

JENNY HUSTON: THE SAD SECRET BEHIND OUR SLIM SOCIAL BUTTERFLIES

# IMAGE

JULY 2008

€4.25 (£2.95stg)



## UNDER THE SUN

LAST MINUTE TREATMENTS, TONING AND TANS

## THE TURF CLUB

IRELAND'S RACING DYNASTIES

THE GENDER DIVIDE  
YES, MEN ARE FROM MARS!

# MAKE A SPLASH

HOT SUMMER WARDROBES FOR HOME AND ABROAD

# THE ART OF EXISTENCE

**G**allery owner and *glam dame* Suzanne Macdougald opens the door to me in an unlikely attire – a scarf and curlers. It's 10.30am and her hairdresser has already been and gone from Suzanne's Co Kildare rural idyll. The IMAGE photographer is to arrive at noon, so we end up chatting in her bathroom while make-up artist Viv helps the former model prepare for her close-up. The formidable 62-year-old looks great even without make-up. What's her secret? "Stress," smiles the managing director of Powerscourt Townhouse's Solomon Gallery.

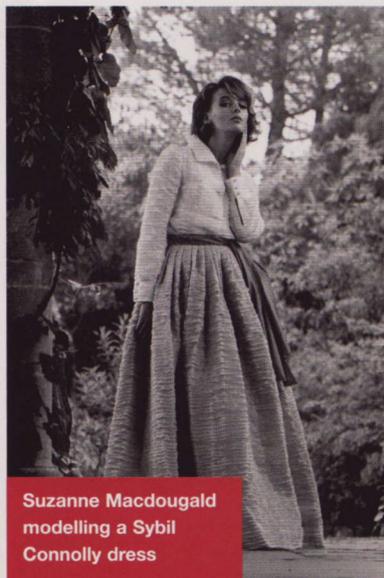
There has been plenty of that lately, leading up to the opening night of *The Secret Garden*, the culmination of her lifelong ambition to stage a major outdoor sculpture exhibition – Ireland's largest – showcasing over 150 sculptures by 60 artists in the magical setting of Dublin's Iveagh Gardens.

Barely a wet day in the job, Martin Cullen, new Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism, opened the exhibition on a splendid May evening. "We were expecting 300 people, and 800 turned up. It was a big social occasion." Approximately 1,000 people per day came to see the show during its short and hugely successful run. Macdougald was "somewhat bemused", however, to have overheard the enquiry, "who is sponsoring the show?" As the Solomon Gallery is a commercial gallery, the answer is "Nobody".

"Insurance and transport were gi-normous," she says. "The OPW [Office of Public Works] charged me a huge amount of money too." Then there was the transport. "Nobody realises the amount of physical work that goes on behind a show like that." Alongside award-winning garden designer Paul Martin, and Colm Finnegan's installation team, "myself and the girls worked like Trojans". Still, heavy labour aside, she enjoyed the process. "I love a challenge," she confesses, "and a project."

"I have been promoting sculpture since 1974. I was the only one who was doing it for years and years, and now it is coming into its own." Macdougald's initial 1974 show, in what became the Lad Lane Gallery (and doubled as home to herself and her young son Reza, who unsurprisingly grew up to become a painter), showcased work by Italian sculptor Enzo Plazzotta. A true "connector", Suzanne had met Plazzotta through a top British model, a mutual friend. From there, Macdougald went on to introduce Irish audiences to British sculpture by epic artists like Henry Moore, and to champion the work of up-and-coming Irish sculptors like her longtime friend Rowan Gillespie

Former model and one of Ireland's most respected gallery owners, Suzanne Macdougald talks to DEIRDRE MULROONEY about her eye for art and the long and winding path that led her to where she is today.



Suzanne Macdougald modelling a Sybil Connolly dress

(responsible for the visceral "Famine" sculptures on the Dublin Quays and in Toronto) and Michael Warren. Orla de Brí, Barry Flanagan, Bob Quinn, Patrick O'Reilly and Anthony Scott number among the roll-call of Irish sculptors whose work Macdougald promotes, and shows to its best advantage in her imaginative outdoor exhibitions.

Creating a buzz is something Macdougald has always excelled at. "In my career I've had an opening or a private view every three weeks. In all those years I have missed three openings." This stamina, and business acumen, can be traced back to 1967, when "I was responsible for opening the first discothèque in Dublin, Croc's, where L'Ecrivain is now." The enterprise, which she ran with her Iranian husband, was inspired by "wonderful clubs in London like Annabelle's and the Saddle Room".

Spotting a gap in the market, "there was nowhere smart and sophisticated like that in Dublin", Macdougald decided to do something about it. "It was very glam. But the licensing laws were extremely strict, so you couldn't serve alcohol after a certain time, and police would raid you constantly. All the drink would disappear off the table and you would end up with cups and saucers – as if we were serving teas and coffees, which everybody knew was complete rubbish. Eventually, we got raided and had to close down." It was around then that Macdougald co-hosted *Jackpot* with a virtually unknown Terry Wogan. "Irish television was in its infancy," she recalls. "It was a very amateurish-type quiz show." Nonetheless, starring on the country's one and only television station as Wogan's beautiful side-kick, Suzanne Macdougald fast became a household name.

She had already made a name for herself as an accidental model. "It was a job. I was at school, and I was sent on a self-improvement course," she says, rather self-deprecatingly. "The lady who ran it asked, 'Would you be interested in

doing some modelling?' I thought it was a ridiculous idea, but anyway, it came about." Macdougald, an equestrian enthusiast who had grown accustomed to riding her pony around Dundrum, was just 16. Her father, fondly known as "Mac", was a well-known vet, and subsequently went into fur-farming to become the biggest producer of mink and fox in Europe.

Despite the modelling, and the nightclubs, Suzanne's was a far cry from the world of Katy French. "Life in Dublin was very different then," she recalls. "There was one coffee bar. We used to live on spaghetti bolognese out of H Williams supermarket. We were much



PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDA BROWNLEE, ASSISTED BY CLAIRE BYRNE.  
CO-ORDINATED BY MEG DYKES/EEFF, MAKE-UP BY VIVIAN POMEROY.

more innocent.” She and her model contemporaries, who included Grace O’Shaughnessy and Hilary Frayne (owner, with her husband Galen Weston, of Brown Thomas and numerous chain stores, as well as 26th Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, Canada), did fashion shows around the country for the grand sum of £5. “They married well,” she jokes, feigning a sigh.

She’s not keen to talk about her own two-year marriage. In 1967, at 21, “I married an Iranian who was at university in England and his brother was at Trinity here. That was all a bit of a disaster, but I have a very beautiful son, Reza.” She sends me downstairs to fetch a photo of her cute little grandson, Matthew, in a pinstripe suit at the opening of *The Secret Garden*. He is one of three beautiful grandchildren she dotes on.

“Yes, it was very exotic,” she agrees, speaking of marrying an Iranian. “We didn’t know where Iran was, for goodness sake. People were very odd – ‘do come to the party, but don’t bring your boyfriend’. I remember that.”

Changing the subject, she draws my attention to an elegant framed thank-you note from Louis le Brocquy, complete with personalised peony watercolour, and then bids me to go into her bedroom, to have a peek at a black-and-white photograph of her willowy teenage self, modelling a Sybil Connolly outfit in the 1960s. Beside her bed I also find a photograph of her ten-year-old French granddaughter, Ambre, with her recently deceased great grandmother (Suzanne’s mother, Alice).

The eldest of five children, Macdougald holds family in great respect. Friends are important too. “I’ve been very lucky with my friends.” As for art, while there are no artists or curators in her family background, Suzanne seems to have a natural eye. The le Brocquy tapestry hanging in her stairwell is pretty special, and there’s a magnificent Richard Kingston cliff landscape on the upstairs landing, behind her dashing parents’ black-and-white 1940s wedding photograph. They met while working in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. Her father was flying Lancasters, her English mother was working as a dental hygienist. No wonder Suzanne couldn’t resist purchasing a Hughie O’Donoghue painting of a Lancaster recently (*his* father also flew Lancasters).

Macdougald attributes her love of art to her love of nature. Her own secret garden – where renovations are underway by a team of workmen – is proof. The morning of my visit, Suzanne’s brother, Colin, is also competing for her attention, borrowing a page from my notebook to illustrate the renovation options for her already charming back garden. The interior of her deceptive-from-the-outside, two-storey terraced house, is all soft cushions and Laura Ashley – not unlike a perfect doll’s house, opening out onto the garden, which has featured as a backdrop for her artists’ sculptures in gallery catalogues. She moved here from Dublin’s Havelock Square nearly ten years ago, where she was renowned for throwing elaborate supper parties.

I try and get her focus from where the new fountain is going to be, back onto her career in art. “The Lad Lane Gallery was a tiny gallery but it grew in stature over the years,” she recounts. However, the property was rented and, one day, her landlady decided to sell. Serendipitously, “this man walks in and says, ‘I’m Philip Solomon, and I’d like to open a gallery, and for you to run it.’ Nobody had ever offered me a job like that in my whole life. So I went to work for him for a year in 1981. In 1982, I bought it from him. Well, the bank

bought it. It took me about eight years to pay it off – 27 years ago.”

The first woman to own her own gallery in Ireland, “I was never taken seriously at the outset. I was ‘the blonde model’. People said, ‘who does she think she is?’” However, Macdougald didn’t allow that to prevent her establishing herself as a force to be reckoned with in the world of Irish contemporary art. Known for representational work as opposed to abstract or conceptual (she can’t stand the likes of Tracy Emin), “I’ve learned on a need-to-know basis,” she says. “Now, I have a very good relationship with my colleagues. I put collections together for people, so that gives me more reason to work with the other gallerists. I buy for people, put collections together, and I also look after collections.”

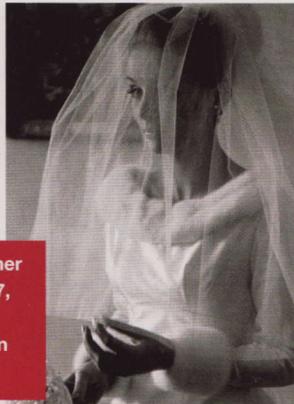
Suzanne relishes dealing. “I find that fascinating. I was in Sotheby’s and Christie’s a few weeks ago. That’s an area I love and that I would like to develop.” She was delighted to read in *The Financial Times* recently that “Irish art between 1976 and 2008 has increased in value by 1,000 per cent. Now that’s a better investment than property.”

“I’m totally self-taught, like Louis le Brocquy,” she says, laughing at the cheekiness of her own comparison. Suzanne is known for keeping her gallery artists under contract. “I learned the hard way. People who work in public institutions don’t have to make it pay,” she points out. “I do.” She takes immense pride in loaning a sculpture by Bernar Venet from *The Secret Garden* exhibition to IMMA for two years, and placing “the biggest Barry Flanagan sculpture ever in a public place” outside AIB Ballsbridge.

The time has come to whip her headscarf off. That done, she unrolls the curlers one by one, and shakes out blonde hair that barely touches her shoulders. “Oh, it’s too curly,” she mutters to herself, running her fingers through it, and smoothing it down.

Thanking Viv, she makes her way downstairs to the sitting room, where our photographer is waiting. Yes, she’s ready now for her close-up. She may look every inch the former model but, rest assured, Suzanne Macdougald is no dumb blonde. ■

RIGHT Suzanne on her wedding day, in 1967, and BELOW As a teenager, she was an avid horse rider



- Suzanne’s favourites** **Artists** Louis le Brocquy, Seán McSweeney, William Crozier, Mark Francis, Barry Flanagan  
**■ Up-and-coming Irish artists** Francis Matthews, Colin Martin, Colin Watson, Colin Davidson, Blaise Smith, Comhghall Casey, Mary Theresa Keown **■ Designers** Nicole Farhi, Armani, Catherine Deane, Vidler & Nixon; likes buying eveningwear in Kalu, Naas  
**■ Books** *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *Star of the Sea* by Joseph O’Connor (recent reads), historical novels **■ Music** Amy Winehouse, The Beatles, Leonard Cohen, classical music, pianist John O’Conor, Lyric FM in the car **■ Publications** Art periodicals and auction catalogues – Sotheby’s, Christie’s, Whyte’s  
**■ Pastimes** Travel, gardening, cooking, entertaining, making jam and chutney (“it’s therapeutic”) **■ Friends** Marguerite and Frank Flannery; Chryss and Tony O’Reilly; Christine and Patrick Ryall; Laura MacNaughton; Rowan and Hanne Gillespie, among others  
**■ Way to entertain** Food and wine with friends. Leaves the cooking to her sister, Jane, who is a professional cook. Loves arranging the table, and the flowers **■ Menu** Traditional Sunday lunch – roast lamb, pork or beef, with roast potatoes **■ Restaurants** Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud; Peplow’s; Cookes Café; Les Olives, Naas; Paul’s, Kilcullen **■ Museums** Musée d’Orsay, Paris; MoMA, New York **■ Skincare** Lancôme: night cream, eye cream, Platinéum hydroxy and calcium cream. “I have always looked after my skin and taken care to use good products” **■ Hair care** Kérastase. “Always use a good volumiser shampoo”