

IMMA reinstates a Modern Irish Master with Gerda Frömel: *A Retrospective*

10 April - 5 July 2015

The first contemporary retrospective of the work of Gerda Frömel opens at IMMA, The Irish Museum of Modern Art, on Thursday 9 April 2015. Born in Czechoslovakia in 1931 to a family of German descent, Frömel moved to Ireland in 1956 and lived here for the remainder of her life. An incredibly well-regarded artist in her lifetime, she exhibited to universal critical acclaim; however following her untimely death in 1975 her work was neglected and rarely seen. This exhibition of some one hundred sculptures, drawings, photographs and archive material brings her work back into critical consideration and reinstates Frömel as a master of Modern Irish Art.

Following her art education in Germany in the 1950s Frömel moved permanently to Ireland in 1955 with her new husband the sculptor Werner Schürmann whom she had met at Art School in Munich. On their arrival in Ireland Schürmann established one of the only foundries in the country, and began to cast their works in bronze.

Frömel participated in the *Irish Exhibition of Living Art* annually from 1956, aligning herself with the most innovative and vital artists in Ireland at the time. Brian Fallon, in *The Irish Times* of 1969 commented; "The small sculpture section on the whole is high in quality. Gerda Frömel is outstanding." Initially working in small scale these early works were cast in bronze and figurative in style. Even in this early stage of her career Frömel received significant commissions from Bord Fáilte (1960) and the Arts Council (1962), and an award from Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (1962).

Throughout the 1960s Frömel created works with real-life observations of life and nature. Her preference was for an uneven surface and works that appear highly finished from a distance, on closer inspection reveal deliberate machining marks and chips. In the late 1960s Frömel made a transition from cast bronze sculptures to works carved in marble, granite, and her favourite material – alabaster. She made use of simple forms: circles, lines and spirals to communicate her observations from nature, natural phenomena and the celestial, in particular, the moon and its reflection were denoted with the simplest of visual codes.

By the late 1960s Frömel was working in a much larger scale and in 1967 she commenced *Sails*, her most important commission to date, and the most ambitious public sculpture of its time in Ireland. Made for Carroll's Factory in Dundalk, Co Louth (now Dundalk Institute of Technology), a building designed by Scott Tallon Walker along lines set down by the architect Mies van der Rohe. The original idea was to commission a major sculpture from Henry Moore or Alexander Calder but the client insisted that an Irish artist be

commissioned. Frömel met with Ronald Tallon and proposed a mobile depicting sails for the site. The final stainless steel sculpture comprises three elements which resemble aircraft wings and proved Frömel's capacity to work on a monumental scale. It became emblematic of the building and can still be seen today.

In August 1975 the life of this extraordinary woman and talented artist was cut short when she died in a drowning accident. Among the artistic community the news of her untimely death at the age of 44 was greeted with shock. At the *Irish Exhibition of Living Art* that year a special display was made of her work and the catalogue included a tribute to her. A year later a substantial retrospective of Frömel's work was held at the Municipal Gallery, but her work has rarely been seen since, despite being championed by writers like Dorothy Walker.

Fortunately Frömel's work remains in key Irish National and Corporate Collections, while IMMA has the most substantial holding of Frömel's work in a public collection, thanks in large part to works donated by the Carroll's and Bank of Ireland Collections. IMMA has included the artist in landmark exhibitions such as *The Moderns* (2010-2011) ensuring that her work continues to be considered within the canon of Irish and international Modernism.

The works in this retrospective exhibition at IMMA date from 1955 to 1975 and are grouped around partial reconstructions of her solo exhibitions, as well as thematic presentations of concerns in her work such as the body, portraits, architecture and abstraction.

Gerda Frömel, A retrospective continues until 5 July 2015, Admission is free.

Additional Information for Editors

About the Artist

While Frömel enjoyed an uneventful childhood in the former Czechoslovakia, her early experiences were marked by the trauma of the Second World War and the German Expulsions in its immediate aftermath. (2015 is the 70th anniversary of these expulsions). These experiences place her within a group of German artists - Joseph Beuys, Frank Auerbach, Eva Hesse and Georg Baselitz - whose work emerged from this post-war environment. In a country trying to come to terms with its recent past, physically, economically and spiritually, in some areas art saw a 'return to order'. Various artists who had worked in an abstract style before the war, notably Henry Moore for instance, returned to a period of figuration as a means to process their need to reassert the primacy of the human body after years of witnessing its destruction. This political and cultural background marked Frömel's development as she entered art school in the years immediately after the war. Frömel enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts, Stuttgart in 1948 and later went on to study in Darmstadt and the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, where she studied metalwork and sculpture.

While at art school in Munich, Frömel met the young sculptor Werner Schürmann. They married in 1955 and the couple moved permanently to Ireland the following year where they lived in Woodtown Park, outside Rathfarnham where Schürmann established one of the only foundries in Ireland and began to cast their works in bronze there.

Early works exhibited in the *Irish Exhibition of Living Art* were cast in bronze and figurative in style and included a portrait of her child entitled *Portrait of Johann Jacob Weneslaus* (1957) as well as images of animals such as *Deer Crossing Bay* (1963).

In 1964 she embarked on her biggest project to date: a solo exhibition at the Dawson Gallery in Dublin. The works shown have clear connections to the Post-war aesthetics of phenomenological works in the style of Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) with real-life observations of life and nature. Unusually within these early works, Frömel's preference is for an uneven surface, and investment (plaster remnants left over from the casting process) can be seen, lending a somewhat unfinished appearance to the sculptures. This variation in surface is characteristic of Frömel's work in other materials such as metal and stone; works that appear highly finished from a distance, on closer inspection reveal deliberate machining marks and chips.

In the late 1960s Frömel made a transition from cast bronze sculptures to works carved in marble, granite, and her favourite material – alabaster. She made use of simple forms: circles, lines and spirals to communicate her observations from nature, natural phenomena and the celestial, in particular, the moon and its reflection were denoted with the simplest of visual codes.

Between 1967-70 Frömel commenced her most important commission *Sails*, made for the Carroll's Factory in Dundalk, Co Louth, designed by Scott Tallon Walker. The successful completion of the sculpture attracted significant positive attention in the press and it became emblematic of the building. At that point it was the largest private sculptural commission in Ireland, and one that would stand up to international comparison.

After her death in 1975 her work continued to be championed by writers like Dorothy Walker, and was included in *Rosc* 1980 but was exhibited only rarely. Her work remains in the collections of The Arts Council, The Bank of Ireland, Allied Irish Bank, ACC Bank, The Crawford Art Gallery, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology [GMIT], Limerick City Gallery, Trinity College Dublin and others. IMMA has the most substantial holding of Frömel's work in a public collection largely due to acquisitions from the Carroll's Collection as well as the Bank of Ireland. They have been included in landmark exhibitions such as *The Moderns* (2010-2011).

The exhibition at IMMA is curated by Seán Kissane. In August 2015 the exhibition will travel to the F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Studios, Co. Down in August 2015 where it is curated by Riann Coulter.

Associated Talks and Events

There are a series of free talks to accompany this exhibition, with more to be announced.

Gerda Frömel – Her life and works 1955–1975 / Preview Lecture - Seán Kissane /
Thurs 9 Apr 2015 / 5.30–6.15pm / Exhibition Curator Seán Kissane (IMMA) presents a lecture on his research for the first contemporary retrospective exhibition of works of Gerda Frömel and addresses how this exhibition reinstates Frömel as a master of Modern Irish art.
[Booking Info](#)

IMMA Modern Master Series – Symposium Gerda Frömel – Reconstructing an Artist's Career /
Fri 17 Apr 2015 / 11am–3pm / Join scholars, writers and enthusiasts on Frömel's work as they critically assess key developments of the artist's short yet prolific career. Speakers will consider what Frömel's story can teach us about the broader history, records and practice of sculpture in Ireland. Chaired by Paula Murphy (Senior Lecturer, School of Art History, UCD), other participants to be announced. [Further Information and Booking.](#)

Closing Conversation - Frances Morris Post-War Art and Existentialism /
Sun 5 Jul / 3–4pm / To mark the final day of the Frömel exhibition at IMMA, renowned art historian and curator Frances Morris (Head of Collections, Tate Modern, UK) reflects on her

extensive research on post war art and examines how this time of vast turmoil and vigorous creativity continues to influence artistic practice of the last decades. In conversation with Seán Kissane (IMMA).

Catalogue

A fully-illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition, with essays by Seán Kissane, Curator: Exhibitions, IMMA; Riann Coulter, Curator, F.E McWilliam Gallery and Studio; Sarah Kelleher, CACSSS Postgraduate Scholar, University College Cork; and Jason Ellis, Sculptor and conservator.

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