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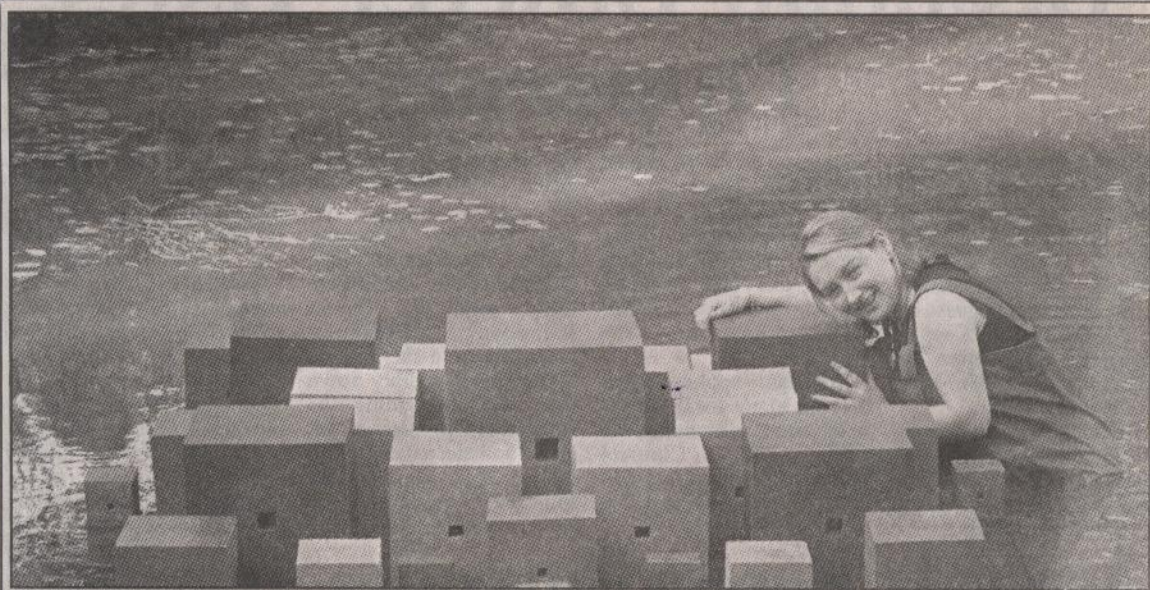
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Ceramic artist Michelle Maher, originally from Bansha, setting up her award-winning sculpture 'The Age of Christ' for the Sculpture in Context exhibition at Farmleigh House in the Phoenix Park. It won the Award for a Work of Distinction.

Up to her waist in water - Bansha's award winning sculptor Michelle

by Tom Corr

Ceramic artist Michelle Maher has been spending a lot of time this week up to her waist in water. The Bansha artist has been learning the art of floating a half ton award-winning sculpture in water.

"It was a pretty amazing feat of engineering to get it to float in water. But we managed it," said Michelle, whose piece 'The Age of Christ' has created quite a stir at the national Sculpture in Context exhibition.

The exhibition has been showing successfully for the last month in the Botanic Gardens. It has now moved to Farmleigh House in the Phoenix Park where it will run until November 12.

Michelle was presented with the Award for a Work of Distinction for her piece at the opening ceremony on September 8. Hers is among a total of 120 works on view created by 95 sculptors from throughout Ireland and abroad.

Over its 20-year-history Sculpture

in Context has established itself as the largest outdoor sculpture exhibition in Ireland. But this is the first time that awards have introduced for pieces recognised for their originality and artistic excellence.

At the Botanic Gardens Michelle's award-winning piece, consisting of cubes that seem to float on water, was sited on the surface of the pond there. It 'floated' with the help of a frame. But at Farmleigh house Michelle said she managed to get the 530 pounds sculpture to actually float on a platform.

Explaining the work, Michelle said it seeks to express poet Thomas Kinsella's sentiments about the aging process through the medium of clay - "for they are not made whole that reach the age of Christ." The sculpture, constructed in stoneware clay, consists of 33 cubes of varying sizes.

"The cubes seem to float on the water," said Michelle. "Their stark geometric shapes at times clash with their environment, but at times so too they blend easily. Each cube represents a year of our lives and as such

are all different, yet in some ways are all the same. And so it is in life, for we are 'not young and not renewable, but man.'"

Michelle, whose parents John and Valerie and her youngest sister Eimear still live in the family home in Bansha, was a Director with international retailer Aldi Stores in a former career. But never one to stand still she made the decision to retrain and become a ceramic artist.

"It was a real honour to receive this award so early on in my career.

They say success comes to those who wait, in my case a lot of hard work and determination can get you there a little quicker."

Michelle, who now lives in Castleknock in Dublin, was Rockwell College's first girl Debater of the Year. She also achieved numerous gold medals for speech and drama during her secondary school-days.

She won the prestigious European Schools Essay Competition in 1991 and represented Ireland in Germany.