to understand ourselves and our world. Lawrence recognised the Outback of Australia as the oldest landscape in the world, an intuition confirmed by geologists, later rendered by Sidney Nolan in a muddy brown and dark green canvases. An initiate of the landscape of Ireland, so old, layered, intimate and flowing, Maud Cotter felt compelled to scrape her psyche clear by confronting the nude interior of Iceland, where the forces that make the earth still tremble the air, distort, shape and thrust the crust of an emerging earth. It was a return to the childhood of the world, that Jules Verne vision of vapours and heat tremors that haunted us so early on.

Let us call it the Inback, a treeless world where a harsh wind works to shift the soft cover of the earth under which these elemental forces boil. Confront the ice cracking and shifting in the glacier, then face a volcano nearby, underneath, or even inside the glacier, and then we are in the fierce grasp of a dialectic, cold and heat, fire and ice. It is this journey into an always shifting interior, this persistent pagan relentlessness mixing sky and earth, which has inspired her latest works, and will continue to underlie it, the primordial disputing our more settled realm, bubbling chaos against the calmer legacy of a centre of culture like Chartres.

At first she tried to pin it down in drawings, sometimes having to kneel down, as her paper flapped, a precarious point of stillness, contemplation confronting incessant, often hostile change. There were points of colour in the pervading bleakness; a new blue lake, glinting like a gem; symbol, perhaps of her quest and its question; a reddish mountain defined against desert, larger shapes of rocks that look like beasts or whales, cairns where man has left a frail track or marker; she tries to read the signs, to decipher, through the burning light of an Icelandic day. The artist describes what the scientist names, a fluid version of the same need to identify process.

In the tundra desert of Iceland, with its permafrost, earth's workings lie exposed. You feel your ego diminish in this desolate stripped world where the earth splits and steams, the topsoil is moved by winds that howl and growl, and your footsteps sink or are swallowed by that thin surface. What can bide here? There are the huts which a storm may shift, and legend has it that trolls dwell in the rocks. Blind white trout live in the crevices created by shifts in the earth's crust, puffins, terns trundle on black beaches. But the saga image of a crow eating an eye from a skull suggests the struggle.

And yet the psycho-physical energy is endless and enormous. There are always geysers, with their manes of flying steam, and sometimes, the stink of boiling mud. And the sound of glaciers calving, black silt rivers seeping from them. And always volcanoes: babies like carbuncles, that burp lava, and oh *My Young Volcano, only twelve thousand years old*, as well as blistering *Crowned Hag(s)* and *Dormant Mound(s)*. Confronted with these cauldrons of power, the artist shrinks to the fragile, tenacious shape of a pebble or root, local minutiae, an apprentice shaman bending over the cradle of the world. It is a version of the kind of challenge that Georgia O'Keefe found in the American desert, and after the soundings through drawings Maud has gone on to three dimensional works in her favoured medium of glass, as well as steel and bronze. Fleeing or flying, she has done what every artist yearns for, confronting the untameable to enrich by not ruin *My Tender Shell*. The poetic litany of her titles does justice to her pilgrimage.

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My Tender Shell

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