



## ‘SOMETHING MORE EXCITING THAN ORDINARY LIVING’ THE ART OF KATHY PRENDERGAST



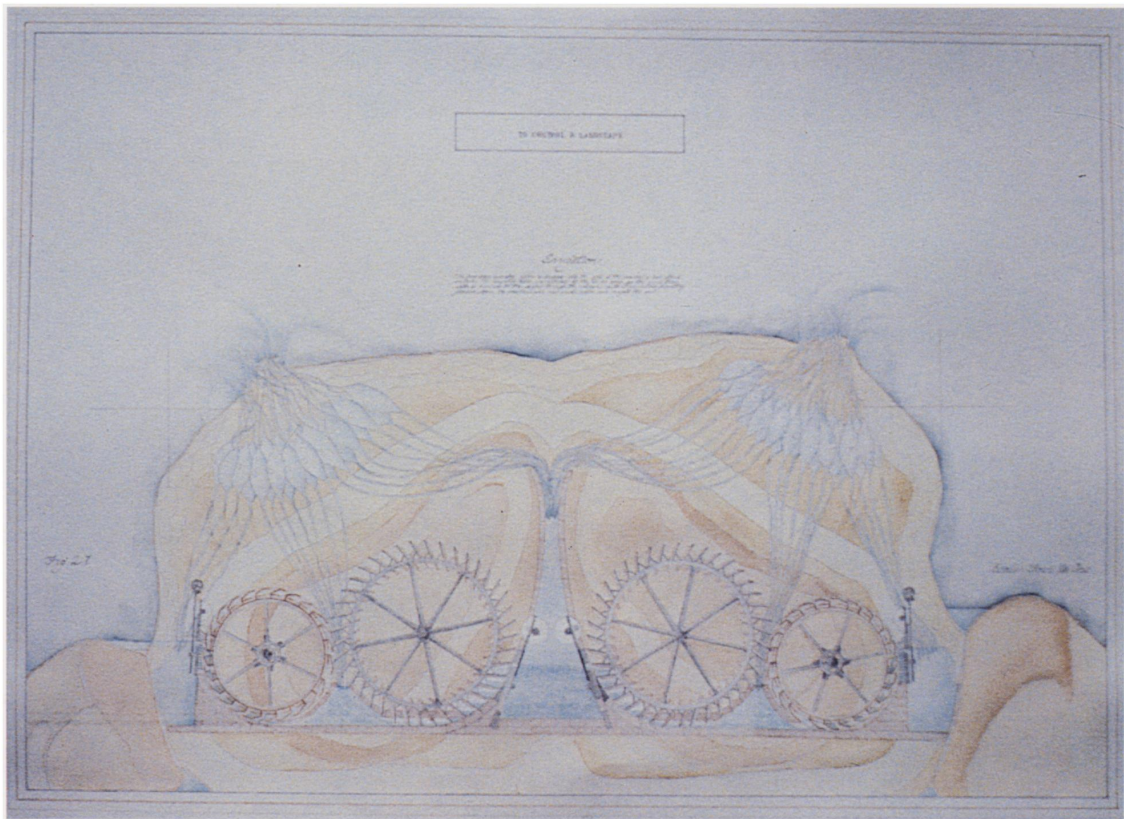
2. Kathy PRENDERGAST *Waiting*. Fibreglass, resin, parquet flooring and sewing patterns, 184 x 230 x 122cm, 1980. (Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery). ‘The first piece I made was in my third year in college, a piece called *Waiting*. It wasn’t a feminist statement. I think I was just curious about my mother’s generation...’

Kathy Prendergast (born 1958) studied at the National College of Art and Design before obtaining an MA in sculpture at the Royal College of Art in London where she now lives and works. She has exhibited in various international exhibitions including ROSC 1988 and the Venice Biennale in 1995 where she won the Premio Duemilia (Best Artist under 40). In 1997, the Tate Gallery, London will have an exhibition of her work in progress.

### John McBratney in conversation with a prize-winning Irish artist

I was born in 1958 in Dublin. Art at school was the only thing at which I was any good. I remember the first Rosc. I don’t know what age I was but my parents brought me. Also I remember in the Municipal Gallery there was what I think was a Picasso – maybe it wasn’t, I don’t know now, I must go back. I remember being completely amazed seeing it. We used to go on a Sunday. I remember being amazed that there was something more

1. (Opposite). Kathy PRENDERGAST photographed with *Hand Drawing*. Pastel on paper, 210 x 194cm. 1989. ‘The drawing is about eight or nine feet high. The idea was to make it so huge that the drawing of it was landscape -so its about scale...’



3. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *To Alter A Landscape*. Watercolour and ink on paper, 76 x 56cm. 1983. 'I had photographs of a female figure exactly to scale. I took a cast of the torso which I sliced and then had a cross-section. So *To Alter a Landscape* is a cross-section across the breast...'



4. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *Seabed*. (with detail on right) Mixed media, 122 x 244 x 122cm. 1980. 'As a result of all the bits of poetry I was reading, I noticed there was a lot of landscape/body metaphor...*Seabed*...is a jumble of loads of lines of other people's poems.'

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exciting than ordinary living.

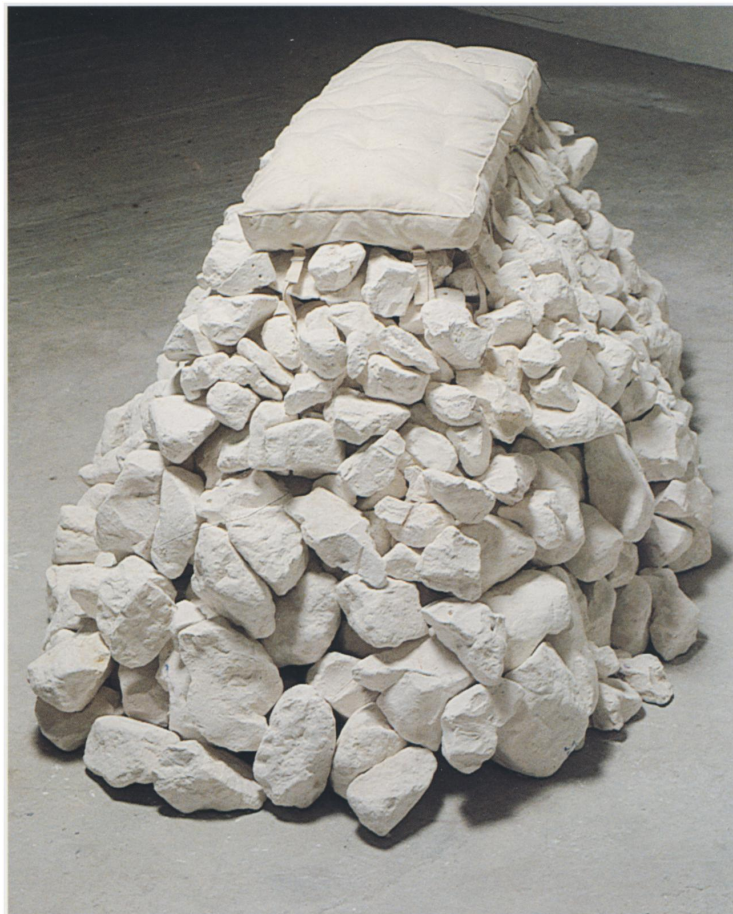
I went to the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in 1976 after failing the first time. It was then an act of desperation to get in and out of secretarial work which seemed to be the only other option open to me. So when I arrived there I was very hungry and desperate to be good at something. When I left in 1980 I went straight into RTE (the Irish radio and television station) to train as a TV cameraman. I left after a year and a half and went back to NCAD to do a final year – a degree course. After that I came to London to do an MA in the Royal College of Art from 1983 to 1986.

During my time at NCAD I read a lot of poetry. Seamus Heaney for instance – it was nothing theoretical. I was reading anything. I think that is what started to inform the work. Also looking at a whole lot of family photographs we had at home. Photographs of people waiting, my parents at a dress dance in the early '50s and all the women were in front and the men behind. I think the old photographs were a sort of point of reference of what the family history was before we were born. Although at the time I wasn't aware of what those things were or why I was using them.

The first piece I made was in my third year in college, a piece called *Waiting* (Fig. 2). It wasn't a feminist statement. I think I was just curious about my mother's generation. My mother spent a lot of her time sewing and the dressmaking patterns are like an identikit for a woman. It's as if these set patterns you could be moulded into. So in a way that was my sort of language or something which I was aware of. But patterns are very beautiful things. They are on tissue paper, they're like nothing but they are so strong. Those three figures in *Waiting* could have come from those particular patterns. I remember finally in third year making the piece and having a huge sense of relief that I had actually made a proper piece of sculpture.

I'm always very grateful to NCAD to have allowed me time. Nowadays on a course you wouldn't last two years not making something. I did make things that were all disasters along the way but I think that space of being left to myself was the best thing anyone could have given me – time to mature.

When I came to London the way the course was run I did produce all the time and nothing exists of that work, well some of it does but – I would be happier if it didn't. I think it's only in



5. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *A Dream of Discipline*. Chalk and fabric, 120 x 255 x 135cm. 1989. 'I was trying to use landscape without it being a very literal thing with the maps like Irish cairns...'



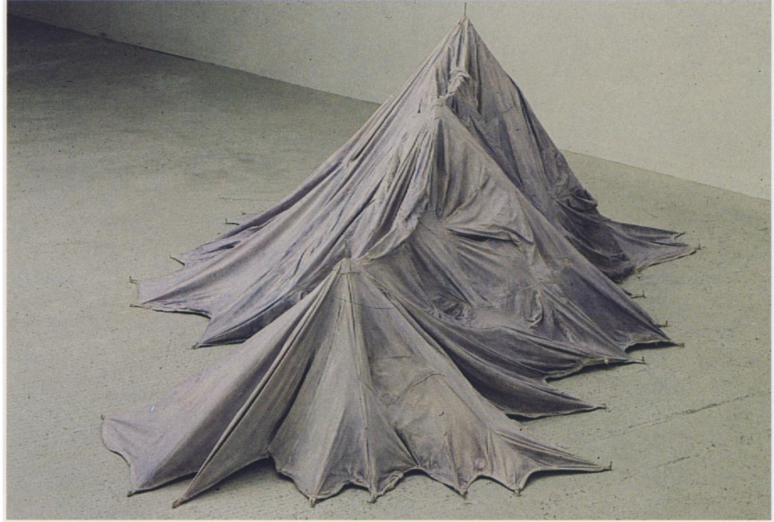
6. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *Another Country*. Chalk on ink, 107 x 61 x 670cm. 1988. '...after a fallow time I slowly started to make work that was dealing with maps and landscape again. *Another Country* – a stone piece – the map idea was coming back...'

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7. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *City Drawing*. Pastel on paper, 210 x 194cm. 1990. '...I was probably trying to use mapping without it being a map of something...'



8. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *as small as a world and as large as alone*. Fabric and tent poles, 137 x 382 x 256cm. 1989. 'The piece is one of those weird pieces which didn't work as a piece but it is the key into the past work and the work I'm doing now.'



9. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *Land*. Canvas, paint and tent poles, 234 x 620 x 358cm. 1990. '*Land* is an important piece because people kept asking me where it was exactly and I kept saying it's not -it's a tent.'

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the last five years I have decided not to worry whether something takes ages and not to worry about not making stuff. It seems to work better for me.

I was thinking about *Seabed* (Fig. 4) while I was making *Waiting*. I made a little cup and saucer out of papier maché which in fact is a little detail on the table in *Seabed* the year before and painted it as an Ordnance Survey Map. As a result of all the bits of poetry I was reading, I noticed there was a lot of landscape/body metaphor and I wrote them down in a notebook. There were loads of them. All the roads in *Seabed* were written on. So it's a jumble of loads of lines of other people's poems. I thought it was almost like a diary of a person. That's what a map almost is. It's almost like a documenting or a diary of the land but when you look at a map it doesn't really explain to you what the land is like. It doesn't have that same feeling. It's not like looking at a film of the land.

It is like a code doesn't tell you if it's a really beautiful mountain. That's what I like about maps, they don't really tell you what the place is like. In a way I suppose people are like that as well. Although maps are giving you all the information they are still concealing the reality. The thing that strikes me about *Seabed* now is that it was really about someone being isolated or being solitary.

When I started doing the *Body/Map* series which was about three years after *Seabed*, I wanted to make something that got under the surface of the figure. It's ironic because the drawings are two dimensional and *Seabed* is three-dimensional. With the *Body/Map* drawings I had photographs of a female figure exactly to scale. I took a cast of the torso which I sliced and then had a cross-section. So *To alter a landscape* (Fig. 4) is a cross-section across the breast. They are exactly the right size to the figure it was taken from. In a way my approach was a lot more academic than *Seabed* where the map was more freely painted and there is, in some ways, greater freedom in that. But with these others I was trying to talk about the underneath or the inside and use that language of landscape like illustrations in medical textbooks or in an encyclopedia for technical things. So the *Body/Map* was about the surface, if you cut through the figure, and the external mechanical things that can change the landscape. People thought the mechanical things were male imagery. I can't say 'yes' or 'no' but it wasn't a conscious thing at the time. I was really seduced by the quality of those prints in encyclopedias, the way they are so clear but at the same time very unclear as well. Like the London underground map, it's clear as to how to get from A to B but the map doesn't represent anything of the real location – on the map some of the stations are close together when in fact they are miles apart and then stations that appear far apart on the map are actually just

around the corner from one another in reality. To make something clear, it can't be like what it really is.

I came to London in 1984. I found it really refreshing. While I was in college here I spent three years welding, you know, doing stuff that maybe I should have been doing on my BA course in NCAD. Then after a fallow time I slowly started to make work that was dealing with maps and landscape again. *Another Country* (Fig. 4) – a stone piece – the map idea was coming back. The lines were cross-hatched on the stones so in a way it was a map on the stone. It was still something imaginary in the same way that *Seabed*,

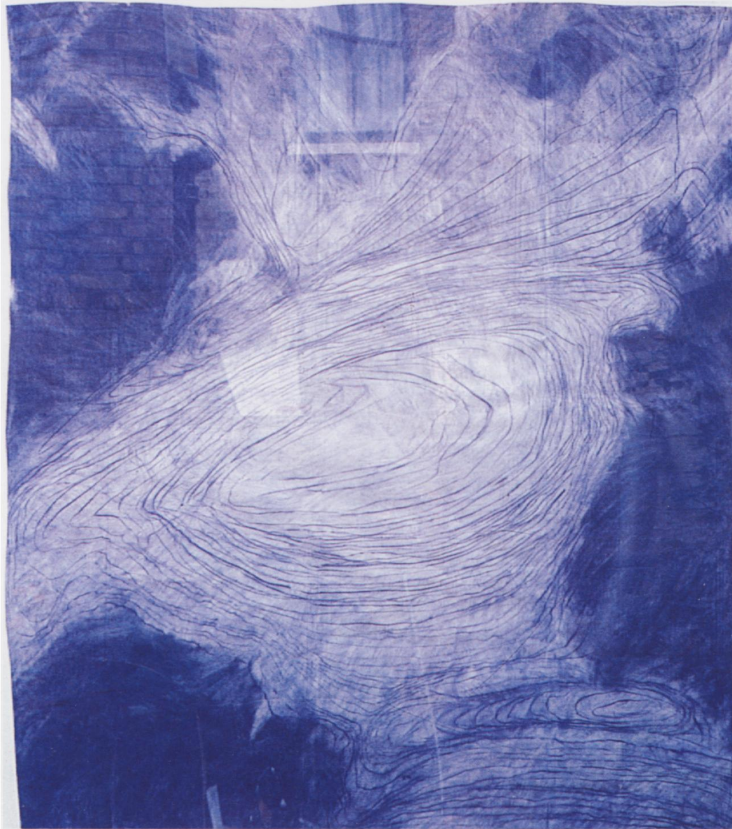


10. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *Sleep*. Stone and cloth, 20 x 30 x 15cm. 'The title *Sleep* came from the fact that it was a very static piece but also a peaceful piece and in a way it did look like a sleeping head on a pillow possibly...'

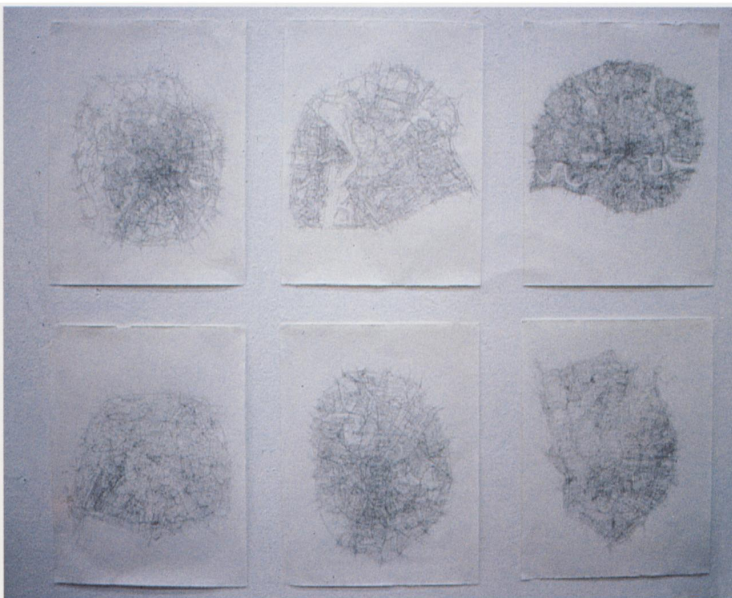
the map drawings and the watercolours are imaginary landscapes. It didn't have that reference point of the body which was something I did have to take on board – why was I using a female body and mapping it. In a way *Another Country* was using those images without the female figure and seeing if it worked or how it would work without that background of ... I was aware at that stage that using a female figure can be seen as feminist or whatever.

Then a *Dream of Discipline* (Fig. 5) came a year later. It was the single bed image like in *Seabed*. I was trying to use landscape without it being a very literal thing with the maps like Irish cairns, well Celtic as much as Irish. The *Sleep* (Fig. 10) piece is a bit like a mattress that was wedged in between two stones. It's

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11. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *Ocean Drawing*. Pastel on paper, 206 x 192cm. 1990. 'Ocean Drawing and City Drawing were huge things made small; Leaf Drawing and Hand Drawing were small things made huge...'



12. Kathy PRENDERGAST. *City Drawings*. (part of the series). Pencil on paper, each drawing 24 x 32cm. From 1992 and continuing. 'The drawings are maybe the size of a small face so in a way they are like portraits.'

funny because that piece happened completely by accident. Somehow the two stones just fitted together and I put the wadding in between them and they reminded me of those beautiful Brancusi oval heads. The title *Sleep* came from the fact that it was a very static piece but also a peaceful piece and in a way it did look like a sleeping head on a pillow possibly – but it was also the last piece I made in that series of stone pieces.

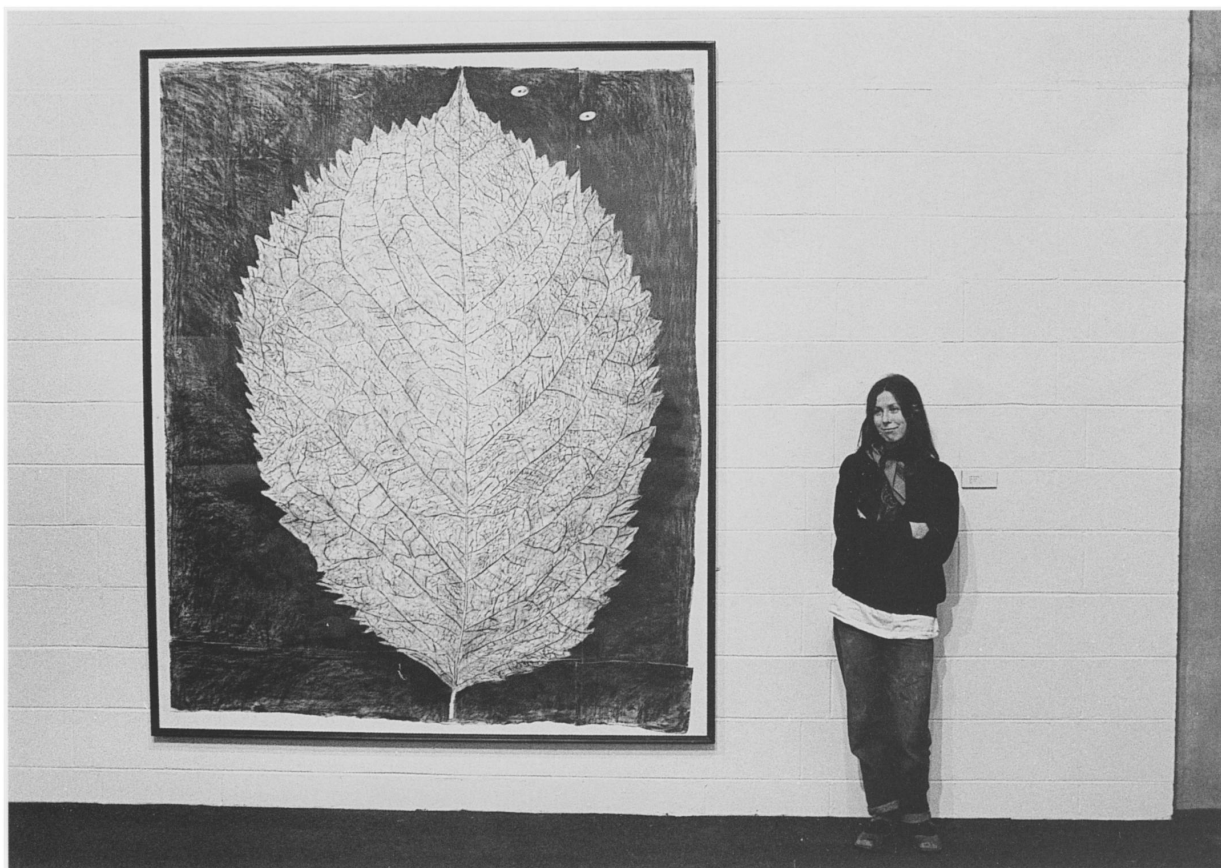
At the end of 1989 I made *Hand Drawing* (Fig. 1) and *Leaf Drawing* (Fig. 13). They are landscape in nature and then *City Drawing* (Fig. 12) and *Ocean Drawing* (Fig. 11). I think I did them during November, December, January, February. They are a return to the personal geography but also trying to make them, in the case of *Hand Drawing*, look like a drawing of a hand. These drawings were about eight feet or nine feet high. The idea was to make them so huge that the drawing of them was landscape – so it's about scale and always I think the real dilemma about scale is little things – big or big things – little. So *Leaf Drawing* and *Hand Drawing* were small things made huge and then *City Drawing* and *Ocean Drawing* were huge things made small. So all four were almost the same size as I wanted them to be seen in the same way and *Hand Drawing* and *Leaf Drawing* almost have the same imprint – the same mass.

I was probably trying to use mapping without them being maps of something. In *Ocean Drawing*, the ocean is like the spacing between contour lines drawn from nautical charts, and in *City Drawing*, the city is almost like a living cell or little microcosm. That idea has carried on. I was starting to use the mapping imagery again, not consciously at the time. I wasn't actually aware that it was a return to the map type imagery.

'as small as a world and as large as alone' (Fig. 8) is a line from an e e cummings' poem called *maggie and millie and mollie and may*, it's a most beautiful poem. The piece is one of those weird pieces which didn't work as a piece but it is the key into the past work and the work I'm doing now. I decided I would make a tent that was like a mountain and this tent was something I could carry myself on my back and I could construct it anywhere. It was my own landscape, my own history, my own emotional baggage – whatever, and also the scale. It is a one-man tent and it was on the scale of those one-man tents you can buy which conceptually is right but as regards a piece of sculpture it's the wrong scale. That is its problem. It's too small and didn't give the sense of anything so I feel quite attached and defensive about

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13. Kathy PRENDERGAST PHOTOGRAPHED WITH *Leaf Drawing*. Pastel on paper, 210 x 194cm. 1989. 'It is landscape in nature...a return to the personal geography...a small thing made huge...'

it because it's almost like my coming home piece. I didn't paint maps on it either which I think is another reason why it didn't work.

In *Land* (Fig. 9) I thought I'd remake the tent but on a big scale. I think subconsciously I'd been trying not to paint maps on work and I just realised it had to have all that detail, all that literal content on it for it to work which was brilliant because there was a reason for it. I painted all the roads, the dips that went down were valleys and the bits that went up were the mountains and it was painted like an Irish Ordnance Survey Map using the grading to get the browns. It made me realise I actually could have made it into a particular shape, like it's not the shape of Ireland or anywhere else but it did work.

*Land* is an important piece because people kept asking me where was it exactly and I kept saying it's not – it's a tent. From people asking me where it was made me question why was I making lots of places that didn't exist. I thought what if I started to make maps of places that really do exist and that's where the *City Drawings* (Fig. 12) have come from. They started in 1992. I started these really small map drawings of capital cities. They are maybe the size of a small face so in a way they are like portraits.

By making them that size they could be imaginary because you do not know what it is anymore and when you see 180 of them in a row you might recognise London because we might recognise the line of the Thames. But very few of the cities have a strong geographic feature so I could throw in a few imaginary drawings and no one would know. But it is like they are all imaginary because none of us will ever get to them all anyway. So what is real and unreal is just what touches on your own life or what we get, for instance, through the radio or television.

What I hope is that when someone starts looking at the *City Drawings* they get more and more involved. Get sucked in and at that stage the reality doesn't exist anymore. Someone said why don't I get all the maps of the cities and put them on the wall but that is the ordinary. I think for a piece of art to work it has to have an element of the extraordinary – a transformation because then it becomes more than what it has come from. Sometimes you have to know from where it has come because that enriches what it now is but if there is no transformation then there is nothing.

JOHN McBRATNEY is a barrister, an enthusiast of contemporary art, and sometime collector.