

INTERVIEWEE: DOROTHY CROSS

INTERVIEWER: ANGELA SINGER

Both, Dorothy Cross and Angela Singer work with animal skins. Cross came to widespread attention when she began a series of works featuring cow skins and cow udders. In her art she amalgamates found and constructed objects. These assemblages invariably have the effect of reinvigorating the lives of everyday things, sometimes humorous, sometimes disturbing, always intellectually stimulating and physically arresting. Angela Singer's body of work comprises of discarded hunting trophies and other taxidermy that strives to illuminate human exploitive tendencies of animal life. In this interview, Cross and Singer discuss animal surfaces, environmental activism, and ethics.

Text and Interview Questions by Angela Singer

Many of Dorothy Cross' sculptures explore the relationship between the animal and human animal in the natural environment. Challenging and beautiful, her work incorporates the found, the broken, the unloved, and the dead. She has a deeply *intuitive understanding of the natural world and sees the body and nature as sites of constant change.*

One of Ireland's most distinguished contemporary artists, Cross came to prominence internationally in the 90s with her series of works featuring cow skins and cow udders. In recent years, her practice has focused on nature and the ocean, using the bodies of maligned animals such as the shark.

Angela Singer: When did you discover you were passionate about nature?

Dorothy Cross: I was lucky that growing up I experienced both cultured nature, in my mother's walled garden in the city of Cork, and a more wild nature when my family went to a hut by the sea for three months of the year to

swim and fish. Being in nature was part of my childhood.

When I thought about where I should go to art school I was aware that to see the great art works I would need to be in a city. I wrote to art colleges around the world because I felt I should leave Ireland to study. But no matter where you are we are never away from nature, we are participating in the growth and decomposition of our own bodies.

I left Dublin to move to Connemara, by the sea on the west coast of Ireland, 14 years ago. I think you have to be of a certain age to remove yourself from the urban. If one lives from art work one needs to partake of the art world, be a part of that system for the greater part of your life.

A.S: In your 2014 book *Connemara* you write that you came to Connemara "to dive the underwater realm of the Bofin, Turk and Clare Islands, through black fissures and gullies with shafts of sunlight and reefs coated with jewel-anemones". What attracted you as an artist to explore

this place?

D.C.: About 25 years ago I went to the Galapagos Islands and learnt how to scuba dive. The wildlife there was still so untouched. I swam with sharks and sea lions, it was amazing but I was conscious that I probably shouldn't be there contributing to human intervention. When I returned to Ireland I decided to do my dive qualifications which began in a pool in Dublin and were completed at the dive centre in Connemara. When I eventually moved to live there in 2002, people told me that living in Connemara would be very lonely but I did not find it so. The place is shockingly beautiful. I bought a field to camp in, then over time I bought a little house across the road, then I built my studio.

A.S: You work with taxidermied birds and snakes in works such as "Snakes" 1995, "Parachute" 2005, "Currach" 2007, "Heron" 2011. What are you trying to say about loss?

D.C.: In *Currach*, the gannet is shown flying upside down below the upturned boat, a currach, a traditional vessel made of stretched canvas over a wooden frame painted with black tar. The work is turning nature on its head. It's about natural loss but also about cultural loss. I showed the work with a short film about a shark caller I met in Papua New Guinea. He begins to cry while singing me a song that he had never sung to anyone before. The song is sacred and usually only sung alone in his canoe to a shark he has caught, and to his ancestors. The primitive world hasn't lost the equilibrium around life and death.

Parachute is about potential loss and the disconnection of the human from bird flight. The gannet is shooting towards the ground in a pointless dive attached to a sky blue parachute normally used to assist a human from falling to their death. The parachute stops it from falling, but its perilous, the bird is just off the floor.

I have the birds taxidermied professionally, I do not do taxidermy myself.

A.S.: Many of your works express concern for

ecological and environmental issues such as the human impact on the environment. Do you see yourself as an environmental activist concerned with raising public ecological consciousness?

D.C.: I could be called an environmentalist but maybe I'm not active enough. You're cutting a fine line with art; you cannot be dogmatic or a propagandist. What can occur with my works that have used animals is that people make jokes about how I like killing animals for art, which I have never done of course! But people who do see what I'm trying to do I hope will see that I am pro animal and in fact attempting to focus attention on their beauty and our relationship to them.

I've work with scientists, including my brother, which has helped me to not make conclusive statements but try to show the value of things that exist already, and the presence and absence of what we don't understand. Using materiality to create something that can't be put on a protest poster. Art can have a power that the poster at the barricade does not, perhaps by dribbling slowly into some viewer's consciousness.

A.S.: 'Udder' (series) featuring cow hide, udder and teats are some of your most iconic sculptures. How did these works come about?

D.C.: I was in Norway 22 years ago for a project, Artscape Nordland, and I visited a folk museum where I saw a sieve made out of a cow udder, a very utilitarian object. It was magnificent. The udder functioning with another function; multiplicity, not just singularity. Back in Ireland, for two and half years, udders took over my studio. I made about 20 udder works. They scared me when I first started; it was this combination of mutilation, metamorphosis and some kind of plastic surgery. My studio was exciting and horrible because I was using these nurturing, vulnerable parts of the poor animal.

I stopped making the work three years later after I dreamt I went into Macy's department store and saw many things



Dorothy Cross

Curach boat with wood, tar and gannet, 196.9 x 51.2 x 27.6 in, Image courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery © Cross

covered in teats! I was very specific in what I combined the teats with. The power would have been undermined by just putting them onto everything.

A.S.: Have you ever received any complaints regarding your works that use animal materials?

D.C.: Some people, not a lot, were horrified by the udder works.

I met a woman on the street who had seen the *Amazon* udder work on show in Dublin and she got very upset and asked had I not considered women who had had mastectomies. I pointed out it was a cow's udder not a woman's breasts and told her how my mother, who had recently had a mastectomy, had considered the work with curiosity.

I remember once writing to feminist Mary Daly, as I wanted to do a book on the udder series, and she savaged the idea. She wrote back saying who did I think I was, and what I was doing was an abomination. The book didn't happen as I didn't get funding from the Arts Council at the time.

A.S.: Robin Lydenberg writes in your book *Connemara* that theorists such as Jean-Luc Nancy have turned from a traditional understanding of touch as an unmediated means of contact and appropriation and have "introduced the notion of touch as trace, and as 'being-among.'...Locating touch at the threshold between remoteness and contact."

Fingers, finger coverings, fingertip bones appear in several of your works including "Pointing the finger" 1994, "Thimble" 2002, "Pearl Bones" 2009, "Foxglove" 2010 and "Molluscs" 2013. What is the relationship between touch and your work?

D.C.: There are two ways I function in the world, one is in terms of materiality and the body and the other is some kind of unseen spiritual route. The end of the finger is the limit of our bodies. With *Pointing the finger* you

have both a sense of protection from pain or infection from the outside world, and absorption into the realm of the animal realm literally, as the finger stall is made from the teat of a cow, which in a sense has also been wounded. In ways it's about being in our body and that being the limit of our experience.

Thimble touches on sensitivity. A boyfriend I had went to the Arctic and asked what I wanted brought back. I asked for a walrus whisker as they hunted them to eat there. I love how the animal has more sensitivity in a whisker. The walrus is more sensitive than the human animal. The thimble protects the finger from being pricked, removes us from sensitivity. The walrus whisker adorning the thimble takes over in an extension of sensitivity. The work plays with pinpointing our vision simply onto these two small, familiar elements.

A.S.: You make the dead and decayed beautiful. In *Relic*, 2009, a decaying shark skin is layered with 21 carat gold leaf. Why do you think you are drawn to the unbeautiful?

D.C.: The idea of decay exists in the work but not actual decay. Preservation halts the process of decay and the vulnerable skins are treated with respect. Unlike the washed up dead whale [*Whale*, 2011] that was carried by bulldozer from the beach to my field and laid there for four years while the meat rotted from the bones, the shark skin in *Relic* was a shark I got from a fishmonger when shark was still allowed to be sold for food. I skinned and pickled it in taxidermy solution. That process is grotesque but the finished skin is no longer decaying, but lined with pure gold.

With the shark in *Relic*, I was in some way trying to imitate life in that it's suspended on wires in a swimming position. It is so wrinkly and desiccated but you are left with the empty space of the animal and you are obviously aware of that absence and the skin which once held such a fabulous animal.

Relic has a relationship to past beauty or past blessedness, like a bone relic from an



Dorothy Cross

Thimble, 2002, thimble and walrus whisker, 4.7 x 6 in. Image courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery © Cross

ancient saint. It is an incongruous relic but powerfully beautiful and perhaps sacred. The shark is so abhorred and is being killed off by finning and over fishing.

The volume of the absence of the body is very present in *Relic*, which to me is more powerful than taxidermy. There's a confusion with taxidermy; sometimes the viewer has difficulty looking at taxidermy because of the connection to trophy-ism. I've seen taxidermy artworks in the art world that I don't think have

considered this problem. You have to be very acute about relationship and positioning of taxidermy, otherwise it is just a dead animal. Like for instance placing a teat on just anything without considering how its combination will shift meaning. As a viewer it can be hard to discern what is significant and what isn't.

A.S.: Your detailed sculptures of sharks, crabs and fingers look very life-like, what is your process?



Dorothy Cross

Relic, 2009, Portbeagle shark, 21-carat gold leaf, 23.6 27.6 x 71.7 in. Image courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery © Cross

Lost wax casting. For *Everest Shark* I drove the frozen shark to the foundry where a rubber mould was made of it, a hollow wax mould cast from this, then the wax is replaced with molten bronze. It's a beautiful ancient process. The topographically accurate Everest sculpture that rises like a fin was made using a CAD machine.

A.S.: What is the history of the sharks that were used for "Everest Shark" and "Basking Shark Currach" 2013?

D.C.: How I come to get the sharks is an adventure, the other adventure is what to do with them in the studio.

I work with the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group. People come and tell me if an animal dies on shore and I go take samples and send them to Dublin so they can assess scientifically why it died, or I document where it died. I asked the group to let me know if they knew of a Basking Shark that had washed on shore. So when they phoned I raced to the location, as

the weather was hot, and there was the shark surrounded by picnickers. It was so heavy it took eight of us, including the holiday makers, to lift it into the back of my car. I asked someone from the Natural History Museum to help me skin it and store it in their freezer.

When I wanted a Blue Shark for *Everest Shark*, and I won't and have a shark killed for my work it's against my principles, a friend of a friend knew of a fishmonger who had had one in his freezer for several years. The shark had started to decompose a little so there were undulations in the skin which mirrored the topography of the Everest sculpture, which in the work is where the dorsal fin would be.

A.S.: A mountain and a shark do not initially appear to have much in common, what was the idea behind *Everest Shark*?

D.C.: The passage of time. The physical animal relationship to the planet and the evolution of the shark. The shark existed 400 million years



Dorothy Cross

Everest Shark, 2013, bronze, 11 x 72.8 x 33.5 in. Image courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery © Cross

ago and it evolved to its present state 100 million years ago. Mount Everest only rose to its peak 60 million years ago. Yet sharks are caught, their fins cut off then thrown back into the ocean just so a few Chinese people can have shark fin soup at a wedding. It's horrifying and frustrating. It's like Oscar Wilde said...can we not appreciate the stars until we are lying in the gutter looking up?

A.S.: What have you been working on recently?

D.C.: I was commissioned by Lismore Arts, County Waterford, Ireland to make *Eye of Shark*, which continues my use of shark and gold. It's comprised of 12 rusted Victorian bathtubs lined with scum lines of pure gold. Set into the wall of the room is a small marble form, like a tabernacle, with a glass in the middle and behind that is a little gold container which contains an eye of a shark. The eye is the

epicentre of the work, a small relic. It was shown in a little Unitarian church in Lismore and later at Modern Art Oxford, where the bath tubs were surrounded by beautiful simple wall drawings by Sol LeWitt.

I recently read that scientists have aged the Greenland shark by counting the lens growth in their eyes; they can live for 500 years. The lenses grow on top of each other showing age like rings in a tree, a very beautiful relationship with time and vision that I had not known when I put the eye of the shark in the tabernacle.



Dorothy Cross

Virgin Shroud, 1993, cow hide, satin train, steel structure, 79.1 x 31.9 x 47.2 in. Image courtesy the artist and Kerlin Gallery
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Angela Singer is an English artist based in New Zealand. For the past 20 years her mixed media art has explored the human-animal relationship. Her art invites a new way of seeing and thinking about the animal. She is concerned with the ethical and epistemological consequences of humans using nonhuman life and the role that humans play in the exploitation and destruction of animals and our environment. She sees the boundaries separating other species from humans as permeable.

Dorothy Cross is considered one of Ireland's leading international artists. Working with diverse media, which includes sculpture, photography, video and installation, she represented Ireland at the 1993 *Venice Biennale*. Central to her work as a whole are themes of sexual and cultural identity, personal history, memory, and the gaps between the conscious and subconscious.

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