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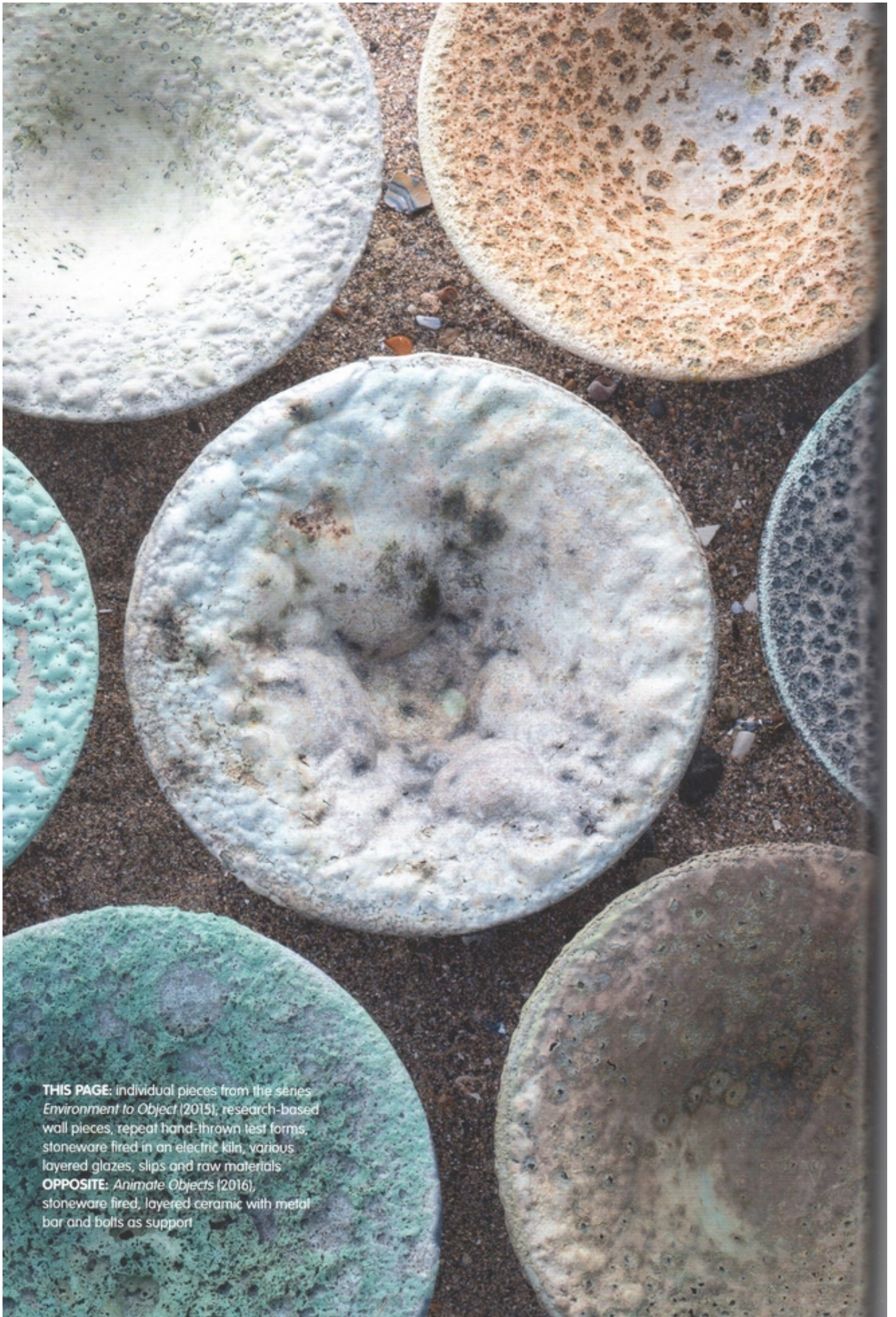
OUR TOP
SUMMER
SHOWS

ON THE BEACH
Owen Quinlan at work

SVEND BAYER
A lifetime making pots

KEITH BRYMER JONES
From clay boy to TV judge





THIS PAGE: individual pieces from the series *Environment to Object* (2015); research-based wall pieces, repeat hand-thrown test forms, stoneware fired in an electric kiln, various layered glazes, slips and raw materials
OPPOSITE: *Animate Objects* (2016), stoneware fired, layered ceramic with metal bar and bolts as support



Lost and found

Galway-based ceramic artist Owen Quinlan explores the material world and how we have come to inhabit it, choosing pieces man has discarded to feature in his works. For him, the successful piece should be at once 'permanent, fleeting, familiar and obscure'

Words Frances McDonald | Images Cristian Barnett



My first introduction to Owen Quinlan's work was through his series of stoneware fired wall pieces, which he has exhibited in grids of nine over the last few years, and which I included in two exhibitions in 2014. The latter, entitled *Interplay*, explored the juxtaposition of objects and their relationship to each other. Collectively these wall-mounted works possessed an intriguing dynamic, but individually they also had a story to tell – and there were many stories. Initially working very quickly, Quinlan talked then about throwing up to 100 pieces at a time, firing the kiln several times a week, continuously reviewing images, firing logs and carefully collecting data. It was a process of information gathering resulting in an experiential, yet controlled, understanding of material and process.

Those who engage in craft practice serve a long apprenticeship. In reality it's an apprenticeship that never ends, as many makers embark on a lifelong journey of exploration, repetition and learning. Owen Quinlan first began making his wheel-thrown wall pieces while completing a BA at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT), Centre for the Creative Arts and Media in 2009–10. Prior to that, he had completed a BA in Art & Design at GMIT, followed by a two-year Ceramic Skills & Design training course at Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny, where he had honed his skills and was first exposed to the rigorous discipline of testing. His time at Thomastown was followed by a period of uncertainty. Having acquired a skills base and possessing an emerging aesthetic, he was still unsure as to how all this would translate into his work. But what he was certain of was the need to develop a more holistic approach to making, and to refine the fundamental elements of his craft. So on returning to GMIT to complete his degree, he resolved to spend as much time as possible in the glaze room, gaining a better understanding of materials, while at the same time having a very practical idea of what he wanted to get out of the year.

A TIME OF EXPERIMENTATION

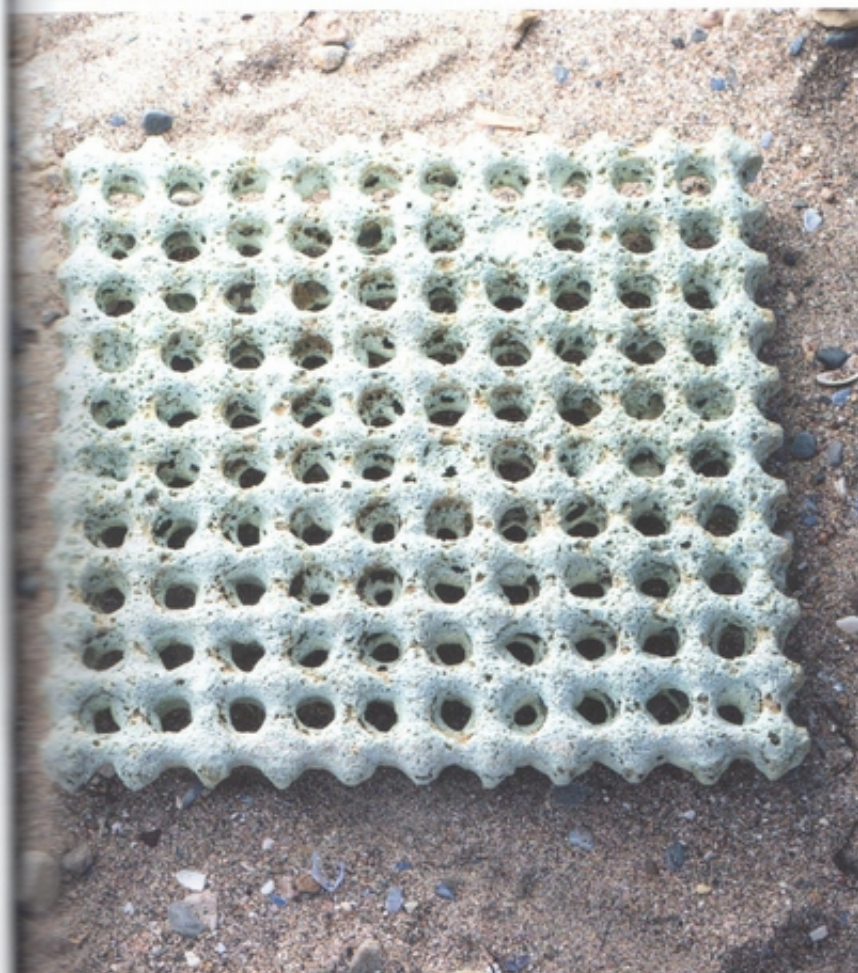
Quinlan equates his work during this time (on a series which became known as *Surface*) to a meticulous scientific period of testing: constantly throwing, firing and carefully recording results. It was an evolving process; beginning with a volcanic glaze, layers of glaze, slips and sands being built up. During the firing these layers begin to react, the bottom glaze starts to bubble and eats through the upper glazes. Throughout this process, minute variations in temperature can hugely affect the reciprocal action between materials; too low and no interaction takes place, too high and surfaces can dissolve and disappear. This 'Petri dish' approach provided Quinlan with a build-up of valuable information that would also, in time, feed into other work.

'When he discusses this stage of the process, his language becomes more intense and there's a sense of urgency as he talks about tension, harmony, visual flow'

When I sat down to speak with the artist about his work, he talked about this seemingly unending process of throwing, analysing and documenting; a way of working he equated to 'giving away the preciousness that some people might have when they spend a long time making one piece'. But paradoxically, it is this un-precious approach to making that has allowed him to capture his unique surface interactions, moments in time (and even some unexpected surprises), and moments in the kiln, when everything aligns and becomes frozen in time. Interestingly, while this was a period when he



OPPOSITE: *Animate Objects* (2016), stoneware fired, layered ceramic with metal support and found objects



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP CLOCKWISE: Owen in his studio lifting sliced layers of plaster batt using a kidney; work in progress; glaze tests; *Mesh Series* (2016), wall piece, stoneware fired ceramic with layered glazes and beach sand



ABOVE: four individual pieces from *Environment to Object Series*, (2015)

OPPOSITE: Owen Quinlan outside his studio

admits to being unsure about his future direction as an artist, he found that frequently firing the kiln not only provided him with information and credible work, but it also retained his level of engagement at a time when he might have become more disillusioned and disconnected.

With post firing came the task of interpreting the work and the opportunity to play with balance and energy as grids were formed. This was something that became increasingly important to Quinlan, as the rather impartial process of making gave way to the interaction of individual elements, within a composition of nine. When he discusses this stage of the process, his language becomes more intense and there's a sense of urgency as he talks about tension, harmony, visual flow; how a single piece out of position can result in a composition that is disjointed or chaotic. I ask about the predominant colours of the grid, but he is reluctant to go there, preferring to discuss their textural and somewhat geological qualities. Perhaps this talk of colour hints at an interpretation more akin to the eye-catching, commercially pleasing work that some galleries seek, which he is keen to avoid.

COLLECTING THE DISCARDED

Having graduated from GMIT, Quinlan went to Cardiff in 2010 to complete an MA in Ceramics. Here he was told to start afresh and put aside what he had been doing – an intimidating prospect at a time when he felt his practice was beginning to take shape. However, in retrospect, it was a valuable step to take. When he moved to Cardiff, one of the first places he discovered was the Tremorfa coastline; a tidal inlet close to where he lived. It included an area that had become somewhat of a dumping ground for unused building materials and it was here that he discovered discarded fragments of industrial waste, pre-existing objects slowly returning to their natural state in a 'less idealised environment'. Actually, Quinlan had been collecting objects for years and these were sitting in his studio, quietly seeping into his

thought process and influencing his work. Now he began to see these newly discovered, discarded objects as working materials outside of the realm of commercially sourced ceramic material. Made from clay, concrete and metal – and once used in the construction of nearby buildings – they were now returning to something more natural. It was this dual quality of industrial and natural that really captured Quinlan's imagination, reminding him of man's fleeting existence among objects in the wider material world. What also interested him was the notion that 'when you pick something up, you can't tell what it is, but you can tell there's residue of some human contact, an indication of past use.'

Quinlan's resulting *Animate Object* series, which combines found materials with added layers applied to their weathered and aged surfaces, suggests that intriguing lack of self, regarding past use or identity – that dual state of uncertainty and permanence, qualities of both industrial and natural. Within the firing process, these newly formed objects, which move as much as the glazing will allow, have the ability to completely transform. Fired within saggars to protect the kiln, what comes out can sometimes be completely different to what is put in. 'There's that kind of serendipity and sense of the unknown to it,' he muses, 'a successful piece should identify as something that has been at some point man-made and should hopefully stir curiosity as to a once possible function, but not answer any more.' What is important, it seems, is that an open-ended interpretation of these objects remains with the viewer. However, this work also raises fundamental questions for Quinlan in relation to the definition of craftsmanship, as he attempts to reconcile his disciplined skills training, with the notion of 'unmaking' objects, which distort and alter in the kiln.

After completing his MA in Cardiff, Quinlan returned to Ireland, where he revisited his grid series and created large-scale individual *Surface* pieces. These provided the same tones and textures, but this time laid out across a broader landscape. Interestingly, his most recent series, entitled *Mesh*, is imbued with elements of previous work and past experiences, as he continues to capture a moment in time. However, these new altered stoneware forms display an edgier sophistication than previous wall-mounted work.

What, then, for the future? For Quinlan, conceptual concerns will always exist alongside those of material and process, and each will feed into the other. Similarly, as he continues to master his craft, he hopes to introduce more discipline into his practice, while also continuing to include that element of risk. It is these combinations, mutual concerns and crossovers that serve this object maker well, as he continues to explore the endless possibilities that lie ahead. ■

Frances McDonald is a project manager, lecturer and writer in art, craft and design (francesmcdonald.com). Find out more about Owen Quinlan's work at owenquinlan.com



QUINLAN'S PATH

- 2000–2004: Diploma in Fine Art, GMIT, Centre for Creative Arts & Media, Galway
- 2004–2006: Ceramic Design and Skills Course, Design & Crafts Council of Ireland
- 2006 onwards: Owen's work has been exhibited in the UK, Ireland, Europe and the USA; in 2012 he had a solo exhibition at The National Centre for Craft & Design, UK
- 2009–2010: BA Fine Art, GMIT, Centre for Creative Arts & Media, Galway
- 2010–2011: MA Ceramics, Cardiff School of Art & Design
- 2013: awarded Design & Crafts Council of Ireland's *Future Makers Award*
- 2015: awarded *The Peter Brennan Pioneering Award*
- Owen has taught pottery at schools and has been an Assistant Lecturer in Ceramics at GMIT, a Visiting Lecturer at Limerick School of Art & Design, and on the 3D Design & Crafts BA programme at the University of Brighton