Speech to launch Abigail O’Brien’s With Bread exhibition at the Highlanes Gallery, September 2013

To Abigail with warm congratulations, from Susan, October 2013

With Bread is such a wonderful title for this magical and womanly exhibition, so suggestive of “with child” in all the mysteriousness of that process. I came to meet the Abigail here last week and when I got home there was a message from an old friend in London to say her daughter was about to have a baby and I immediately had this image of Maeve like a perfectly risen loaf, tapped and ready.

Here’s a poem by Pablo Neruda called Ode to Bread:

Bread

You rise

from flour

water

and fire

Dense or light

flattened or round

you are like

the mother’s

rounded womb

and earths twice yearly swelling…

While we are on this theme, congratulations to Aoife Ruane, midwife to this fabulous show.

Of course it isn’t only pregnant women who have risen and rounded bellies and indeed Abigail and I talked about this, the generous way that flesh can sprawl and swell, the way that skin which was taut can slacken into folds…

….we had this conversation, incidentally, in the gallery café over delicious breads and cakes….I can assure you that Abigail’s interest in bread is not purely artistic.

 Look at the photographs dedicated to the artists, great women like Frieda Kahlo, Dorothy Cross, and Georgia O’Keeffe. Some of them are here tonight, including Teresa Nanigian, Amanda Coogan, Mary Kelly and Alice Maher – whose photograph fittingly suggests a Greek goddess. What a lavish femmage, to use the work Mebh Ruane suggests in her catalogue essay instead of hommage.

 Showing me around the other day Abigail said that when she looked at these images she wondered, Is it just me? Well, as I am sure you will agree, it isn’t – with their glossy curves and velvety shadows, their secret folds and clefts, these images are both sensual and erotic.

My friend Ernestine on seeing this show tells me that in Austria where she is from , there is a breadroll which is shaped like a vagina.

The photographs and the sculptures are also redolent of geology and landscape, of mountains and ravines, cliffs and glens and scree….a sense of the earth moving….

And, speaking of which, at the heart of this exhibition is the Grand Dame, the Molly Bloom to whom Abigail told me she talks and sings. This dame says Yes, yes, yes as she comes surging from her jug….. Aoife told me there is to be a bill board of the Grand Dame in Drogheda –you have to wonder what the blessed Oliver Plunkett is going to make of that…

-The Grand Dame is the “Levain” , what Abigail calls the “primordial soup’ of flour and water, the manifestation of a sheer volcanic life force constantly erupting and spilling, gloriously tactile. The levain can be 30 or 40 years old and bakers share them, passing on the fragrance and flavor of their region. Abigail says that her own Dame loves the loamy moist weather of Louth…which must also account for the excellence of the bread of the sponsors of this fine show, McCloskeys.

The late great journalist Mary Holland once wrote about how she had gone out to work while her children were small and how ‘no child of ours ever came home to the smell of freshly baking bread’ and this made me laugh.

My own experience of breadmaking hasn’t been entirely successful. I was a working mother full of guilt who took to baking home made bread to try to prove my love….as in the ‘proving basket’ – and please see the photograph dedicated to Cindy Sherman.

Anyway, after a few weeks of this, my daughters came in a delegation to ask me could we please start having proper bread again…

Abigail has not neglected “proper’ sliced pan bread either – among the beautiful shell shaped croissants and mushroomy brioches and gorgeous slippers and celtic swirls and snakes there are some perfectly nice silver squares, just slightly squished by life….

Bread and wine, body and blood, the mysteries of communion, the alchemy that makes water stand. Bread and roses. Bread as the staff of life. Give us this day our daily bread.

Making bread is a labour of love, and so is making art. Abigail O’Brien has labored with love to make this exhibition, a celebration of life’s mystery and pleasure.

By way of launching it, I’ll finish with a poem I am sure many of you know by a poet for whose loss we are all grieving, Seamus Heaney.

It is one of a pair of poems called Mossbawn, and its own title is Sunlight:

Sunlight   There was a sunlit absence.

The helmeted pump in the yard

  heated its iron,

water honeyed

  in the slung bucket

and the sun stood

like a griddle

cooling  against the wall

  of each long afternoon.

So, her hands scuffled

over the bakeboard,

the reddening stove

sent its plaque of heat

against her where she stood

in a floury apron

 by the window.

  Now she dusts the board

 with a goose's wing,

 now sits, broad-lapped,

 with whitened nails

  and measling shins:

 here is a space

again, the scone rising

 to the tick of two clocks.

  And here is love

 like a tinsmith's scoop

sunk past its gleam

 in the meal-bin.

(From “North”, (Faber 1975) )