

My life in colour - Anne Madden on artistic success and a life in France and Ireland



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Anne Madden's artistic success in France allowed her get away from just being seen as Louis

le Brocquy's wife, writes **Alan O'Riordan**



Anne Madden's new exhibition opens at the Hugh Lane next week. Picture: Moya Nolan

ANNE MADDEN returned to Dublin some years ago, after spending more than 30 years living in the south of France with her husband, the artist Louis le Brocquy. But imaginatively, at least a part of her is very much still there. Her new paintings are full of what she calls “the sky, the sea and Mediterranean light”. And, even their unifying theme is distinctly Mediterranean, referencing Ariadne’s golden thread, which the mythic figure gave to Theseus when he went into the Minotaur’s labyrinth.

Her house, on a terrace of villas on a quiet street in Portobello, Dublin, is full of her and her late husband’s work. What stands out from Madden’s is its scale and its use of colour, two things strongly to the fore in her show of new work, opening next month at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin.

“It’s all to do, really, with how to get that bad side of us out,” she says after we sit down at a coffee table, James Joyce’s death mask looking down upon us from its perch on the wall. “Is the light going to take away the darkness? It’s all to do with light and darkness.” The Minotaur who lurks in some of the paintings “says a lot about us humans”, she says.

Although Madden is reluctant to ascribe too much of the autobiographical to her work — it is, after all, the artist’s privilege to express an impulse rather than interrogate it — her life has certainly had its share of light and dark. Her father died in a car crash when she was a teenager. Later, her sister and brother-in-law died in a plane crash, leaving three young children for whom Madden became guardian. Her brother, also as a young man, died in a domestic accident, fatally injuring himself falling down a stairs. As for Madden herself, a riding accident in her late teens left her confined to bed for three years as she endured a series of spinal operations, with doctors predicting she’d never walk again.

“Ghastly things,” she says. “It’s all still there, I don’t know what life is like without all that, but tragedy does live with you, it goes along with you. You don’t get rid of it.”

Most recently, of course, has seen the death of her husband, in 2012. He was 95 and had been suffering with Alzheimer’s. “What happened to him was agonising,” she says, “which made it agonising for me. But there is nothing you can do except get through it. I think time does help. It somehow sort of make you understand that

it has happened and that's it. You want him back, you want to die yourself, but you go on. I suppose my work helps me really."

We turn to a series of works she did in the period after le Brocquy's death — each haunted by a dark, central figure, almost as if in a coffin or grave. It looks like the definition of "working through" something.



"I think I'm lucky to have the work," she says. "It makes me feel like I'm trying to do something. So I tell myself I am lucky. I try to think of all the good things. It's very easy to go on crying for the rest of your life," she says, with a dry laugh.

She and le Brocquy enjoyed successful, glamorous lives in the south of France. Times she calls "paradisal". They raised their children, partied with the beautiful people, made their own wine and olive oil, and worked side by side in a shared studio. Artistically, it's not an arrangement that would suit every couple, but Madden puts the lack of rivalry down to their 17-year age difference.

"If we'd have been the same age, I think it might have been very different between us. But I had different influences. The people who were of great importance to me were different for me than him, right along up to the 20th century, when Matisse was important to me, whereas for Louis, it was Picasso. It was completely different. We were on different roads, which was probably for the better!"

Madden gained repute in France, representing Ireland at the Paris Biennale in 1965, and frequently showing in the city after that. Her work is in the collections of major institutions such as the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Georges Pompidou centre, and the Picasso Museum.

It was a reputation that did not extend fully to Ireland, despite a major retrospective at IMMA. Here, she has been somewhat in her husband's shadow. "I did pretty well in France," she says. "They didn't see me as Louis's wife. But here, I didn't exist! I accepted that though, ages before we moved back. Some times it irritated me. But on the whole it never bothered me at all."

Madden's first experience of Ireland was in 1945, when she moved here after spending her early years in Chile, where her father had a farm. She was born, though, in London, her mother undertaking the arduous ocean voyage while pregnant specifically to ensure that fact. The young Madden began exploring the Burren in those years, and its landscapes were an important early influence on her work.

"It was a most extraordinary country, then," she recalls. "It was like coming to a rainy Greece, especially then, when everybody was in shawls and without shoes. I fell in love immediately, I feel like I'm made of the same stuff as the Burren. It's very peculiar, but I love that place."

Madden describes herself as "very much an Irish European" and when the conversation turns to public matters, she expresses her relief at the election of Emmanuel Macron, and her dismay over the Arts Council's recent demands on the workings of Aosdána.

"One must try to keep the flag flying for civilisation. But the government is horrendous."

In France, politicians seem much more comfortable valuing the nation's "patrimoine culturel" as more than just a marketing opportunity. "Is it the education system here?" Madden wonders. "I think it must be. Children not being taken to the theatre like we were, doing plays at school, so we knew them by heart, learning music. It's such a pity."

And yet, there is always the work. She is still drawn back to the studio: working every day for several hours. "It's exciting to try to do it," she says. "You never get there, but you keep trying."

- Anne Madden's show, *Colours of the Wind — Ariadne's Thread*, is at Dublin City Gallery - The Hugh Lane, from June 1 to September 10