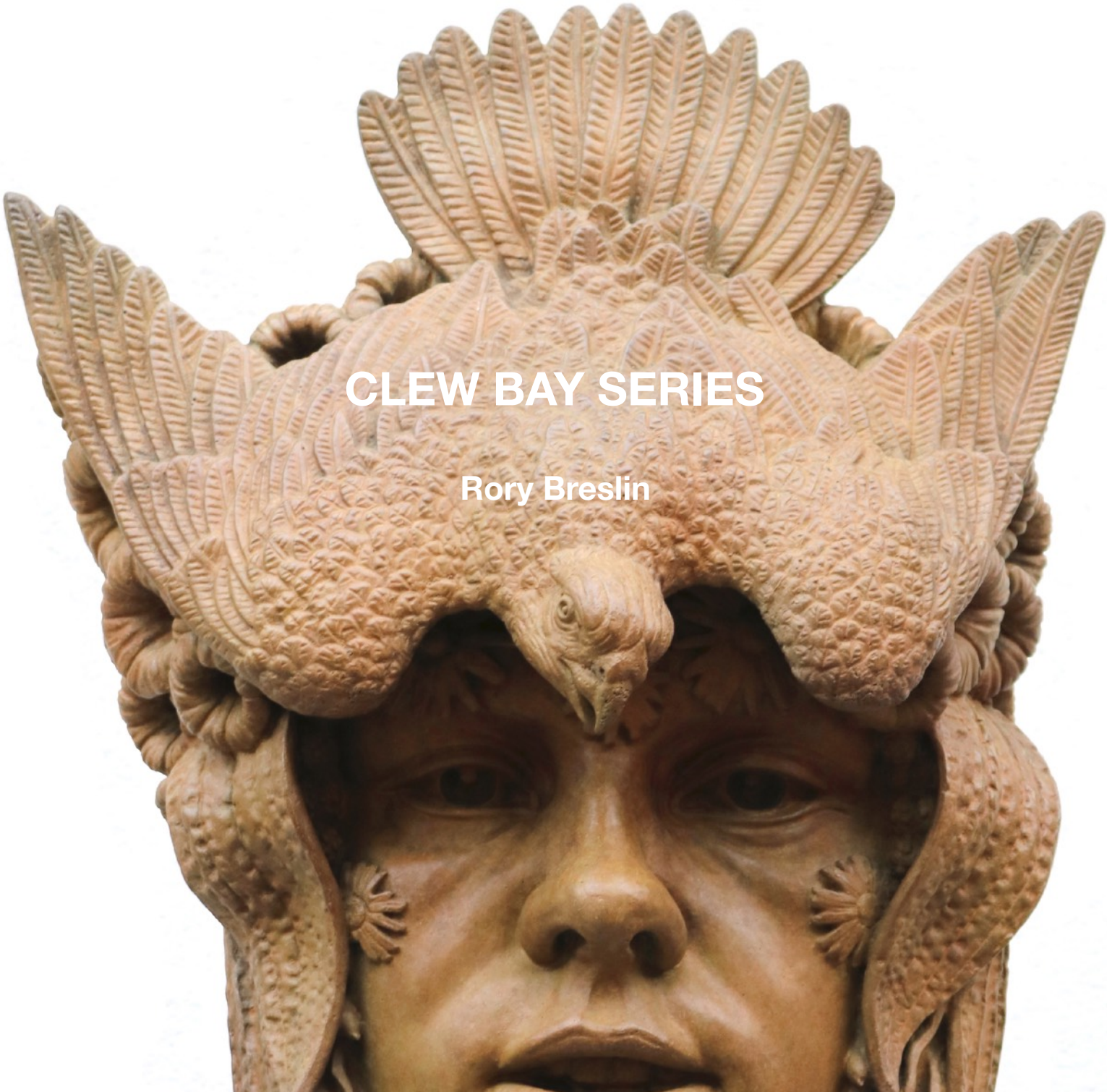


CLEW BAY SERIES

Rory Breslin

Front, September Mask. Inside, November Mask, Back, July Mask. Rory Breslin 2022







Clew Bay Series

Painted over the centuries by scores of traveling artists of assorted talents, who were captivated by the rugged landscape, rolling cumuli, restless seas and mercurial light, the Mayo Bay area has long been a source if visual inspiration. These artists have painted a range of pictures from landscapes to rural gatherings, perhaps ignoring somewhat the tenacious local biota that contributed to the very colours on their palettes.

This series, in terms of time and landscape, chronicles and celebrates the emergence of a small selection of native and perhaps overlooked flora and fauna as they appear by month in the Mayo bay area, in what could be called 'sculptural landscapes'. Though recorded around Clew Bay, this biota is not particular to the area, most of it is native throughout the country, some here for thousands of years, some recent 'blow-in's' that have found a home. The juxtaposed iconography in the bronze sculpture of the faces of the youths and the biota of the local environment, intertwined and symbiotic, portray the enormous importance of our relationship with our living world and its inhabitants. This is underscored in the text by references to local and historical lore and also the reputed medicinal benefits of some of the plants.

Rhythmically framing the countenance of a native to the area, the rendition of the plants and animals in these bronze masks is modelled with a baroque vitality; it is rich and dense, a mimetic and uplifting tribute to the beauty and tenacity of the local environment.







Clockwise from left...

Maidenhair spleenwort plastercast

Flowers set in clay precast

Primrose leaf plastercast

Ox-eyed daisies plastercast





From the top...

Clew Bay native

Clay mask

Rubber and plaster mould

Wax positive

Reverse of mask with runner 'sprews'

Methodology

Included in this booklet are images of the sculpture at different stages of development prior to bronze casting. The pieces are originally made in clay, then rubber and plaster moulds are taken from which a final foundry-ready wax positive is re-worked and sprewed with wax 'runners' to enable an even flow of the molten bronze in the next stage of the process. Once the casting and finishing process is complete, the works are patinated and antique wax applied.

Cognisant of the transition of the year, scores of samples of the flora were collected daily in the countryside as they emerged through the months. Photographs, drawings and plaster casts of the plants were realised when they appeared, due to their ephemeral nature and to enable their size, shape and texture to be captured and worked in clay at a time when they were not necessarily in season. The finished bronze pieces average size on their bronze bases is approximately 68 cm high, 36 cm in width and 25 cm in depth.

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January

Clockwise from left...

Bronze

Cormorant

Bronze detail

Clay in progress

Maidenhair Spleenwort









Engaging directly with the viewer, the youth's expression perhaps conveys a semblance of surprise at the drama that revolves around him. In an aspect and form that is reminiscent of an Egyptian headdress, the circular theatre of prey and preyer frames the work. The Cormorant... the epitome of greed according to Shakespeare, lithely encapsulates the head in its pursuit of the Common Frog and its offspring emerging from the Pondweed. With a collar ruff of Trametes Veriscolor or Turkey Tail Mushroom, used at one time to decorate hats. The countenance at the temples and cheekbones is further framed by Maidenhair Spleenwort and emerging snowdrops.





Clockwise from left...

Pheasant

Hazel Catkins

Wax detail

Wax Mask

Clay detail









February

Two Pheasants peer out from each others wings that envelope the whole of the work like a monk's hood, an intimation of winters lingering cold hold. Connected above by the star-like leaves is the Narrow Leaf Plantain or Slánlus said to prevent blood poisoning and encourage healing in a fresh cut. The long feathered symmetrical crescents of the wings and tails, are broken slightly by the leaves of Cats Ear, cousin of the Dandelion on either side.

The countenance of this piece seems to be stubborn and slightly obdurate, further underlining the long duration of the winter span. Under the over-hanging wings from the forehead down, the tenacious harbingers of Spring emerge. Hazel Catkins in subtle shadow, the reputed sting balming Water Dock leaves that unroll and drop down from either side of eye. On chin and cheekbones, Margherita's daisies, as counted by Goethe, arc the lower part of the face. And finally the Jenny, Lysimachia nummularia, creeping from either side of the lower tail feathers.

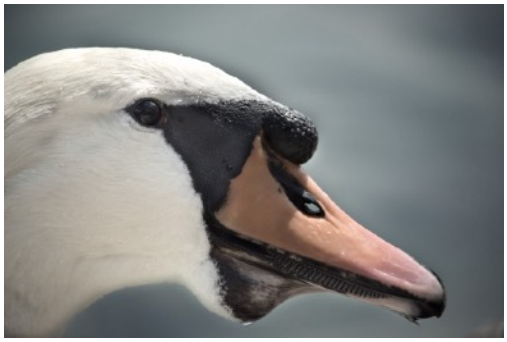


March

Giving an overall impression of a Pharaonic headdress, the upper section of the bronze sculpture is composed of a cohort of Foxglove leaves curved to a point above the forehead. Above, a symmetrical panoply of Dandelion leaves splay down the upper sides of the mask and are extended visually by the feathers of the swans.

The girl gently blows, indicative of the last winds of winter. Theses winds are further intimated in the swirling leaves of the Iris or Feleastram, inspiration for the Fleur-de-lys emblem. They unfurl through a colony of pre-historic Horsetails, some of which emphasise the slightly puffed out cheeks, and into the bouquet of Primrose flowers and leaves below the chin. Giving the appearance of sentries, two Mute swans emerge through the Dandelions from behind to visually contain the visage.









Clockwise from above...

Horsetails

Wax Mask

Clay detail

Mute Swan

Clay in progress

Wax Mask



April







With a look of intense curiousity, the countenance of the youth is animated and engaging. Crowned with a cascade of Wild Parsnip or Cuirdín bán leaves, atop which two symmetrical and spiralling Egrets vie for their meal. Rare in Ireland until recently, the egret is highly revered by the Cherokee, its feathers associated with peace and worn by diplomats when peace making.

Below the crown of leaves, framing the face, and used occasionally for making a St Brigid's cross, are two pairs of Bullrushes, behind which are the leaves of the Common Nettle and Bramble. Climbing inwards from forehead, cheeks and chin are Bush Vetch and Sticky-backs or Cleavers, the former once boiled to make a remedy for measles and smallpox while the latter an old remedy for burns and wounds.
From either side of the base of the rushes and underneath the chin, are a circular ruff of the satellite-like leaves of the Marsh Violet. Interspersed within the leaves are the flowers of the Violet and also the Bluebell, the flower of Endymion.

Clockwise from right...

Work in progress

Clay, side view

Wax mask

Bluebells

Egret

Mask in clay













May

The youthful female face in the May Mask is fine and determined. Her deep eyes intonate a resolute and spirited character. She gently blows Zephyr-like, a warmth indicative of the coming of Bealtaine and of summer. The head is crowned by a tiara of the stamen of the Plantain with its inflorescence above it. Framing the eyes are orchid petals and on either side of the cheeks are the leaves of Hart's Tongue, an ancient fern that Dioscorides the Greek physician said was 'good against the stinging or biting of serpents'.

Knitted through the Plantain and running either side of the mask from the crown to the earring discs below representing the sun and the moon, are a dense arrangement of Foxgloves. Below the chin, the elusive Marsh Cinquefoil flower buds are about to unfurl while at the top of the work off-centre and with an abundance of energy, the swallow bears down on us from above.

Clockwise from right...

Bronze mask

Clay detail

Bronze mask detail

Foxgloves

Plantain

Wax detail



















Clockwise from above....

Hare

Bronze detail

Burdock

Wax detail

Fern

Bronze mask

June

The June Mask is ebullient and assured at the arrival of mid-summer or Meitheamh. A panoply of native flora; Honeysuckle, Ferns, and Common Self-heal bustle to emerge on either side of her face. They are contained by Plantain leaves and the expansive leaves of the Lesser Burdock, the burrs of which were the inspiration for the invention of 'Velcro' by Swiss engineer, George de Mestral. Framing the chin of June, leaves of the Coltsfoot cradle the seedpods of the Birds-foot Trefoil with a further dense array of Honeysuckle below. Around the eyes are the star-shaped Common Butterwort, or Bodán meascáin, whose leaves await to digest unfortunate insects. The work is crowned by the Irish Hare, whose head pushes through the leaves of Burdock.



July

With a furor of energy, two fighting Mallards dominate the upper portion of the mask, their wings and feathers energetically akimbo. In stark counterpose, the expression of the youth is contemplative and reflective as if recalling a distant memory. From beneath the mauling ducks a shawl-shape pair of Teasel leaves frame the face. Constricted by the Teasel and the wings of the ducks, are budding Loosestrife flowers, said by Lysimachus, one of Alexander the Great's generals, to calm fractious teams of oxen by driving away tormenting insects, thus 'loosing strife'.

Pressed between the cheekbones and the Teasel are Ash berries and the flowers of the Dog Rose, while clambering upwards from below the chin, the old cure for melancholia, are the fronds of the Polypody fern. Spiralling downwards in counter-point to the ferns is a garland of Willowherb leaves that unfurl in amongst a bloom of Rubus fructicosus or Bramble flowers whose fruit are not to be eaten after Michaelmas Day... the day on which St. Michael cast Lucifer out of heaven, and Lucifer landed in a bramble thicket and cursed the brambles and spat on them.







Clockwise from above...

Willowherb

Fighting Mallards

Bronze mask

Bronze detail

Bronze detail







Clockwise from left...

Wax mask on base

Wax Mask, detail

Clay, side view

Clay detail

Blue tit

Goats Beard

Clover





The expression of the youthful August Mask is stoic and quite a bit determined. A plethora of symmetrically balanced leaves issue from the top of the work to the bottom. The first, a canopy of Twayblade orchid leaves overhang the criss-crossed leaves of the Marsh orchid and two rosettes of Spear thistle on either side of the head. Folklore of both ancient Ireland and Greece tell of mixing the roots of orchids with goat's milk to make love potions. The thistle, James II choice of emblem for Scotland was picked because of its defensive symbolism...'Nemo me impune lacessit', 'Nobody touches me with impunity'. Below the thistles, leaves of the Doves tail crane bill, complete with their flowers frame the lower arc of the sculpture.



Acrobatically flying through the cascade of leaves, four blue tits fly harmoniously reflecting each other at the upper and lower sections of the sculpture. The tails of the upper birds graze flowers of the Devils Bit, named from the fact that its roots look truncated, as if bitten off, legend has it, by the Devil.

A series of plants curve inwards on the youth's face from the chin up. Leaves of the much maligned Ragwort and the pointed buds of Goat's Beard, whose flowers close up at noon. Seedpods of Plantain follow the cheekbones and lastly, Patrick's emblem, used to explain the essence of the Holy Trinity to king Aengus, the clover subtly hangs down from the forehead.

August





September



The September Mask is alert and engaging. With her deep dark eyes assertively arresting the viewer, and, appearing in expression to address them, this assuredness is somewhat softened by the Nóinín mór or Oxeye Daises, cure for sore eyes, appropriately framing her eyes above and on her cheekbones. Leaves of the Ribwort Plantain, in folklore chewed and applied to a sore to encourage healing, drape from her temples and envelope the lower part of the work encasing Blackberries, Rosehips and Willowherb leaves. Shaped like a Lunula with wings outstretched, below the chin, the Sparrow cuts through the undergrowth. Sacred to Aphrodite, but lecherous to Shakespeare, this bird is escaping the dramatic dive of the Sparrow-hawk. This 'bird of the wind' energetically crowns the piece, its dynamism softened only by the nexus of Bindweed flowers







Clockwise from above...

Bindweed flower

Sparrowhawk

Bronze mask

Wax details with sprews

Bronze detail







Clockwise from left...

Bronze mask

Iris seedpod

Bronze detail

Clay detail

Barn Owl

Mica ink caps

October





The countenance of the October Mask is determined and reticent, perhaps reflecting the shortening of days and the month of Deireadh Fómhair or "end of harvest".

The barn owl's enclosing wings reflect the slow cessation of growth in a protective and blanket-like embrace of the natural flora. On either side of the head of October, from the crown of her head to below her chin, a cascade of Mica Inkcap mushrooms steadily transforms to acorns and oak leaves. A flurry of Iris Pseudacorus seedpods or Feileastram, cure for rheumatism in Irish fokelore, radiates from her forehead held in check by a headband of a leaf of the Iris. Two further leaves frame the lower face like a chinstrap. On either side of the seedpods two large Birch Milkcap mushrooms at her temples frame the lower part of the mask while dominating the apex of the piece, the head of the Barn owl is brash, noisy and redolent of the ancient Irish legend of the Banshee.









November

Eyes downcast and contemplating, the visage is reflective of Samhain, the beginning of the new Celtic year. The liminal or threshold festival, when the boundary between this world and the Otherworld thinned.

With an abundance of energy two Grey Herons, guardians of the treasures of the Otherworld in Irish mythology, swoop down to haggle over a fish. Wings akimbo and necks outstretched they frame the subdued and tentative face of the youth. Enveloped within the birds from below the chin up are creeping Ivy, cones of the Scots pine and on either side of the temples Shaggy Inkcap mushrooms. Dapperling mushrooms and Ivy on either side soften the vigorous thrust of the birds.

Clockwise from right...

Bronze mask

Dapperling mushrooms

Grey Heron

Bronze detail

Shaggy Inkcap









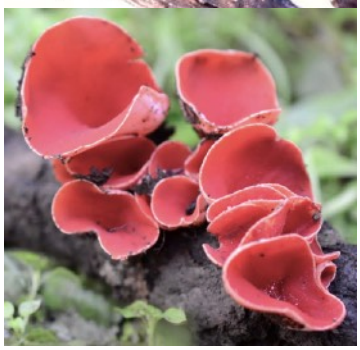
The December Mask is reflective and poignant. With an air of pathos, the countenance of the youth is still, serene and his eyes virtually closed, perhaps deliberating on the scene above. Indicative of the cycle of life a raven succumbs, its head nestled in holly berries and its lifeless and limp wings criss-cross and frame the upper right aspect of the work. Framing the left side and in full cry, its partner tenaciously clasps the edge of the head's veil, evocative of a blanket of snow.

Beneath the veil and framing the face from above the eyes are Holly leaves and berries that according to Pliny if planted near a house or farm, repelled poison, and defended it from lightning and witchcraft. Scarlet elf cups mushrooms, Sarcoscypha austriaca, line the cheeks, their name emanating from the belief that elves drank the morning dew from them. While below the last few holly leaves and berries a collar ruff of witches butter, Tremella mesenterica, is crumpled below the chin.



December







Clockwise from above...

Scarlet Elfcaps

Raven

Bronze mask detail

Bronze mask detail

Witches butter

Bronze mask







