

# With restraint, he uses stone to evoke Ireland

By Edward J. Szostaki

Special Art Critic

The sculptures and drawings that Bill Freeland is showing in the Morris Gallery of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts are said to have been inspired by a visit to the Aran Islands and the northwestern coast of Ireland. Anyone who has traveled in that neighborhood or who has seen Robert Flaherty's 1934 documentary, *Man of Aran*, will appreciate the reference.

Over the centuries, the relentless pounding of wind and rolling of waves for thousands of miles across the North Atlantic has denuded the west coast, leaving the most resistant of its natural endowments, stone, as the dominant feature of the landscape. The Irish who live in these inhospitable precincts use it to build their cottages and bound their fields.

Seen in this context, stone is a very appealing metaphor for the human condition, and in all but one of his sculptures Freeland incorporates it as a symbolic element rather than a structural one: Even in the large floor piece called *Irish Pastoral VII*, which is made of melon-size rocks packed into an enclosure of welded steel rods, the material creates a presence instead of a form.

Despite its romantic allusions to wild, windswept Aran, however, Freeland's sculpture expresses his poetic sensibility in deliberately measured gestures. He doesn't make stalks out of clumps of moss and tufts of seagull feathers; he crafts real objects that embody the essence of what he has seen in a few carefully chosen textures and shapes.

The sculptures in this series are assemblages of oak, stones and accessory materials like steel, canvas, clay, paper and glass. The smaller ones hang on the wall, the larger ones sit on pedestals or on

## On galleries

the floor.

The hanging pieces express poetic conjunctions of materials, textural contrasts and oppositions of mass and space. Their aesthetic is self-sufficient and more lyrical than that of the free-standing pieces, which are more precise, minimal and coldblooded.

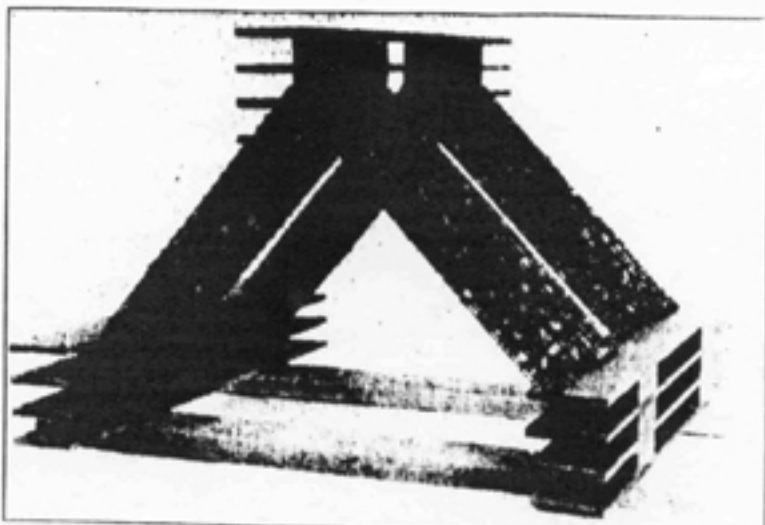
While the larger pieces are more directly allusive to the Irish landscape and to motifs, like the Celtic cross, that Freeland observed there, they also are more emotionally severe. One senses the calculating hand of the architect in them rather than the spirit of the poet.

Many of the pieces, and all the larger ones, address his interest in the interaction between structures and the natural landscape. "To move out into the field as a sculptor, I feel it necessary to mesh materials and image with landscape," he has written. "I want these works to function on an ecological level as prefabricated ruins, preserves and sanctuaries for wildlife."

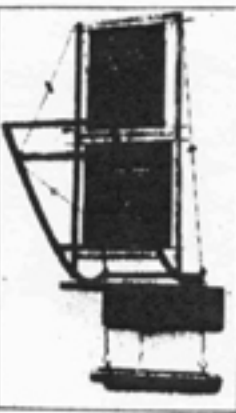
Those intentions are stated unequivocally in *Irish Pastoral VII* through its scale, materials — rock and Cor-Ten steel — and architectural form. *Irish Pastoral VII* is an outdoor piece that's out of its natural element here: It needs sunlight and perhaps some weeds around the base or vines growing through it.

*Rock Cradle* is similarly a strong architectural statement; it looks like a model for an outdoor pavilion or a monument. This arched form doesn't communicate as tabletop scale, though; Freeland's poetry is a little too sparse.

Freeland's work generally is



Bill Freeland's "Rock Cradle" (above) and "Galway Rocker" (below) is made of looks like a model for an outdoor pavilion, wood, stone, canvas and wire.



characterized by restraint and precision. There isn't any extravagance or flamboyance; when he throws a curve into a slit of oak to suggest the wind, it is soft and gentle.

This exhibition probably doesn't present a true bill on Freeland, however. For starters, it certainly is too crowded. Freeland's work is contemplative, and when it's crowded, as it is here, the

pieces interfere with one another. *Irish Pastoral VII* by itself is prepossessing enough to command the whole space, which doesn't give the other work much room to breathe.

Also, the dichotomy between the intimate, poetic work and the architectural pieces that are underscaled for gallery presentation is disturbing. The latter need to be realized in their appropriate scale and outdoor setting; indoors and in miniature, they cannot speak as forcefully as they should.

Morris Gallery, Broad and Cherry Streets, 972-7600, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, noon to 4 p.m. Sun. Through April 21.

Three artists are sharing the Noel Butcher Gallery through April 6. Two of the three — Linda Stoodt and Deryl Mackie — are demonstrative in a funky, neoexpressionist way. The third, John Driesbach, is more attuned to psychological nuance; his pictures involve viewers almost against their wishes.

Driesbach has only three pictures on view, which isn't enough; he's the only artist of the three I wanted more of.

Stoodt's mixed-media paintings

represent a vivid brand of fantastic expressionism in which portions of varicolored reptiles and reptiles are combined to create metaphors of violence, predation and menace. The images are literal — that is, we can identify all the pieces — but they don't add up to a logical story line.

Nor are they supposed to. Stoodt's pictures offer the viewer a number of inferential options. They're fun and bright, but they seem stuck between out-and-out fantasy and allegory, part entertainment and part fable.

Mackie's narratives, on the other hand, are figurative and taken from everyday life. His black subjects are drawn with an exaggerated animation, like visual bobo, and the style complements their activities — dancing, playing the saxophone and generally having a good time. Give him an A for ambience.

If only Driesbach had the same opportunity. His small lithograph *The Gentleman Caller* tells a familiar story with such conviction that the viewer can extract a short story from it as a glance.

Noel Butcher Gallery, 112 S. 17th St., 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Through April 6.