

Eilis O'Connell was born in Derry in 1953. She lived just across the border in County Donegal until the age of ten. She describes her childhood as a typical rural Irish childhood with all that went with that; space to play and freedom to explore her surroundings. O'Connell feels that those early years in the Donegal countryside formed the basis of her creativity. She describes how places and objects remembered from this special childhood stage emerge again and again in her work. Her family moved to Cork when she was ten years old. She found her new city life cramping, in sharp contrast to her old freedoms, and this too must have served to make her earlier memories more poignant. She recalls her early love of form in objects as diverse as gourds and old farm tools, and notes her on-going need to hoard such finds until they get a new lease of life in her work.

The seventies was a time of great innovation and development in sculpture in Cork; trends in sculpture in metal by Anthony Caro in England, David Smith and Richard Serra in America and others were being embraced and developed. Developments in steel technology such as stainless steel and Cor-ten steel - a type of steel that rusted to a rich chestnut brown and then rusted no more, were quickly picked up by a new generation of sculptors. Brightly painted steel compositions were made possible by advances in paint technology. O'Connell studied art at the Crawford College of Art under sculptor John Burke. Burke had, himself, studied at the Crawford and had afterwards gone on to St. Martin's College in London, the home of abstract art in Britain. Anthony Caro was a big influence at St. Martin's and Burke brought the enthusiasm for fabricating and working with found objects in metal, back to his teaching in Cork. A whole generation of abstract steel sculptors were born; this movement inspired Vivienne Roche, Maud Cotter, Jim Buckley and Eilis O'Connell. The process of working in and shaping steel appealed to O'Connell and much of her early work was in fabricated steel.

O'Connell spent a year at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in 1974-75 and returned to work in Cork for the next few years. Exhibitions led to travel awards, which allowed her to work and experience the work of international artists in the United States, Italy, France and Spain. She based herself in England in the 80's and now divides her time between England and Cork.

She has built her reputation through public commissions for large-scale works, taking on the challenges of working with architects, designers, town planners as well as the various constraints and difficulties that go with creating public sculpture. An example near Kinsale harbour, *The Great Wall of Kinsale*, 1988, made of Cor-ten steel and teak, 5.5 x 54.8 x 12.2 metres, marks the entrance to a park. As the site was a popular seating area, O'Connell incorporated this idea into the design, so that sheltering structures break up the length of a long, low wall. The work was commissioned by the Arts Council for the Urban District Council of Kinsale. Once the sculpture was installed it created controversy as the surface of the Cor-ten steel took longer than expected to develop an even surface, due to its proximity to the sea. To the artist's disappointment the sculpture was painted and the county architect later added a wall parallel to the work and a number of decorative ponds. O'Connell felt that these altered the sculpture's original integrity, changing how she wished the art work to be seen.

*Secret Station*, 1991, in Cardiff, England, is an 11x11x10 metre construction in bronze and steel. To make the work O'Connell used innovative materials such as fibre optics and steam generators to create a feeling of industry and life, echoing the steam ships that used to swarm Cardiff bay. The sculpture is made of large cone forms, which rhythmically let out steam and are lit up by night by the fibre optic lights. It is located on a redeveloped piece of land opposite a large roundabout near the docks. Cardiff Bay was once a major coal port and this piece aims to pay homage to both the past and the future. The title of the sculpture comes from a poem by Seamus Heaney called *The Diviner*.