



Cork-born artist DOROTHY CROSS uses sculpture, video and installation to explore themes of nature, identity and memory. Her work has caused controversy for its sexual and political content. Now based on the west coast of Ireland, a new book, *Connemara*, reflects on her past decade of output.

You studied at Crawford College of Art and Design, Leicester Polytechnic and San Francisco Art Institute. Which had the biggest impact on your art?

They all did in their own way. But in San Francisco, we'd go look at Rembrandts in the De Young Museum one day a week, or go off in wrecked cars to the desert at the weekends. That's a good mixture of art and nature.

Why come home?

Politically, I didn't want to be in America. It was the Reagan era and it was very disillusioning.

You trained as a jeweller initially.

I did, and it gave me an attention to detail. The work started getting so sculptural you could hardly wear it.

You had a studio in Poolbeg Power Station when you returned. What was that like?

I worked there for four years, in an old pump house by the water. It's a fantastic building, very sculptural. It's a shame it's been left to rack and ruin.

Do you have an opinion on the plans to redevelop it?

They've left it too late. It's gotten to the point where they can't restore it now. The power station would have made a fantastic museum of modern art – like the Turbine Hall.

What work did you create there?

For my first big show in Philadelphia, Power House, I used a lot of stuff I found there that had been left by the workers. The workers had pride – they painted their lockers in gorgeous tones of pale blue and green. We took the old control panels to the show and back again. At that point in time – the transition between functioning and not – it was almost like an underwater wreck. It was very beautiful.

Have you always worked with found objects?

It was gradual. I think it started when I came back to Ireland. I was a printmaker in San Francisco, I did my MFA in etching and lithography – I loved the physical process of it, etching onto stone or metal. I tend to move from one thing to another to another.

How do you begin a piece – is it inspired by an object, an image, a story?

It's always something different. It can come from a space. I recently came across a 17th-century Methodist church that had windows with rounded tops, exactly the same shape as a set of bath tubs I'd found in a junkyard in Galway. They'd been sitting in my studio for about a year before I started working on them in gold. **Does that happen often – holding onto an object until you know how to use it?** Yes. Sometimes for 20 or 30 years. And yet I don't have a massive collection of stuff – I know what to keep somehow.

One of your most famous works, Virgin Shroud, used your grandmother's bridal veil, placing it over a cow's udder.

A lot of my work is about beauty, even

though people might be disturbed by a cow's skin or a shark's skin or a piece of skull. The overriding thing is beauty. Sometimes you have to tame the brutality by contrasting it with something beautiful, like silk – silk that had covered my grandmother's head when she was 23, getting married in London. What matters is some kind of softening of the brutality of the cow, because there is of course a brutality there, that the animal has been slaughtered. But hopefully by presenting the animal in this way, it gives it a power that it might not have had in its other life. That's up for argument of course.

Has anyone ever taken issue with the way you use animal remains in your work?

A few times. I once wrote to Mary Daly, a famous American feminist, when I was trying to put together a book about the cow's udder. She wrote back saying it was an abomination. I had kind of expected it, but I still hoped she might contribute.

Much of the conversation around your work refers to its wit and humour. Is that something art needs?

It depends on the work. You wouldn't be roaring laughing in a Rothko chapel. Some of my works have been very funny, like the stilettos – but then they had a serious connection to foot binding.

Do you think you have become less politicised over the course of your career?

I don't know. What is politicised, in a way? My earlier work was more about sexuality. Somebody said to me the other day that my later work is the same but more refined. What does that mean?! Maybe it's more distilled. When I was very young, after I had done a lot of work about the church that was very blatant, a critic wrote that it was so hostile it became bland. She was right. Blandness isn't interesting.

Do you still go to lots of exhibitions?

I think there's a responsibility to do that. But I also think it's important to go and look at the pyramids, or go and walk on the beach. It's all part of the same cycle.

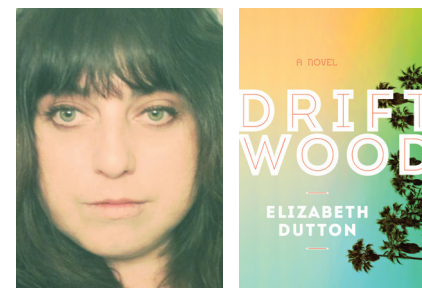
You have a show coming up at IMMA, which I understand is not your own work, but an exhibition of other objects put together by you.

Yes. It's called Trove, and is a selection of works from the Natural History Museum, the National Museum, IMMA, Crawford, the Museum of Country Life. The things I'm borrowing are really varied. ■ ROSA ABBOTT *Connemara is out now. Available from selected galleries and Artisan House Editions, Letterfrack; www.artisanhouse.ie.*



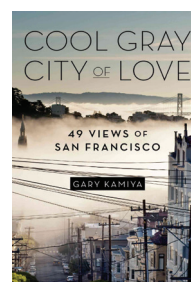
BEDSIDE TABLE

What is **ELIZABETH DUTTON** reading?



Elizabeth Dutton left her native California for Scotland, where she achieved a place on the University of Glasgow's prestigious creative writing Masters programme. Now based in the rural Deep South of America, Dutton's first novel *Driftwood* (out November 20) explores the (mis)fortunes of Clem Jasper, whose rock star father unexpectedly dies playing ping-pong.

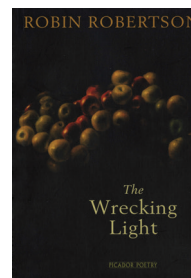
Following a mysterious set of instructions left in her father's will, Jasper takes to the open road and discovers the redemptive powers of the Californian landscape. *Skyhorse Publishing, €19.50.*



COOL GRAY CITY OF LOVE

by Gary Kamiya

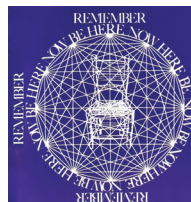
San Francisco draws visitors from all over the world, and enchanted tourists pass through in a never-ending blur. Tony Bennett sings of leaving his heart there, but I feel at times my soul resides there, too. It's not easy being so far from my hometown. When I get homesick, I can vicariously visit through Kamiya's 49 tales of various locations and points in time throughout San Francisco. His writing is honest, engaging, humorous and poignant in this one-of-a-kind look at a treasure of a city. *Bloomsbury, €15.75.*



THE WRECKING LIGHT

by Robin Robertson

Robertson's fourth poetry collection is a master work filled with contemplations on nature, memory, place and mythology. He tackles topics that leave readers shocked, inspired, uncomfortable, wistful, and any other emotion one can think of in the grand spectrum. I am particularly fond of *At Roane Head*, an examination and reworking of the selkie myth. There is something incredibly earthy and real in the details of this mystical tale, a juxtaposition I really appreciate. I love to be challenged by art, and this collection delivers. *Picador, €14.50.*



BE HERE NOW

by Ram Dass

I always keep this book close at hand; it has been a source of knowledge and solace for me as long as I can remember. The illustrations are fantastically out there and I adore the roughness of the natural paper upon which it is printed. A favourite page of mine is the one that discusses the fact that one cannot force the snake to shed its skin – everything must happen in its own time. As a terribly impatient person, I need this reminder frequently. *Lama Foundation, €28.99.*