

CERAMIC REVIEW

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WINTER
SHOWS

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THE GREAT POTTERY THROW DOWN

Our interview with 2015 winner Matthew Wilcock



Vase or vessel?

A new show in Ireland takes as its focus a familiar object – the vase – looking at it through the eyes of artists. *Frances McDonald* went to view

VASE: *Function Reviewed* at the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny, conspires to deceive – but in a good way. As the name suggests, this exhibition by leading ceramic artists provokes debate around issues of functionality within ceramics, questioning perceived hierarchies and reminding us that, within the world of contemporary craft, the seemingly innocuous word ‘vase’ has become charged, even divisive, and seldom used these days, while its apparently more acceptable close relative ‘vessel’ takes centre stage. So, as we consider our understanding and interpretation of a word we seem to dismiss easily, we are reminded that it is perhaps where the word ‘vase’ sits, or even the world it inhabits, that ultimately defines it.

Curator Brian Kennedy has selected from a broad palette of artists for this show. Choosing makers from Ireland, the UK, mainland Europe, Asia and Africa, he has also interspersed iconic names of modern ceramic practice with established and emerging makers, so the range of responses he elicits provide us with a diverse approach. We see, for example, Sara Flynn’s confident installation, purely sculptural in intent, Akiko Hirai’s powerful Moon Jars, which demand our attention, and Mike Byrne’s jug-like works (pictured here), in quieter, pastel tones, that navigate the edges of, and the connections between, the familiar and the symbolic. In another part of the gallery, Alison Britton’s authoritative red earthenware pots defy classification. Dominating their space, they are a forceful reminder of the overall theme and the questions posed. However, while a meditation on the vase has ultimately brought all these ceramic artists together, Kennedy has also forged other connections throughout the space. Forming fascinating threads, they are expertly woven throughout the exhibition, creating an overall narrative that reinforces the complex nature of contemporary ceramic practice.

The first work I encountered on entering the space was by Susan Nemeth, who references the historical in her work, most notably early European Meissen and Sèvres porcelain. Her *Fil et Ruban* vases include elements of subtle transfers and glazes, but are beautifully disrupted and rebuilt, their sublime imperfectness emphasising the mark of the maker. Felicity Aylieff also draws on traditional techniques and skills, this time in Chinese porcelain. Her large-scale vases incorporate mark making in shades of blue and are reminiscent of broad calligraphy strokes. In this part of the gallery, blue dominates as we see work by Philip Eglin, Janice Tchalenko and Babs Haenen, who presents a piece entitled *Wind Water*. In creating her complex vessel forms, she works with porcelain slabs, which are cut, folded and sculpted into meandering forms that all but leave the vessel behind.

Interestingly, in addition to this work, the show features a number of pieces from her design collection called *Flow*. Incorporating the Chinese waterfall and Dutch seashore, it was developed following trips by the artist to Jingdezhen in China. The inclusion of both studio ceramics and production work by Haenen makes sense, of course, as it befits the overall theme of the exhibition.

VASE: Function Reviewed occupies both galleries at the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland’s exhibition space in Kilkenny, and while overall themes and connections permeate both spaces, each room also contains some subplots, with grouping of works introducing new elements to the story. One interesting juxtaposition is an installation by Natasha Daintry alongside an understated grouping by Andrew Wicks. Colour is central to Daintry’s practice and her collection of five slip-cast porcelain vessels in pink, blue, white, cream and platinum are bold and modern. Contrast this with Wicks’s exploration of texture, consisting of a symmetrical, odd-numbered grouping of objects, historically referred to as garnitures. Meanwhile, in the second gallery, Hitomi Hosono weaves the beauty and delicacy of leaves and flowers into her vase forms, the sculpted, carved and moulded porcelain exterior contrasting with a shimmering gold leaf interior. Peter Ting has also sought inspiration in nature: the exquisitely delicate handmade flowers in his collection being the result of a collaboration with artisans in Dehua, Fujian province, China. Their presence serves as a reminder of the rich history of clay and how designers and makers today continue that tradition, while sometimes interpreting the past in new ways. 🍵

VASE: Function Reviewed, part of Kilkenny Arts Festival 2016 is presented by the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland at the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny, until 6 Nov (nationalcraftgallery.ie); and Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin (farmleigh.ie) from 19 Jan to 26 Feb 2017. Frances McDonald is a project manager, lecturer and writer in art, craft and design (francesmmcdonald.com). See Susan Nemeth at work on our video channel: vimeo.com/ceramicreview

