

Artist's Takeover, September 2022:
Kathy Prendergast



Waiting (1979) Hugh Lane Gallery collection

The work 'Waiting' was inspired by photographs of my parents at Dublin Corporation dress dances before they married. My mother, then called Angela Nelson was 21 years old in these photos, recognizable but not quite yet the person that I grew up with, a sort of unknowable peer. I also was 21 years old when I made this piece. This artists' takeover article is in deference to her.



My Mum sewed every garment of clothing that we wore. She sewed the dresses she wears in these photographs. She sewed beyond the world that was immediately around her, a form of escape, of building a more creative world than the one designated to her. So loved were these clothes that they had specific names - the Grecian (photo below on right), the Tangerine, the Cossack - my sister's Confirmation outfit inspired by Dr Zhivago and an immense source of jealousy for me. They were made with as much care, skill and imagination as any haute couture garments produced at the time. She was a housewife, caring for our Dad and four children and doing it with immense style and creativity. This is the 'Waiting' that the title refers to; the age that she was in the photograph and that I was when I made the piece is one of dreaming, of imagining the world that you are stepping into, the possibilities that it holds.



In 1972 my Mum won a competition run by the Irish Countrywoman Association to make a woolen winter coat. She developed a technique involving crocheting a fitted coat and wove coloured wool through the holes, creating a tartan, perhaps the first Irish wool woven in suburban Dublin. All this was done in the evenings - us all in the same room, our Dad reading the newspaper and us doing our homework or watching telly. In fact, I remember her armchair positioned beside the lamp so she could use the flex from the lamp as a base to sew the wool around to make her 'fur' collar. Fabric, wool, the female body and the skill of imaging form and cutting patterns, the buzz of the sewing machine and zzzzz of the knitting machine were the background to growing up in our house, shaping the way in which I approach my work. Her coat was displayed in the window of Brown Thomas, then Switzers, on Grafton Street for a month. This was a great source of pride for us all, a validation and a step into the beyond.

In this time, women who worked in the public sector were not allowed to keep their jobs once they married so when I made 'Waiting' part of what I was thinking of was the enforced invisibility of women in Irish life and perhaps by my Mum making the coat and entering it into the competition

was her way of saying “I am here” and having a space in the world outside of home. It is now in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland, Country Life, Co. Mayo.

Sybil Connolly, the Dublin based fashion designer, entrepreneur, innovator, pioneer put Irish fashion on the map in the 50s and 60s was known for creating fashion from Irish linen, Báinín, Irish crochet and Carrickmacross lace, transforming them into radical forms, pushing the limits of what cloth could do. She had an international fashion brand with Spence Bryson, a handkerchief manufacturer from the North. Sybil Connolly remembered squeezing the linen in her palm for the first time and when it sprung back crushed, it prompted the idea of making crushed linen a feature rather than a disadvantage.

“A challenge invariably makes one creative; after pondering the question for some time and in conjunction with the workroom staff, it was decided to experiment to see if we could develop a process that would permanently crush or pleat the linen and so make a feature of the problem rather than an insurmountable setback. It took eight months, during which time we put many theories to the test, before we came up with the correct solution. The process we decided on still remains our secret.’ The pleated linen was backed with taffeta and could be “packed into a small duffel bag and emerge unscathed” according to Harper’s Bazaar in June 1958.

With this she achieved forms that were radical and transgressive, yet deeply feminine and deeply Irish. Unlike Fortuny or Madame Gres who used pleats vertically to drape and accentuate the female form, Sybil Connolly used her pleats horizontally with vertical piping to give the garment its own structure rather than relying on the body and thus giving the garment a sculptural quality. Looking at these dresses reminds me of a seascape or geological strata. The materiality of my work is informed by these transformations, the ability for materials to be metamorphosed through their own inherent qualities.

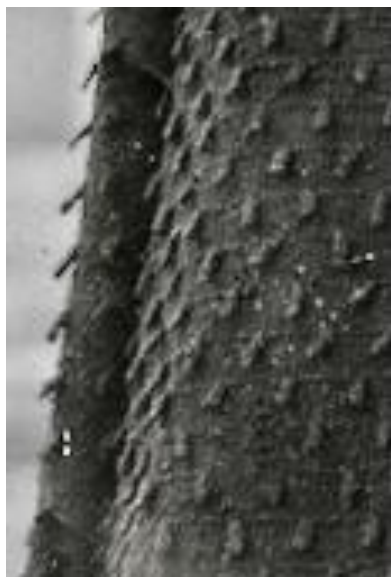


Timeless. Gillian Anderson wearing a Sybil Connolly 60's dress for the Baftas in 2012.

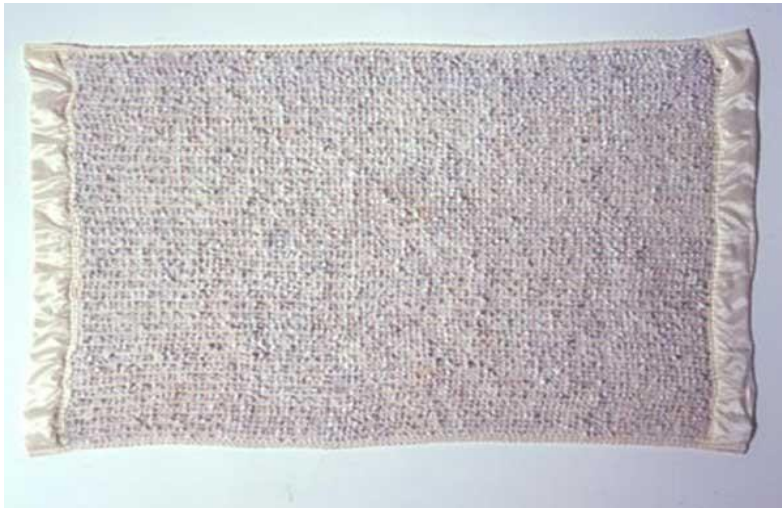
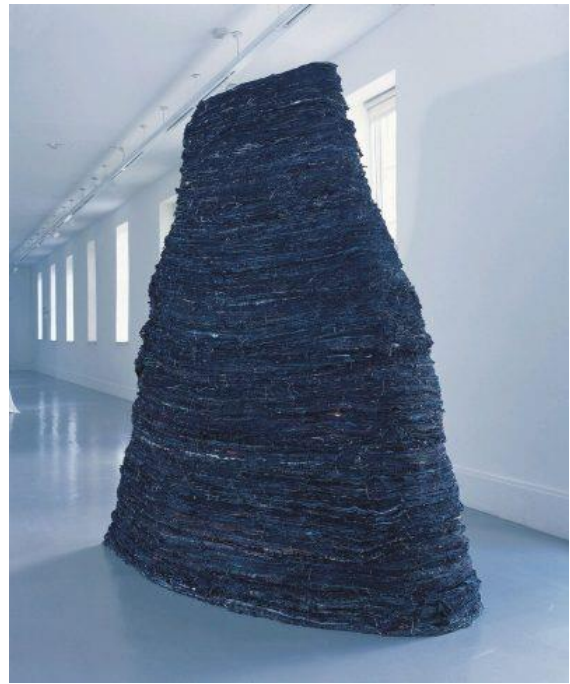
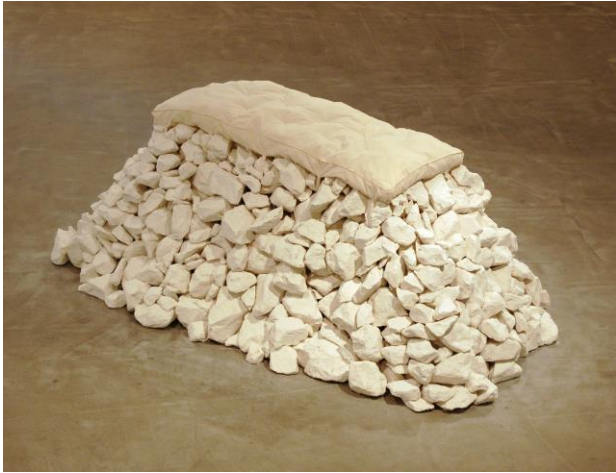


Gert Hay-Edie pioneer and revolutionary weaver collaborated with Sybil Connolly in producing very soft tweeds that had a physicality and texture that she could use in a way that gave her creations the form and sculptural quality that she was achieving with the pleated linen. Norwegian by birth and already having a considerable career abroad Gerd Hay-Edie settled in Northern Ireland and set up a workshop at Killowen at the foot of the Mourne Mountains. Inspired by the location of her weaving studio between the Mourne Mountains and Carlingford Lough which reminded her of the Norwegian Fjord, she drew upon the landscape, the geological forms and forces, to create weaves that were both ground-breaking and deeply traditional. Already having a considerable career with her woven rugs and upholstery fabrics, she produced a different range of tweeds for Sybil Connolly, the texture and form so reminiscent of the Irish landscape.

Here is the wonderful 'Shaggy Dog' fabric used and woven by Gerd Hey-Edie for the Sybil Connolly Winter Collection 1957:



Each of these women have inspired me: their skill and vision, their connection to their material and their power to both transcend and ground the world that it occupies.



List of images

- 1 Waiting Collection Hugh Lane Gallery 1979
- 2 My Mum, Dad and friends at a dress dance, Dublin Corporation early 50s
- 3 My Mum, Dad and friends at a dress dance, Dublin Corporation early 50s
- 4 My Mum in her Grecian Dress with my Dad
- 5 “Tweed and Fur” coat, made by my Mum in 1972 in Switzers window
- 6 Tweed and Fur coat, made by my Mum in 1972 in Switzers window
- 7 Sybil Connolly signature handkerchief linen dress mid 50s worn by Gillian Anderson 2012
- 8 Sybil Connolly dress mid 50s
- 9 Detail with piping
- 10 Linen pleating detail
- 11 Sybil Connolly coat made with Mourne Textiles cloth “Shaggy Dog”
- 12 Detail of Shaggy Dog fabric
- 13 Gerd Hay-Edie
- 14 A Dream of Discipline,
- 15 Stack, Cloth, string, paint and wood, 270 x 260 x 70 cm
- 16 Grave Blanket Woolen blanket and marble clippings, 08 x 71 cm 17 Grave Blanket detail

About the Artist

Kathy Prendergast represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1995 for which she won the Best Young Artist Award. She has also exhibited at the Yokohama Triennale, the Sydney Biennale; Modern Art Oxford, Camden Art Centre, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Drawing Center, New York; Kerlin Gallery, Dublin; and Peer, London. She is represented in the collections of the Tate Gallery; the British Government; the Cheekwood Museum of Art, Nashville; University Art Museum, Santa Barbara; the Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo; the Contemporary Museum, Honolulu; at IMMA and Hugh Lane Gallery; and numerous private collections in Ireland, Britain, and Europe.

Kathy Prendergast lives and works in London.