

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL CERAMIC ART

CERAMIC REVIEW

Issue 286
July/August 2017
£9.90
ceramicreview.com

**TOP
SUMMER
SHOWS**

MAKING HER MARK

Kyra Cane's vessels



WALTER KEELER
Shares his glaze recipes

PICASSO ON DISPLAY
The Attenborough collection



Ceramics Ireland

40 years on

As Ceramics Ireland presents a new exhibition celebrating the best in Irish ceramics, *Frances McDonald* looks back at the development and achievements of the organisation over the last 40 years



Images: CENTRED by Philip Loughlin, Touchstone by Rory Moore

In June 2017, Ceramics Ireland will present *Touchstone*, the third exhibition in a triennial series that began in 2011 with *transFORM* and continued in 2014 with *CENTRED* (pictured above, at the Farmleigh Gallery in Dublin). Focusing on a broad spectrum of ceramic practice in Ireland, which includes sculptural, decorative, functional and installation-based works, *Touchstone*, like its predecessors, looks beyond the membership base of Ceramics Ireland to survey a moment in time as it captures the best of contemporary ceramic practice in Ireland.

In hindsight *CENTRED* reflected a certain tipping point in Irish ceramics. Les Reed, potter and former Chief Executive of the Crafts Council of Ireland described it as a moment when some exhibitors were deemed to be at a point in their career where they were 'not just benchmarked by an international ceramic standard but setting it.'

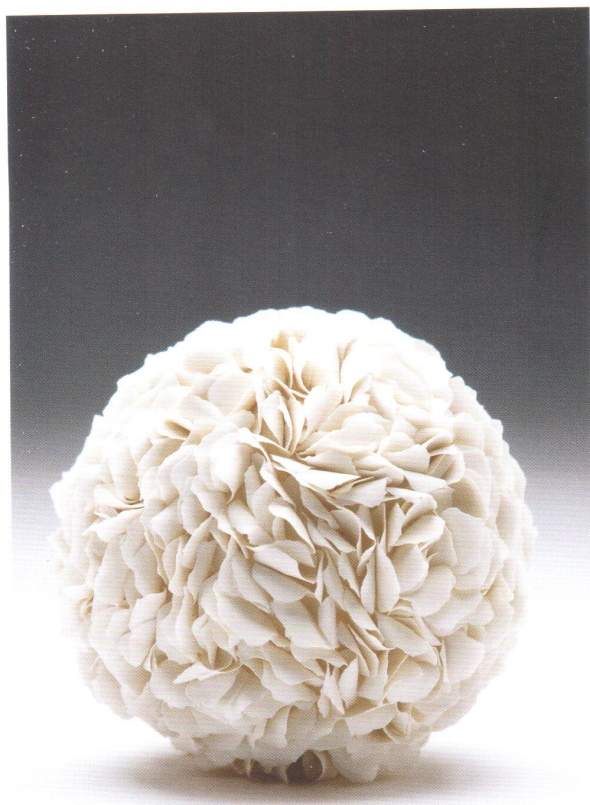
In addition, Reed called *transFORM* a seminal exhibition, observing at the time that 'an exhibition that includes a functioning teapot as well as a concept-based installation is very comfortable in its own skin.' There seemed to be a sense that Irish ceramics had come of age.

It's an achievement that Ceramics Ireland, which this year celebrates its 40th anniversary, can be very proud of.

IRISH SHOWCASE

Over the years, there have been many contributing factors to the success of Irish ceramics, including the work of regional organisations. For example, in 1982 the Society of Cork Potters ran an *International Ceramics Exhibition and Symposium* in Carrigaline, County Cork. To this day, it remains one of the largest ceramic events to have taken place in Ireland. The Design & Crafts Council of Ireland (DCCoI) continues to showcase the work of Ireland's leading ceramic artists through its various programmes and provides training through its Ceramic Skills and Design course at Thomastown, County Kilkenny. Other third level courses also continue to grow, while the establishment of the Irish Contemporary Ceramics Collection in 2015 by the Hunt Museum and Limerick School of Art & Design helped define the place of ceramics within the hierarchy of the visual arts in Ireland.

However, over the years, the Craft Potters Society of Ireland (CPSI), which subsequently became Ceramics



'Touchstone, like its predecessors, looks beyond the membership base of Ceramics Ireland to survey a moment in time as it captures the best of contemporary ceramic practice in Ireland'

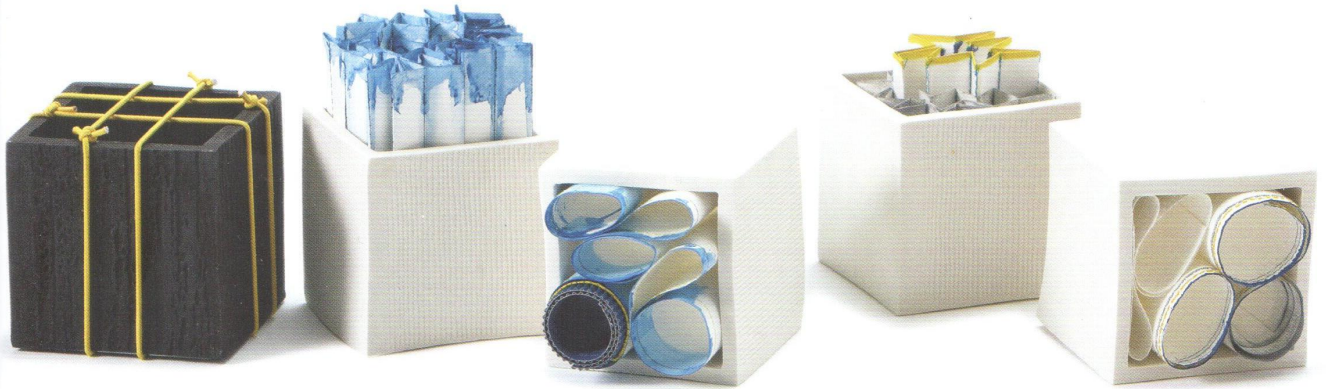


Ireland, has remained a constant presence in the overall craft sector and is now widely acknowledged as a potent force in Irish ceramics. The CPSI changed its name to Ceramics Ireland in 2005, believing that the original title did not fully represent the diversity of members' work.

Dr. Audrey Whitty, Keeper of the Art and Industrial Division (Decorative Arts, Design & History) at the National Museum of Ireland, cites the founding and development of Ceramics Ireland as playing an important part in the enormous strides made towards raising the level and quality of ceramic activity in Ireland. She wrote that: 'Ceramics Ireland, as a nonprofit member organisation, is now an important benchmark of excellence for the discipline. This has been increasingly the case over the past decade, which has witnessed a proliferation of artists in clay from Ireland at an international level.'

NEW WAVE OF MAKERS

Today, 40 years on, Irish ceramics appear to be in a good place. However, back in December 1977, when the CPSI was formed, the ceramics industry was experiencing the same highs and lows as many other craft disciplines. A number of the major potteries such as Carrigaline and Arklow were declining, but many smaller concerns were beginning to emerge and there was also an influx of makers, primarily from the UK, who fuelled an interest in studio ceramics. Most of the new wave of makers living and working in Ireland by the mid-1970s created domestic ware, while some explored ceramics as art objects, and many engaged in



PREVIOUS PAGE: *CENTRED*, the second exhibition in the triennial series, held in Dublin in 2014 **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Featuring in *Touchstone* are Jennifer Hickey; Vicki Sutherland; Frances Lambe **ABOVE:** Work by Caroline Getty

other activities to supplement their income. With makers scattered around the country and the majority living in rural areas, it was felt that an association linking potters together was needed. Initially the CPSI concentrated on the development of shared interests, communicating with and providing information to members. In 1980 they held their first members' exhibition, *POTTERS 80*. Extant catalogues from the period now provide a wonderful archive of material on makers of that period and the work they created.

CELEBRATING ACHIEVEMENT

Over the years, Ceramics Ireland has achieved a great deal. Perhaps one of the most successful projects was *Féile Clai* (*Festival of Clay*), a partnership between makers from both Wales and Ireland from 2005 to 2007, which resulted in the biennial *Ceramics Ireland International Festival* that now takes place in Thomastown on alternate years to the *International Ceramics Festival* at Aberystwyth (see pages 49–51).

In a new collaboration presented for the first time at the 2016 festival, Ceramics Ireland awarded one of its members a residency at the new International Ceramic Studio Kecskemét in Hungary. The organisation was also the conduit that helped co-ordinate a successful residency at the Fule International Ceramic Art Museums in 2011, which established the Irish Pavilion in China and subsequent Irish touring exhibition in 2012–13, *Bricks in the Rain*, curated by Hilary Morley. Today, two annual members' exhibitions take place, including an open submission exhibition in which every entrant is guaranteed a place thereby reinforcing that sense of shared experience, a biannual magazine is produced, annual awards and bursaries are presented and crucially, international links are fostered through participation in organisations such as The National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) and the International Ceramic Magazine Editors Association (ICMEA).

As a nonprofit organisation, Ceramics Ireland has also nurtured successful relationships with various partners over the years. DCCoI have provided network support funding and exhibition opportunities at the National Craft Gallery, while the support of Gus Mabelson, the Course Manager of the Ceramic Skills and Design Training Course

at Thomastown, County Kilkenny, has been invaluable. Ceramics Ireland also greatly values the support from the Office of Public Works in Ireland, which generously provides exhibition venues. Finally, the opportunity to award bursaries and travel awards has been an important part of Ceramics Ireland's commitment to rewarding excellence; current awards are made possible through the support of Helena Brennan, Scarva Pottery Supplies, Gallery Zozimus and the Blue Egg Gallery.

PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

In an essay in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition *17 Prime Makers* in 2007, studio potter Phil Rogers commented that, 'It is remarkable, when one looks at the significant organisation behind these two bodies [Ceramics Ireland and the Craft Potters Association], just how much of the time-consuming work is done by the potters themselves, taking time out of their own commitments to further a greater cause.' It reflects the overall generosity of sharing that exists within the clay community, that sense of shared experience that Gus Mabelson believes is invaluable to students and recent graduates. 'All my students join Ceramics Ireland,' he explains. 'They feel as if they are part of a professional network where they can easily get in touch with someone who can help them. It takes away that sense of isolation. In addition, members recognise the importance of being part of an international ceramics community rather than just an insular national one.'

It is remarkable that so much can be achieved these days by nonprofit groups who operate as enablers and facilitators; helping emerging makers take their first tentative steps while simultaneously showcasing the work of established practitioners who have already gained international recognition. As generations of Irish artists working in clay, whether they have occupied a privileged position or espoused a vernacular tradition, continue to challenge conventional notions of what constitutes ceramic practice, let's hope that Ceramics Ireland will continue to be there – to motivate, inspire and expand the possibilities for many years to come. ■



Touchstone is at Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin, from June to September 2017; National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny, from November 2017 to January 2018; ceramicsireland.org