



Sensational Ceramics

FROM MUD TO MARVELS BY JACQUELIN CARNEGIE

Forget candy dishes and coffee mugs: today's potters are creating museum-quality work. These artists in particular—Sara Flynn, Frances Lambe and Nuala O'Donovan in Ireland; Felicity Aylieff in England; and Daphne Corregan, an American in France—are producing pieces of “material poetry.”

“Clay has a history that stretches back to the beginning of man’s creativity,” explains Brian Kennedy, curator and arts consultant for the Crafts Council of Ireland. “As a material, it occupies that great position between functional and artistic. Over the ages, artists have used clay to create everything from cooking vessels to religious effigies. It’s fascinating

to see how this history informs even the most contemporary pieces by today’s ceramists.”

Irish Inspirations

“The Clay Girls” is how these three supremely talented artists jokingly refer to themselves. Each one takes inspiration from nature and then, in a uniquely distinctive way, pushes the technical boundaries of the clay.

SARA FLYNN It’s hard to believe that Sara Flynn’s pieces are solid material—they have the contours of shapes still in the process of forming. Flynn’s hand-thrown pieces—sculptural, decorative vessels—are meant to highlight movement and volume. Her husband, Stuart Poole, develops all

PHOTO BY GERRY MORGAN



Clockwise from left: *Butterfly Season (Hú Dié Ji Jié)* and a stunning collection of seven-foot high “vases” made in China by Felicity Aylieff; Nuala O’Donovan’s porcelain *Teasel Chrysanthemum*; Daphne Corregan’s *Communicating Vessels*; *Spiny Indented Form* by Frances Lambe

the glazes, many based on ancient Chinese ones whose ingredients and firing methods remain the same today.

“Initially, I went to the Crawford College of Art in Cork to be a painter,” Flynn explains. “But I got my hands on clay and was hooked. I’m also intrigued by the history of the material, and my own work is influenced by 20th-century potters such as Hans Coper and Joanna Constantinidis. In 1998, I began working with porcelain and instantly fell in love with it. Hand-throwing demands focus and calm; it’s an amazing way to spend one’s ‘working’ day!”

FRANCES LAMBE Perhaps because Frances Lambe’s studio at Allardstown in County Louth is in a renovated cowshed, her pieces look as if they have been “birthed” by Mother Nature.

“Time stands still when I’m working with clay,” Lambe says. “I work slowly, carefully developing ideas. My inspiration comes from an interest in marine biology, botany, geometry, geography and astronomy, and a deep connection to the place where I live—the glacial-formed ‘drumlin’ landscape and the rocky shoreline, where the land meets the sea.”

NUALA O’DONOVAN Before Nuala O’Donovan went to the Crawford College of Art in Cork to study ceramics, she studied architectural drawing and environmental interior design and construction. It shows. Working in porcelain, she creates structural marvels that reflect the natural world.

“The starting point for my work has always been patterns from nature,” O’Donovan says. “The forms are constructed slowly, over a period of weeks or months, and fired a number of times during the process. The finished forms reflect regular patterns as well as the irregular characteristics found in nature.”

East-West Porcelain Poetry

FELICITY AYLIEFF One of the reasons Felicity Aylieff, senior tutor at the Royal College of Art in London, likes working in clay is its long history as a material. Consequently, she spent a six-month residency in Jingdezhen, China, known for centuries as a renowned porcelain center. The specific

project she had in mind was making a series of large-scale vessels, using traditional techniques but applying them in her own innovative way. This resulted in a number of beautiful, seven-foot high porcelain “vases” covered with decorative butterflies, insects and flowers, reminiscent of traditional Chinese vases.

“My fascination with the color palette and patterns of 18th- and 19th-century Chinese porcelain is a constant source of decorative inspiration,” Aylieff reveals. “At art school I studied ceramics, but my minor was textiles. It’s from the textiles that I can trace back my interest in color and pattern, which in recent years has become a bit of an obsession in my work.”

Franco-American Flair

DAPHNE CORREGAN American Daphne Corregan went to France to study ceramics and never left the region. Today, in addition to doing her own work, she teaches ceramics at the Pavillon Bosio, Superior School for the Visual Arts in Monaco. Her work is usually made from *raku* clay, hand-built with coils. In the past, the pieces were either *raku*-fired or smoked. More recently, they’ve been gas-fired. A lifelong interest in fabrics and folk clothing has influenced Corregan’s work, as have extensive travels to places like West Africa, North Africa, China and Egypt.

“Traveling is a great source of inspiration,” Corregan notes. “The art, architecture, design, traditional crafts, textiles, ethnic costumes and jewelry of other cultures are compelling stimuli for me. Teaching is also inspiring. I tell my students that all artists must think and prepare, and be aware of everything happening around them, from economic crises to new scientific discoveries.”

In addition to numerous galleries and museums, Sara Flynn, Frances Lambe and Nuala O’Donovan will exhibit work at *dubh—dialogues in black* this fall, at the American Irish Historical Society (www.aihs.org) in New York. Felicity Aylieff and Daphne Corregan will have pieces at the International Sculpture Objects & Functional Art Fair, SOFA NY (www.sofaexpo.com) in spring 2012.