

Subscriber

## Up close and personal with Cork's Canova Casts in muscle: a question of power

Marc O'Sullivan Vallig talks with the creator of an immersive experience that takes visitors on an audio-guided journey through Crawford Art Gallery's historic Canova Casts collection



'Muscle' at Crawford Art Gallery. Picture: Jed Niezgoda

MON, 15 MAY, 2023 - 21:00

MARC O'SULLIVAN VALLIG

Anna Furse's first impressions of the Canova Casts in the Sculpture Gallery at the Crawford Art Gallery were not necessarily the most positive. It was 2018, the Crawford was hosting an Arts and Health conference, and Furse — a British theatre artist, writer and academic — was the keynote speaker. "I walked around the Sculpture Gallery on my coffee break," she says. "It hadn't been renovated yet. It was musty, and all these figures were kind of huddled together."



The casts — Antonio Canova's reproductions of sculptures from antiquity, such as Adonis, Bathing Venus and the Belvedere Torso — were commissioned by Pope Pius VII as a gift for the Prince Regent of England, later King George IV, and were presented to the city of Cork in November 1818. When Furse came upon them, 200 years later, "they looked like neglected children".

Furse's talk at the Crawford was entitled *Interiority*, and dwelt on the historical overlap between culture and medicine. At that time, she was working in Dublin on a three-year residency with Create Ireland, and she was delighted when the Crawford's director, Mary McCarthy, asked her back to produce an exhibition.

The result is *muscle: a question of power*, which combines an audio tour of the Canova Casts — in the greatly refurbished Sculpture Gallery — with a short film called 'women talking'.





The Canova Casts. Picture: Jed Niezgodna / [www.venividiphoto.net](http://www.venividiphoto.net)

“The project combines my interests in the sculptures and human muscle,” says Furse.

“In Dublin, I'd been reading quite a lot of medical historians. There's one, Shigehisa Kuriyama, who's written a fascinating book on the differences between the Chinese and Greek medical traditions. The Chinese didn't make a separation in the body; they still don't, they look at the body as a system, whereas the Greeks divided everything up. But Kuriyama also observes that the emergence of muscle consciousness was the moment when the idea of the self emerged as well.”

“Working on this exhibition, I started to think about muscle and women. I became really interested in the idea of women who work with their muscles professionally, women whose physical strength has enabled them to compete with men. As women, we have always talked politically about our strength and our equality being about what we do in society, rather than what we do with our bodies. This is partly because in early feminism we didn't want people to think about our bodies, we wanted them to think about our minds.”



At Furse's exhibition, visitors are first guided around the Canova Casts, listening through headphones to her critique of how artists viewed male and female bodies in antiquity; and then presented with the film, which features the contemporary testimonies of six women who work professionally with their muscularity.



**Anna Furse, the award-winning UK theatre artist, writer, and academic at the preview of muscle : a question of power. Picture: Darragh Kane**

They include the 73-year-old dancer-choreographer, Emilyn Claid; the Paralympian athlete, Stef Reid; pole dancer and sex workers' rights activist, Maddie Burdon; bodybuilder, D'NYCE Fitness; fashion model, Lily McMenemy; and Sergeant Louise Banton, who recently concluded 22 years' service as a soldier with the British Army.

Furse was particularly taken with Banton, who combined her career in the army, where she served in the Royal Artillery as a drone specialist and logistics manager, with LGBTQ activism: "She's not an ordinary soldier, by any means."



Banton had only just come out to her family when she joined up in 2000.

“The ban on gays in the military was still there,” she says. “It was only a few weeks later, when I was in basic training, that it was finally lifted. I was lucky to be there for that change. I vowed to be my true self after that; I wouldn’t be secretive or go back in the closet. But obviously, being female, being of colour and being gay, I ticked a lot of boxes that the old-school army men didn’t really jump on board with or agree with or come to terms with. I had to prove myself.”

Banton has always been a sportswoman: “My dad taught me how to play football as soon as I could walk. And I’ve always done gymnastics. I don’t like to sit still, I’m always on the go, so I got involved in sports within the Army, playing football to the highest standard for over 20 years. I did pretty well at that, and it always worked in my favour. In the Army, as long as you’re strong enough, you’re fit enough, and you get the job done, you’re going to be fine.”





'Muscle' at Crawford Art Gallery. Picture: Jed Niezgoda

Banton did three tours of duty in Iraq and three more in Afghanistan.

“In some ways, being female in those places worked in our favour,” she says. “Obviously, you need to be female to search other females because it would be disrespectful for our men to do it. But when women were out there with the infantry in the frontline, it was mostly in the roles of medics and dog handlers, jobs like that. It’s only recently that women have been allowed to serve, like men, in infantry roles.”

Compelling and all as Banton’s contribution to the film is, so too are the other participants’ testimonies. “Each of the six has a chapter, but we could have done a documentary on any one of them,” says Furse.

“Each talks about their background, and what got them into their career. They talk about the rigour involved, the resilience issues and the barriers. We were cutting the film up to the day before the exhibition opened, and it was a shame to leave so much out. At the moment, it’s 20 minutes long, but I still hope to expand it to a full-length documentary. The material is certainly there.”

\* *muscle: a question of power* is produced by Anna Furse in collaboration with sound artist Graeme Miller,

