

Body Conscious: An exhibition by Dorothy Ann Daly Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT), Waterford Regional Hospital, 29 June to 3 August 2012.

This text is from a talk given by Mary Ruth Walsh at the opening of the exhibition.

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Waterford Healing Arts Trust, also referred to as WHAT is an acronym that makes you think. I believe we don't ask WHAT often enough...what is it? ...what is it about? ...what do you mean? This is a good thing as we approach an exhibition and fitting as we explore Dorothy Ann Daly's work for *Body Conscious*.

Dorothy Ann Daly is an Irish artist living in Berlin. She graduated from the National College of Art and Design studying painting. Previously she spent time in The Glasgow School of Art studying textiles. She won the Taylor award while still a student and was selected for EV+A several times and has shown in New York, in the UK numerous times, Berlin, the Netherlands, Glasgow and her last solo show in Ireland was in The Lab, Dublin. Dorothy Ann Daly is an exhibiting member of The 62 Group of Textile Artists.

When I first saw Dorothy Ann's *Body Conscious* works it reminded me of several things, particularly how they evoked a sense of bandaging and healing. The impression was of a 'wished for healing' without referencing the image of the body. Although the work is about the body, the body is absent, and the work becomes richer for its nonappearance. The works awaken a desired imagined healing, much deeper than a visible external healing. And they arouse a wish to sooth those left behind in the home country, here I'm referencing Ireland, Daly's native land; and those in foreign countries, which references her adopted Germany.



Torso by Dorothy Ann Daly

The Historical Perspective

The thought of a contemporary artist in Berlin making Irish crochet lace seems bizarre until you see, feel and experience Dorothy Ann's work. When I looked at her work initially I was reminded of two things – the first was of a tiny piece of beautiful, finely woven cloth, very old, dating from pre-Christian times; those times of magnificent gold collars or torques. This piece of inch square weave with a tiny tassel is in the National Museum in Dublin. It is from a much bigger garment yet nobody knows what that garment was. But why describe this and what does it indicate? Technically it is brilliant as a textile and indicates a sophistication by the wearer and maker. The second thought that

occurred is something of the wool and fabric that Kathy Prendergast uses in her work that references new life and death. There is something about Daly's work that evokes memories of a newborn baby's bonnet and at the same time an elderly person's garment that is worn next to the skin. These works may have some of the appearance of Kathy Prendergast's work, yet the language here is totally different, it is wholly Dorothy Ann Daly's.

Going back now to the former woven square with the tiny tassel in the National Museum and to its relationship to Dorothy Ann's work. Both are technically sophisticated, however I think, technique is not her focus; rather it is the *context* of why she uses Irish crochet as a chosen medium. Even more challenging is Dorothy Ann's deliberate connection between her physical position in Berlin and that part of her memory and identity that resides in Ireland. Using Irish crochet as a contemporary statement is thought provoking. It connects the contemporary woman (and man) to the time of post famine Ireland. Dorothy Ann speaks of this time when many women earned their fare to America through crochet. I see her work as a gently presented yet strong feminist statement, a linking to an ancestral sisterhood by a contemporary émigré. Her work is a determination to remember our shared history, and our history is what helps us to define who we are. This is heart-warming work and as sophisticated in the idea as it is in the technique; we don't often get both these aspects in one work.

It also brings to mind the still problematic feminist issue of women artists and all women who create and work and at the same time are nurturers and homebuilders. I wonder how much of one role, the nurturer / homebuilder, feeds into the creator role? Addressing this challenging issue is for another time.

Context and Content

Of the several layers that are at play in Daly's *Body Conscious* the context is important in terms of (a) the wider geographical context of different countries, Ireland and Germany, her homeland and adopted land respectively. (b) The context of historical time that links a post famine time of crochet making to the present time of Daly's contemporary interpretation of crochet. (c) The deliberate context of positioning this show in a hospital rather than in a gallery. This is an interesting choice that speaks of a wish to heal and bandage.

I think the title *Body Conscious* is well chosen for this exhibition, all the more so as we don't see what we recognise as the body in these works. Daly's work becomes much more than a representation of something, it taps into the body's senses evoking a consciousness of the tactile. Although you can't touch the work, you feel these cotton stitches, these three-dimensional drawings full of minutiae and intricacies. Because the work's scale is small and the stitches microscopic, it forces an intense focus from the viewer and puts us, the viewer, behind the microscope peering through the lens enquiringly. This brings the viewer into the hospital laboratory. However that is where this comparison stops, as the laboratory is full of dead tissue and cells whereas *Stiff* and *Spasm* are very much alive. In these works I see a deliberate unfinished-ness, an alertness, a striving, a willing into being and the scale continuously forces us to examine, like in a laboratory these understated, almost invisible (against their white background),

yet powerful works. Why do I think these works are powerful? Because, to me, they to speak of the invisible powerhouse of the physiology of the body, (physiology being the science of the functions of living systems – very different from pathology which examines dead tissue). Physiology is invisible yet it is alive, it works all the time and yet it is not a thing in the strict sense. Daly's works



Straighten Up (Detail) by Dorothy Ann Daly

are things; we can touch them, but not defined *things* or *representations* of the body either internally or externally. Yet they are alive with physiology-like-function as they ravel and unravel they become *Tension* and *Wobbly*, not scientific terms but really descriptive of the body in a tactile way. The threads pull and curl up - they are *Straighten Up* and *Spasm*. They are organic foldings twisting over themselves. They are part open, part closed. They are visible areas and hidden parts. They give a sense of transmissions being caught in mid action, but that action is invisible. They speak of a determination yet they are soft. They are resistant to a single reading.

A further context besides those of history, time and location needs to be addressed; how does Daly's work fit

into the contemporary artists' scene? In other words who else is working in textiles and what are they saying? One of the earliest and relevant artists is Eva Hesse who was surrounded by conceptual artists yet produced many textile related works. She considered the sculpture *Hang-Up* (1966) 'to be her first significant work of art. An ironic commentary on painting, *Hang Up* was, according to the artist, her first piece to achieve the level of "absurdity or extreme feeling" she intended.

Hesse, like Daly refutes ideas relating to painting and both women use a language-play and 'softer' mediums to describe their different individual ideas. The Irish artist Katie Holden, also an émigré and now living in New York, made the work *137.5° / It Started on the C-train* (2002); a sprawling, black crochet web-like wall installation, started on the subway in New York and continued as the artist travelled around Eastern Europe. Her work explores our relationship to the organic and scientific world. Male artists also use textiles as in Francis Alÿs socio-political narrations where his unravelling jumper left a thread-map of his journey through Mexico City, wittingly titled *Fairy Tales* (1995). Mark Garry, a young Irish artist uses colour threads in his delicate installations, which he shows abroad and most recently in a permanent work using copper threads in Belfast's new MAC titled *The Permanent Present*. The list of textile related artists

goes on and having broken the male / female boundaries and are much richer for it.

I think this work by Dorothy Ann Daly is compelling not because of her disability but in defiance of it; I know this work is driven by that very disability but it is done with such in-depth honesty by her- it is a very difficult thing to be wholly honest with oneself. This becomes visible in the integrity of her work which she describes making with different stitches as she would use different pencils if she were drawing. Drawing, to me, is one of the greatest forms of visible thinking, and Daly has made visible *her* time and her *thinking* that eloquently revealed the invisible physiology of the body in difficult yet beautiful ways.