



METAMORPHOSIS



Olivia Musgrave's interest in the Classics greatly informs her sculptures, writes **Peter Murray**

Born in Dublin in 1958, over the past thirty years Olivia Musgrave has become recognised as one of Ireland's most accomplished sculptors, her work combining aesthetic sensibilities of the ancient and the present-day worlds. Happy to be described as a 'Classical' artist, Musgrave draws much of her inspiration from the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean, from Etruria and the Aegean to Hellenic Greece and imperial Rome. Hers is an art based on tradition, but informed also in unexpected ways by contemporary popular culture and media. The stories that inspire her sculptures will be familiar to readers of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and include Pygmalion, Daphne, and Diana and Actaeon. She reads these mythic narratives on different levels, comparing them to opera, an art form which at first glance seems absurd, but which delves into enduring archetypes of the human psyche. The story of Europa and the bull, much beloved in the art of the Renaissance – including paintings by Veronese and Titian – is a recurring theme in her art. Perhaps because her mother is Greek and her father Irish, Musgrave has little difficulty in retelling and reiterating the language of sculpture from the ancient Mediterranean: Fates, Sirens, Amazons and Graces abound. She also taps into a long history of equestrian sculpture. Although

not a horsewoman, she depicts these animals with enormous admiration, studying their anatomy and movement in detail. Combining this rich tradition with a sense of playfulness, hers are sculptures to which everyday audiences can readily relate.

Musgrave says lightly that she would not have come into the world were it not for her aunt Alikí, who served in the resistance movement in Greece during World War II, before managing to escape to Egypt in a fishing boat. Arriving in Cairo, Alikí met and married a British army officer, John Wills. After the war they settled in London, where Alikí's husband went into the Foreign Office. Alikí's younger sister Maria (Olivia's mother) then came to London but did not return home, later meeting her own future husband, Richard Musgrave. The couple married in 1958 and settled in Ireland, raising a large family there. That same year, Olivia was born 'in a nursing home in Hatch Street'. She grew up near Duleek in Co Meath and attended Newtown School in Waterford. Childhood holidays were spent in Co Donegal. Although cautious about attributing her interest in art to family and upbringing, it is clear that she comes from a background where art was, and is, highly regarded. A relation of her father's, Joan Jameson (née Musgrave), was an accomplished artist and friend of Norah McGuinness, painting very much within the School of Paris mould. The three Jameson granddaughters, Kirstin, Andrea and Tara – Olivia's cousins – are all established artists.

After leaving school in 1977, Musgrave attended a secretarial college in Dublin. Deciding to spread her wings, she travelled to Paris, where she studied political science for one year. She took a job with a travel agency that allowed her to live and work in Rome and Venice for a further two years, before moving on to Athens. During these years on the Continent, she spent many hours in museums and galleries, gaining at first hand an education in

1 OLIVIA MUSGRAVE
TURNING FOR HOME
2007 bronze 91(h) x
53(w) x 86(d) cm

2 Olivia Musgrave in
her studio

3 AMAZON WITH
FLOWERS 2016
bronze 41(h) x 11(w)
x 30(d) cm





IN A FORMAL SENSE, MUSGRAVE'S SCULPTURES BRING TO MIND THE WORK OF ARTURO MARTINI AND MARINO MARINI

art and an appreciation of the Classical world. She cites also as influential the writings of Robert Graves, author of *The White Goddess* and *The Greek Myths*.

Aged twenty-four, taking stock of her life, Musgrave settled in London, enrolling at the City and Guilds of London Art School in Kennington, where Allan Sly taught traditional techniques of sculpture. She recalls showing her portfolio of drawings to Roger de Grey, head of the school, and her delight at being accepted as a student. Since graduating, she has steadily developed her own practice as an artist, while also being active in the organisational side of the art world. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Sculptors, she has also shown regularly at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin, describing that institution as very supportive and

remembering with gratitude Conor Fallon championing her work there. In 2004, by now well established as an artist in Britain and Ireland, Musgrave married the countryside campaigner John Gardiner. In more recent years Gardiner was appointed by David Cameron to the House of Lords, and is now Senior Deputy Speaker.

Based in the UK, with a studio in north London, Musgrave works on both private and public commissions as well as producing her own personal works for exhibition. Before beginning a sculpture she likes to do life drawing with a model, describing it as like a pianist practising scales. She does not set out with a fixed idea, but allows her sculptures to evolve as she works. Modelled in clay, her sculptures go through a series of processes before being brought to the

foundry, where the hot metal is poured and the finished bronze emerges. Musgrave is fascinated by the process of casting, the heat and noise of the foundry, the pouring of molten metal into moulds. She works closely with the technicians, finishing the pieces by hand after the works emerge from the casting process, then patinating the surfaces. She describes this as 'reclaiming' her work and enjoys the sense of transformation involved: 'They start in clay, then wax, then after a birth of fire, they become bronze; the theme of metamorphosis is there.'

In a formal sense, Musgrave's sculptures bring to mind the work of Arturo Martini and Marino Marini, two 20th-century Italian sculptors who in turn were inspired by Etruscan and Classical art. Marini delighted in depicting horses and riders and the female nude. There are affinities with the work of Melanie le Brocq, revealed in an exhibition of the two artists held at the Boyle Arts Festival in 1997. Giacomo Manzù has also been cited as an influence. However, Musgrave is very much her own artist, her sculptures characterised by the small, humorous touches of expression or attitude that temper the sense of monumentality.

She is down to earth in describing her approach: 'I realise that I have become a sculptor rather than beginning as one and I have become one by making sculpture day after day for many years. It really is as simple as that. We are now building up to an exhibition and soon it will all be over and then I will start again, working for the next one. This is what it is all about, a daily activity. For me it is the doing and the making, the thoughts and feelings that may be expressed are almost more the end result rather than the starting point. Perhaps that has something to do with the nature of sculpture itself, it is hard, physical work.'

In general, Musgrave does not often portray men in her sculpture. She prefers the rounded forms of females. The term 'Rubensian' can be used to describe her playful goddesses,



who recline, loiter on horseback, read and generally look as if they are enjoying life. However, while she delights in the female form at its most expansive – her *Siren* (Fig 8) depicts an enormously bloated woman with a bird's tail – her figures have a surprising elegance and lightness, massive torsos supported on dainty legs and feet. There is an almost childlike innocence to her work, an honesty and delight in expressive form. Although generally monumental in feeling, her sculptures also possess tender and intimate touches, as in *Large Amazon Smelling a Rose* (Fig 7), in which a woman lying on the back of a horse holds a flower close to her lips, or the equally poignant moment captured in *Persephone and the Pomegranate* (Fig 9). In *Amazon Leading Horse* (Fig 5) a



4 IO AND THE GADFLY
bronze 2019 39(h)
x 26(w) x 54(d) cm

5 AMAZON LEADING HORSE
2006
bronze 22(h) x 34(w)
x 15(d) cm

6 THE FATES 2012
bronze each
head 91(h) x 46(w) x
48(d) cm





BEFORE BEGINNING A SCULPTURE MUSGRAVE LIKES TO DO LIFE DRAWING WITH A MODEL, DESCRIBING IT AS LIKE A PIANIST PRACTISING SCALES

woman attempts to lead the animal, embracing his head in her left arm. Both woman and horse lean forward, but the animal is reluctant to move. In *Turning for Home* (Fig 1) two women sit astride cantering horses, side by side. Ranging from less than a metre to almost two metres in height, these equestrian sculptures could easily be maquettes for larger monumental sculptures in parks, gardens or city squares. In *Crossing the Line* (2016) four female riders are portrayed, ranged in a line, as if in a race. As in most of Musgrave's sculptures, there is a witty subtext: the horse on the left has all four legs raised – see the paintings of Elizabeth Butler – but this is a posture that occurs only fleetingly in the actual movement of horses, who like to keep one foot on the ground even when galloping. In a 2019 work, the heifer Io jumps awkwardly, tormented by a gadfly (Fig 4). In contrast with these representations of females, Musgrave's images of males convey unease and anxiety; in her 2006 *Too Close to the Sun* a helpless Icarus looks upwards, as if vainly seeking inspiration from the implacable heavens. The Andros goat bleats as he looks to the sky. There is also compassion in her art.

A bronze boat-like form, crowded with figures, represents a modern-day (and age-old) example of humanity struggling to escape adversity and establish new lives.

From the outset Musgrave's work has been well received; sculptures by her were shown in 1992 and 1994 at the Royal Academy summer show, and in 1997 and 2002 at the RHA annual exhibition. In 1986 she won the Feodora Gleichen Award from the Royal Society of Sculptors, and in 2016 received the ESB Moran Award for Outstanding Sculpture at the RHA. In 2014 she was elected President of the Society of Portrait Sculptors. She is represented by John Martin in London and other galleries worldwide, including the Somerville Manning Gallery in Wilmington, Delaware and the London/South African gallery Everard Read. In Dublin, she has had several exhibitions at the Jorgensen Gallery. Among her commissioned works are sculptures for Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind in Cork, the University of Limerick, the Saïd Business School, Oxford and the National Bank of Greece.

AN Wilson captured the vitality of her work: 'Very many of Olivia Musgrave's sculptures bring these ancient stories to life once more. She makes wonderfully sensual Amazons, often sitting astride lithe vibrant horses. I tingle when I see these sculptures. They are profoundly mysterious. They capture the wistful religion of the Greeks, gazing sorrowfully at the moon. But these are also the work of an Irishwoman who knows horses, and has in every sense a feel for them. Musgrave's Greek and Irish ancestry draw out from the old stories potent images which speak to us very strongly. They are Amazons all right, as they raise their terrifying spears, or, while resting, as they recline their lovely heads.' ■

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- 1 John Martin Gallery, *Olivia Musgrave Exhibition Catalogue*, 2009
- 2 AN Wilson, *John Martin Gallery, Olivia Musgrave Exhibition Catalogue*, 201

**7 LARGE AMAZON
SMELLING A ROSE.**
2006 bronze 185(h)
x 149(w) x 60 (d) cm

8 SIREN 2012
bronze 33(h) x 27(w)
x 15(d) cm

**9 PERSEPHONE AND
THE POMEGRANATE**
2016 bronze 33(h)
x 19(w) x 48(d) cm

Images courtesy of
John Martin Gallery,
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