

Not Just

Contemporary Irish Ceramics at



AUDREY WHITTY

presents a selection of ceramics, ranging from the scientifically flawless to the witty and inventive by some of Ireland's leading makers

In October this year a landmark exhibition will open at the National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks entitled *Not Just Pots: Irish Ceramics of the 21st Century*. This is the first time an exhibition on the subject of Irish contemporary ceramics will take place in the National Museum, drawing on the museum's own collection as well as showcasing loan material from some of Ireland's leading ceramic artists. The exhibition will include works by approximately twenty-four artists. The display is significant, as last year the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) and the Crafts Council of Ireland (CCOI) established a joint purchase scheme whereby acquisitions of applied arts (across all media) will be made on an annual basis. Indeed this may be seen in part as the NMI returning to its roots, as during the early days of the organisation (late 19th/early 20th century) contemporary collecting of decorative arts formed an integral part of acquisition policy. The past four years have witnessed a concerted effort to acquire contemporary material both under this scheme, and funds permitting, within the National Museum's own remit for those artists whose works cannot be termed 'craft'.

In order to contextualise the current high esteem in which Irish ceramics is held, the exhibition will look back to the 20th-century precursors to the modern day movement.

Four works by Kathleen Cox (1904-1972) will be included (see *Irish Arts Review Yearbook 1996*), ranging from a plaster bust (1933), to relatively recent accessions by the NMI of two figures, dating from the early 1930s, entitled *A Woman Carrying Something* and *The Fruit Seller*. Both are of glazed earthenware. The quality achieved in these works is due to Cox's pioneering use in Ireland



Pots!

the National Museum

of an electric pottery kiln, which anticipated many technical accomplishments by her compatriots later that same century. Other significant precursors to the current movement were Peter Brennan, Grattan Freyer, John ffrench and Sonja Landweer. Indeed, the latter two continue to push the boundaries of what constitutes ceramic art. Peter Brennan's major achievement lies in having laid the foundations of the NCAD Ceramics Department. As a sculptor Brennan was ideally positioned to bridge the divide between fine and applied arts.

The Freyer piece is of a platter from the Terrybaun Pottery, 1955, with sgraffito decoration of fish, starfish, crab, squid and scallop (Fig 9). Grattan Freyer, an academic with a background in science and history, was unable to take up a lectureship with the British Consul due to the Second World War, and so re-directed his studies to ceramics, working for a year under Bernard Leach and setting up Terrybaun in 1949/1950. The works of both John ffrench and Sonja Landweer are held in high regard and the unique quality of Irish ceramics today, would simply not have occurred without their involvement. In ffrench's case one can trace the history of the movement from the Ring Ceramic Studio in Kilkenny, to Arklow Studio Pottery and beyond. His is partly a story of the application of art within an industrial setting while maintaining a coherent artistic *oeuvre*. Sonja Landweer came to Ireland from the Netherlands in 1965, and through the encouragement of Paul Hogan, developed prototype design and glaze research in the Kilkenny Design Workshops. Renowned during the 1970s for her batik bowls, two vessels will be shown in the exhibition of multi-layered iron and nickel glazes from 1981 (Fig 10). One piece was donated to the NMI collection in honour of David Hendrick whose gallery on St Stephen's Green regularly exhibited her work from 1962 until 1981.

Following these pioneers are the new works by contemporary ceramic artists including: Cormac Boydell, Helena Brennan, Pat Connor, recent NCAD masters graduate Isobel Egan,



1 Lisa Young
Memory Filters press-moulded and hand-built paper clay with slip glaze body stained and on-glaze colour 2005

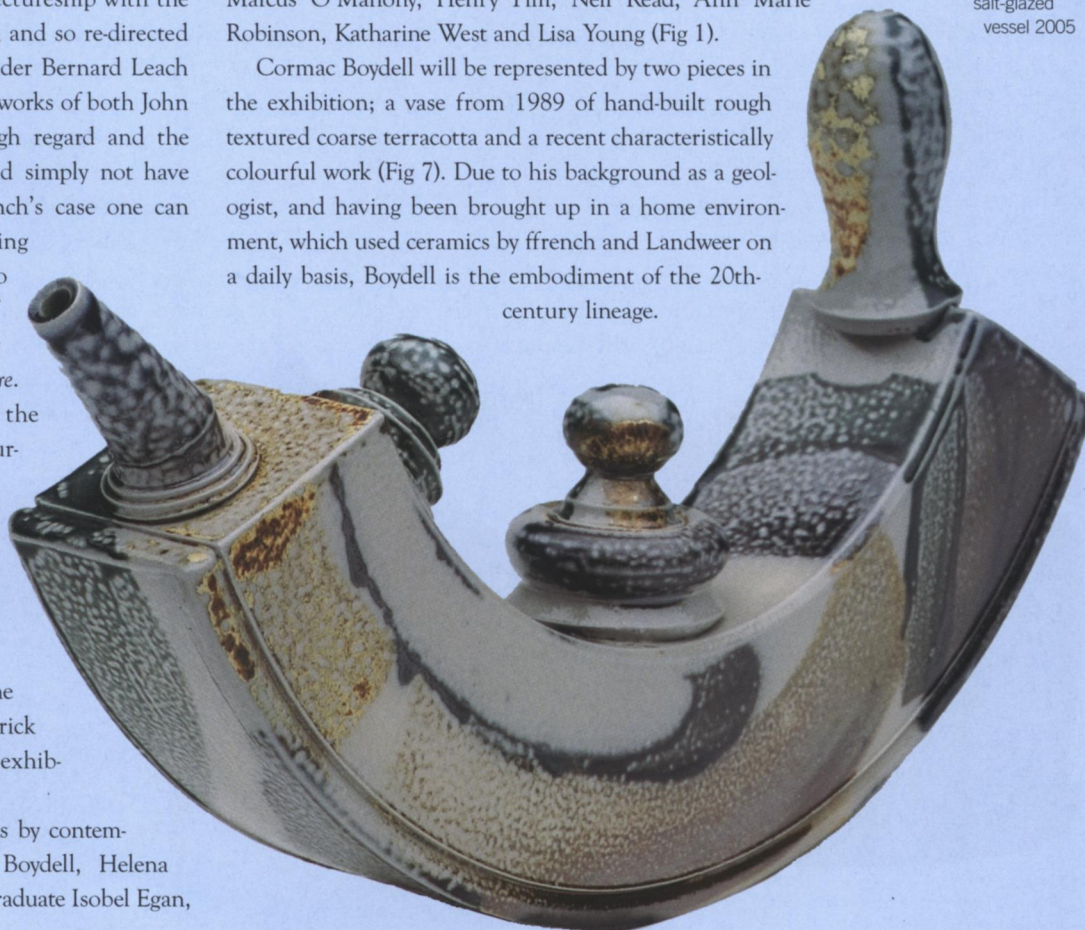
2 Patrick O'Hara
Chimanimani porcelain sculpture 2004

3 Patrick O'Connor
Meditation stoneware figure 2004

4 Peter Meanley
salt-glazed vessel 2005

2004 Crafts Council of Ireland/National Museum of Ireland joint purchase Sara Flynn, Vivienne Foley, Deirdre McLoughlin, Peter Meanley, Robert Monaghan, Michael Moore, Patrick O'Hara, Marcus O'Mahony, Henry Pim, Neil Read, Ann Marie Robinson, Katharine West and Lisa Young (Fig 1).

Cormac Boydell will be represented by two pieces in the exhibition; a vase from 1989 of hand-built rough textured coarse terracotta and a recent characteristically colourful work (Fig 7). Due to his background as a geologist, and having been brought up in a home environment, which used ceramics by ffrench and Landweer on a daily basis, Boydell is the embodiment of the 20th-century lineage.



5 Ann Marie Robinson
Punch bowl and
ladle 2005

6 Neil Read piece
worked in the raku
method 2004

7 Cormac Boydell
Lascaux Bull,
terracotta with
glazes 2005

8 Marcus O'Mahony
wheel-thrown
reduction stoneware
vessels 2005



Pat Connor's work stems from a firm intellectual understanding of the process of making ceramics. Based at Schull in Co Cork since 1971, his *oeuvre* tends to the expressionistic, combining the techniques of throwing, pressing and modelling. Also represented by two works in the exhibition, the NMI's stoneware figure of a lady from 1981 and the recent *Meditation* (Fig 3)

Two works in the National Museum's collection represent Vivienne Foley's time based at Whitegate, Co Clare. She has since returned to London where she continues to work in porcelain inspired by historical Chinese ceramics, particularly fine Song Dynasty (10th to 13th centuries) Ru, Jun and Guan wares. Although Foley is admired for her classical modelling (Fig 11), since the 1990s she has developed a new silhouette whereby the necks of vases are no longer strictly symmetrical in profile, but off-centre as are the mouths.



nonsense is made of the ceramic discussion about vessel and sculpture'.

Peter Meanley (former Reader, University of Ulster, School of Art and Design) will be represented by one of his self-titled *Spouted pouring vessels* (Fig 4). Indeed the aspect of pouring forms an integral part of the designing process. Sometimes inspiration springs from a study of the past, such as the Cadogan or a 17th-century Chinese wine ewer that enables the liquid to be introduced through the base. Meanley's art form is represented in the collections of amongst others, the Victoria & Albert Museum and the International Museum of Ceramic Art in Teramo, Italy. During his last years with the University of Ulster he undertook groundbreaking research into insulated kilns for salt and soda firing. Also from the University of Ulster is

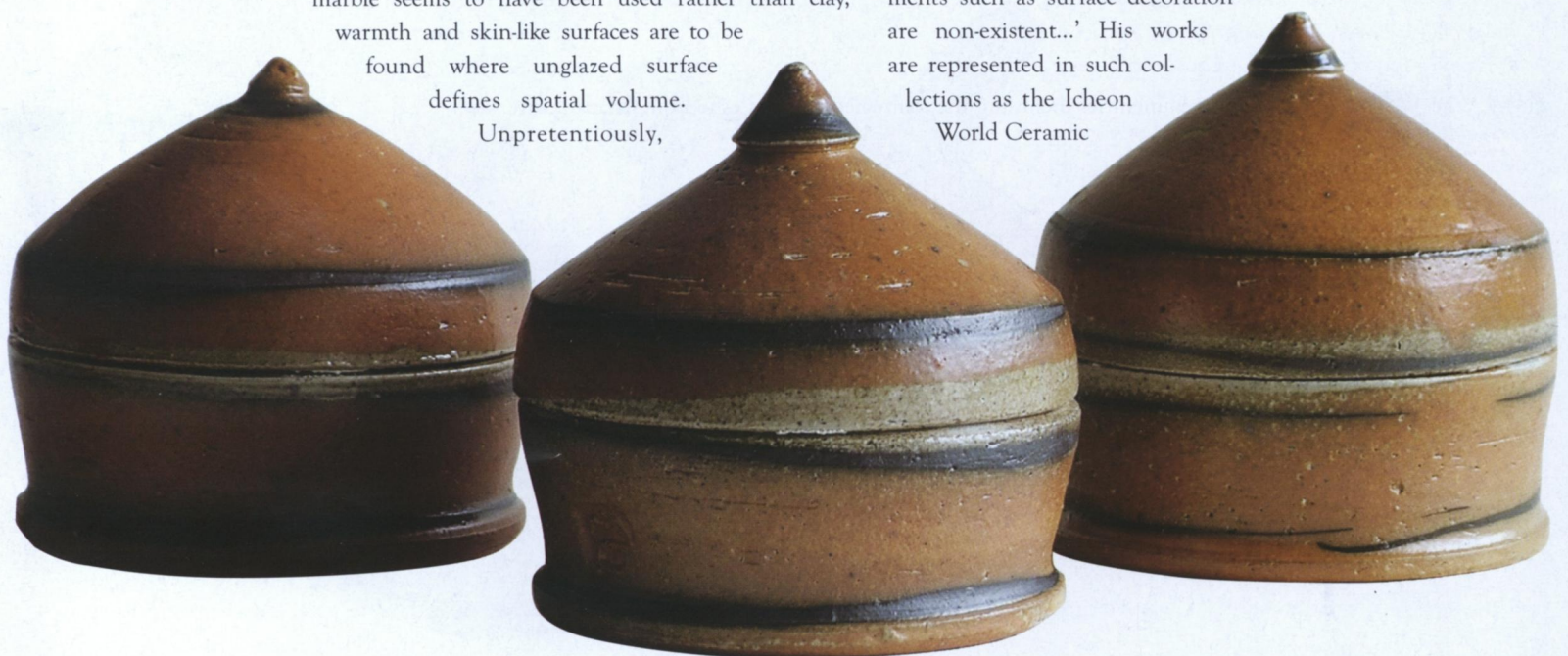
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Deirdre McLoughlin represents the Irish-educated talent that has been most successful internationally, winning the prestigious Westerwald Prize, Hohn-Grenzhausen, Germany in 2004. The NMI's previous acquisition of her work along with that of this year's *We Are Too* will be shown. The Westerwald Waldpreis 2004 Keramik Europas jury statement reads as follows: 'there is the elegance of the material component, of the exquisite technique which also corresponds to the language of ideas: finest

marble seems to have been used rather than clay, warmth and skin-like surfaces are to be found where unglazed surface defines spatial volume.

Unpretentiously,

Michael Moore the current Reader in Fine and Applied Art Ceramics. He will be represented in the exhibition by recent NMI accessioned work that is indicative of his artist's statement: 'I work only with clay and its natural fired colour, usually white or red. These pieces are rarely stained or glazed as the area of investigation is abstract clay form. I seek wherever possible to pare back clutter, confusion and distraction to reveal a simple, yet challenging form, therefore elements such as surface decoration are non-existent...' His works are represented in such collections as the Icheon World Ceramic



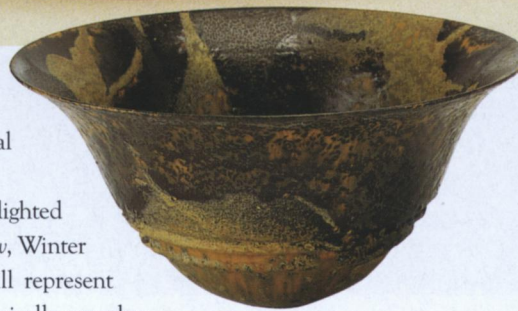


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9 Grattan Freyer
Platter, Terrybaun,
Co Mayo 1955
NMI Collection

10 Sonja Landweer
Two vessels of
multi-layered iron
and nickel glazes
1981 NMI Collection

11 Vivienne Foley
Black magnesia
glazed porcelain
vase 1980s
NMI Collection



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Exposition Foundation, Korea and the National Museum, Prague.

The work of Patrick O'Hara has been highlighted recently in this publication (see *Irish Arts Review*, Winter 2004). His sculpture *Chimanimani* (Fig 2) will represent him in the show, being 'one of the most ceramically complex structures he has ever worked on'. It is based on field research from the mountain pools between Zimbabwe and Mozambique. O'Hara is admired as a sculptor in porcelain of endangered wildlife species from the continents of Africa, America, Asia and Europe, and noted for his anatomical and botanical accuracy.

Neil Read is head of the Ceramics, Glass and Metals department at NCAD. Unlike the artists mentioned above, his education was based in ceramics and stained glass at the Edinburgh College of Art. He holds the Chair of the Irish Contemporary Ceramics group, which has staged two significant exhibitions

punchbowl (Fig 5). Her own words illustrate passion for the medium: 'I love the challenge particularly of making teapots, getting everything to balance properly, spout, lid and handle and then to spend hours hand decorating with luscious velvets and lustres...'

The overall aim of the exhibition is to encourage public awareness of ceramic as an artistic form of expression, whether in the more traditional craft/applied art context such as the work of Marcus O'Mahony of Glencain Pottery (Fig 8) or that of fine art sculpture exemplified by Henry Pim or Katharine West. Indeed

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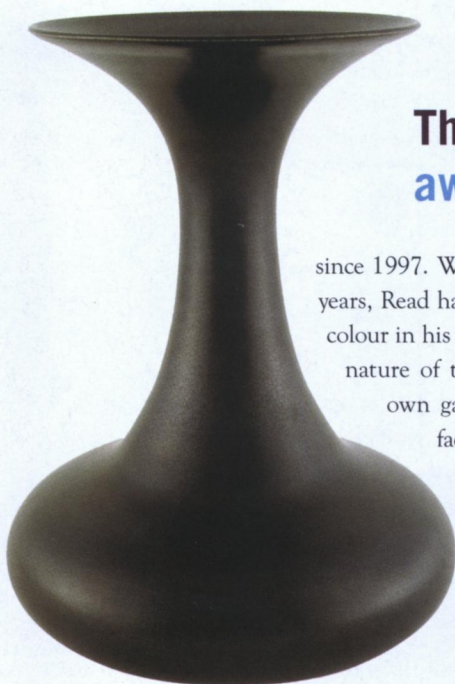
since 1997. Working with the raku method for several years, Read has combined controlled form, texture and colour in his art, enhanced by the immediate and risky nature of the process. Read has also produced his own gas-fired raku kilns to assist in the manufacture of his large flat pieces (Fig 6).

Ann Marie Robinson's ceramics imbue the functional with a sense of humour, splash of colour and accessibility. Her graphic teapot designs are particularly sought after and this exhibition will include an equally lively

the latter form of expression was formally recognised by the inclusion of Landweer, McLoughlin and West in the recent RHA annual exhibition. Yet in terms of the National Museum of Ireland's remit as the institutional collector and interpreter of the material culture of a nation, these distinctions as to function are somewhat irrelevant. The primary value for future generations will be the visual strength of Irish ceramics in all its utilitarian and decorative formats. ■

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'Not Just Pots: Irish Ceramics of the 21st Century' at the National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, Dublin from 5 October 2005 to January 2006.



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