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NEWCOMERS
TO CAL



SHINING EXAMPLE

Matt Sherratt on his
curvaceous displays

NEW HORIZONS

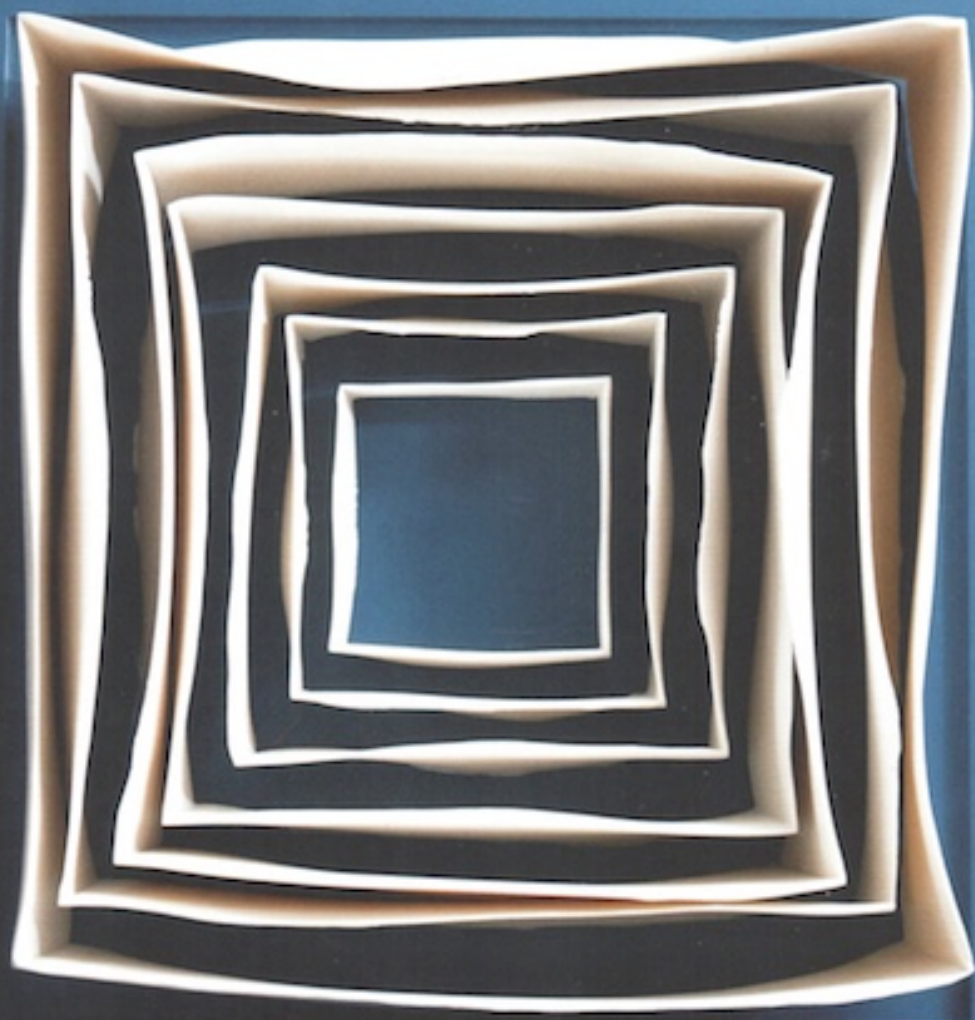
Eddie Curtis
reveals why he's
having a blast

BUILDING BLOCKS

The inspiration
behind Isobel
Egan's forms



Memories and material





Art and architecture collide with dramatic effect in Isobel Egan's intricate sculptures. *Frances McDonald* uncovers the influences and inspirations that resonate in her work

The fragility of life, our perception of space and memory: these are themes frequently explored by artists from many different genres and so they often feature in artist statements and descriptions of work. Therefore, when we first encounter Isobel Egan's silent, contemplative sculptural creations, we may feel that we've been here before, that we know what to expect. We see beauty of form, acknowledge skill and find the work quietly engaging. However it's only when we take the time to really view her work that we begin to understand and appreciate its great emotional strength and depth. Drawn from personal interactions, experiences and observations, it offers subtle yet powerful glimpses of light and shade – honest reflections on man's journey through life.

These days, Egan's work comprises large-scale wall-mounted installations that feature geometric gridded forms in which she has created a series of compartmentalised spaces. *Oculus* (below), a circular porcelain structure, consists of a sequence of square boxes, each of which offers a perception of space that alters upon closer inspection, as inner spaces are revealed through minuscule apertures. The ladder-like compositions of works like *Continuum*, on the other hand, comprise a series of internal horizontal and vertical structures that, again, reveal individual spaces. However, in this case movement alludes to both physical relocation and emotional progression in life.

NURTURING MEMORIES

Isobel Egan first explored themes of space and memory while completing her BA in Ceramics at the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, in 1999. She had initially considered studying architecture before opting for art,

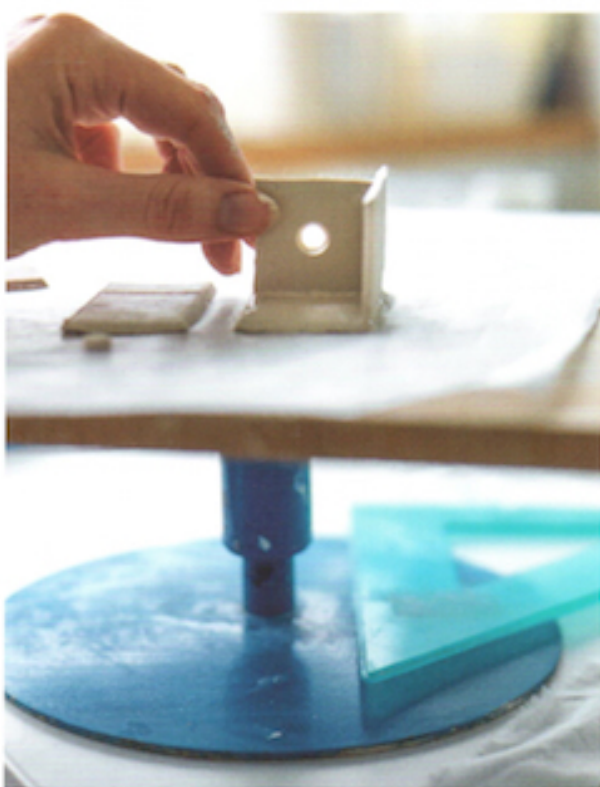
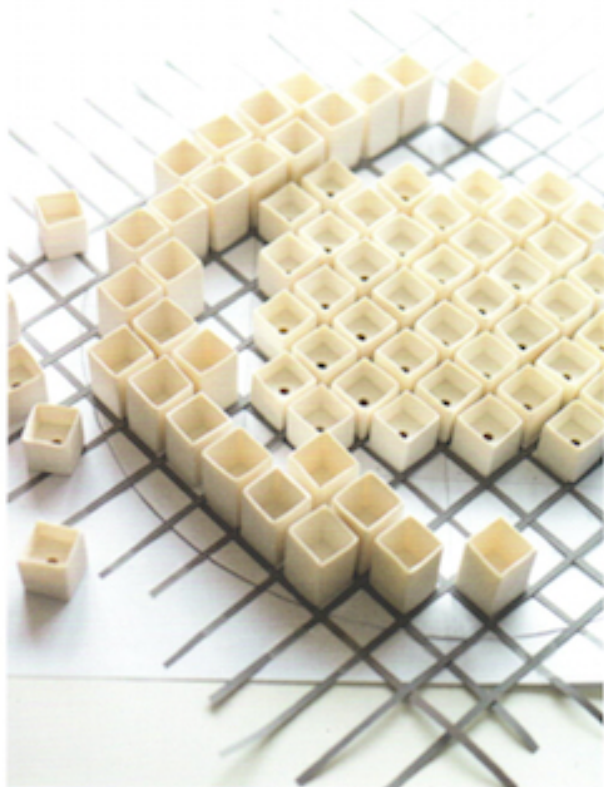
sensing that the art school environment would ultimately give her more freedom to create objects 'that our imagination can react to easily'. Early investigations into notions of space and our relationship with it brought her to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. A standard text for architectural students, it was the ideal synergy of art and architecture for Egan, who instantly connected with the book's philosophical meditation on dreamlike space and the interrelationship between us and the spaces we inhabit.

It would prove to be a seminal text for the young ceramic artist. Writing that 'a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space,' Bachelard's exploration of the home as a place of safety, a place that shelters dreams and nurtures memory, deeply resonated with Egan. She continued her exploration of the concept of personal space and our relationship with it throughout our lives.

She used crank clay in which she mixed paper pulp for her first major body of work, created for her degree show in 1999. These wall-mounted works were well received, both critically and commercially; Egan would subsequently win the Taylor Art Award in Ireland. For a recent graduate, this was a very positive beginning.

MATERIAL JOURNEY

In 2003 Egan returned to NCAD to complete her MA in Ceramics, initially continuing to work in crank clay, painting the surface with coloured slips as she had previously done. However, this material was soon replaced by white earthenware, which allowed her to create increasingly finer forms with a greater clarity of expression. But there was more she wished to say. Egan had always





admired porcelain despite an initial resistance to working with such a technically challenging material. However, she feels that using other materials in those early years was a journey she needed to make.

The work created during this period, most notably the series *Intimate Spaces*, comprised small wall-mounted compositions of miniature box structures. Clustered together on shelves, they are reminiscent of Bachelard's ideas of intimacy and the need to create psychological spaces where memories from our lives are stored. Some boxes were open, easily accessible and could be enjoyed, while others contained memories that were not yet ready to emerge – and there were also many playful moments.

Work such as the *Tree House* series, for example, included ladder-like structures, which Egan suggests 'allowed the viewer to move imaginatively between spaces'. However, her most powerful work at this time were the small cityscapes that featured solitary cube-like structures delicately positioned on the counterbalance, on the edge, ready to tip over at any point. She also made a series of drawings in which this structure was rendered in black. It was a stark commentary on the fragility of the human condition, the notion that our journey through life can, at any time, be suddenly and dramatically altered.

THE POWER OF CLAY

A further series of large free-standing works from this period, entitled *Introspection*, also employed the central properties of porcelain to comment on life's journey. While all individual elements were constructed separately, the finished arrangement was created before firing and, as pieces warped and shrank, rows moved out of place, one row affecting the next – just as one event can affect the next stage in our lives – for better or for worse.

Egan is keen at all times to emphasise that her material is central to her practice. She made the decision during her MA to work exclusively with porcelain. Her work today is a reminder of the expressiveness and sheer power of clay, its ability to inform creative practice and to convey emotion.

Throughout her career, Egan has employed the intrinsic characteristics of porcelain to great effect, mixing nylon fibres into the slip to create a durable translucent material. But it's not only the translucence and fragility of the material that resonate in these delicate sculptures. 'I love the whiteness and shadows,' she notes, 'the different contrasts when light falls on the clay, the light and dark greys, and the different shadows they create.' While the delicacy of porcelain perfectly illustrates the fragility of human life, the juxtaposition of a white material with dark shadows serves as a powerful reminder of the light and shade of our journey in this life.

'I love the whiteness and shadows, the different contrasts when light falls on the clay, the light and dark greys, and the different shadows they create'

Talking to Egan about her practice during that period, she explained the need to see an idea through and to create a piece that may never enter the public domain. 'Maybe some elements of those works subsequently reappear, but I think sometimes you just have to make certain pieces to simply get to the next stage,' she says.

In discussing the physicality of making with Egan, there's an underlying sense that process has an important part to play in the overall narrative. The initial creation of line drawings and paper models as each work is meticulously planned. The act of carefully rolling out sheets of poured porcelain slip, the continuous motion of repeatedly smoothing the surface and of carefully sanding each individual piece between firings seems like a meditative process and an essential part of her journey.

SENSE OF SCALE

Today, the notion of memory and space continue to inform Egan's practice and architecture continues to inspire her (*Oculus*, for instance, is a circular opening inspired by classical architecture). However, the scale of her work has changed somewhat; increasingly installation-based work engages with her concerns on a greater physical scale.

In *Internal Spaces*, a work shown at *Centred* (a curated exhibition organised by Ceramics Ireland in 2014), four gridded square structures combine to create a large wall-mounted work, which also houses a series of box structures. These in turn have internal spaces, which the viewer is invited to explore. In *Cityscape* (below, on wall), created for a solo exhibition at the Riverbank Arts Centre in County Kildare in 2015, Egan created a panorama of porcelain: a minuscule environment of boxes, tall buildings and open structures that stretched over two metres. They serve as a reminder of her fascination with architecture. As in previous work the inherent fragility remains, though years of honing her skills have allowed her to create structures

that are flimsy and almost paper-thin, emphasising further the delicacy of life.

Memory also remains one of Egan's central themes, as she continues to compartmentalise, store and protect past memories. While her creations continue to reflect both light and shade, there is a subtle shift in her more recent work: an increasing confidence and a greater sense of balance and acceptance.

The arrangements that Egan creates within many of her installations are very carefully considered, and as they frequently consist of separate elements, they also raise interesting questions of ownership. In grouping and arranging individual pieces of an installation the artist creates a specific and personal dynamic. However, the collector may also choose to move individual pieces after purchasing them. Does an ability to connect with an artist's work in this way add particular resonance? Does altering the dynamic enable the viewer to enter the dialogue? It's an issue that Egan continues to question.

The fragility of life and our perception of space and memory are themes frequently explored by artists. However, in this artist's case, it is an engagement that has given us work of great value, depth and honesty. ■

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To view more of Isobel Egan's work visit isobeleganceramics.com and find her at CAL 2017



BUILDING BLOCKS

- 1999: Bachelor in Design, Ceramics, National College of Art & Design, Dublin. Won the Taylor Art Award from the Royal Dublin Society (RDS)
- 2001–2004: Artistic Co-ordinator at the 5th Gallery Guinness Storehouse, Dublin
- 2003–2005: Masters in Design, Ceramics, National College of Art & Design
- 2005: work collected by The National Museum of Ireland
- 2006: represented Ireland at the European Ceramics Contest, Bornholm, Denmark. Won the Golden Fleece Award (merit). Established a studio in Kildare
- 2009: published in *Contemporary Ceramics: An International Perspective* by Emmanuel Cooper
- 2010: participated in the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale
- 2011: exhibited in 'Dearc', Celebrating 150 Years of the RDS Taylor Art Award, RDS, Dublin
- 2013: Visual Arts Bursary, Kildare County Council
- 2016: *Circulus* commissioned by the National Museum of Ireland and The Design and Crafts Council of Ireland for the Contemporary Collection of Craft and Design
- 2015–17: participated in *Ceramic Art London*