

17 Prime Makers

Article by Phil Rogers

IT IS A WIDELY ACCEPTED ASSERTION AMONG MAKERS OF ALL DISCIPLINES THAT potters in particular are good at organising themselves in order to present their work economically and effectively. It is also the case that potters have always been ready to broaden their own experience, to learn from each other and to share experience, knowledge and the many practical matters about which only potters can converse. Potters are, for the most part, sharing, supportive and genuinely munificent people. It is also true that potters are nothing if not pragmatists – people who ‘do’ rather than procrastinate, people who take it upon themselves to come together – to take the trouble to be involved, sometimes to their individual disadvantage, but for the common good.

Take the Craft Potters Association and Ceramics Ireland, for instance – the Craft Potters Association of Great Britain (CPA) is celebrating 50 years this year. Initiated by a group of determined and resolute potters it is now the only national body representing ceramic artists in the UK. Its stated aim is to advance and encourage the creation of fine works in ceramics, to foster and extend the interests of the public in such objects, and to promote its value in society. All of this it has successfully achieved in a practical sense

Ceramics Ireland, formerly the Craft Potters Society of Ireland, also celebrates an anniversary this year. Ceramics Ireland is the national body for ceramics in Ireland and has been promoting the work of ceramic artists throughout Ireland for 30 years. In common with its British counterpart Ceramics Ireland publishes its own magazine in which it showcases Irish makers and, like *Ceramic Review*, acts as a conduit for the exchange of information, knowledge and critical debate. It is remarkable, when one looks at the significant organisation behind these two bodies, just how much of the time-consuming work is undertaken by the potters themselves, taking time out of their own commitments to further the greater cause.

The International Ceramics Festival event is, in itself, another example of exactly what I have been trying to describe. Potters, in this case the two Welsh regional associations – North and South Wales Potters together with Aberystwyth Arts Centre, have combined to create arguably the finest festival of ceramics in the world. Again – potters making things happen, making the effort, taking the time and energy away from their own work to provide everyone with the opportunity to encounter ceramic expertise they might otherwise never experience. The International Ceramics Festival, like its Irish cousin the Ceramics Ireland International Festival, is an occasion to celebrate and revel in all things clay, to learn, to broaden knowledge while at the same time meeting and socialising with other potters from around the globe. Ceramics Ireland in conjunction with Féile Clai have developed their own festival which is held in Thomastown, Kilkenny, every second year. The vigorous cooperation between the two events has created a mutually beneficial bond and each is richer for the other’s involvement.

Féile Clai is the most recent initiative born out of similar aspirations and fashioned as a joint venture by the International Ceramics Festival and Ceramics Ireland. The name Féile Clai means Festival of Clay and combines a Gaelic and a Welsh word to symbolise the essence of this cross cultural project which is now in its third year. Funded by the European Community and the European



Left: Brigitta Seck. Ireland. One Way or Another Tower. Slab-built, engobes.

Regional Development Fund under the Interreg IIIA community initiative, it brings together ceramists from the East of Ireland and West Wales in a new partnership. Féile Clai facilitates events, encourages the exchange of ideas and information, fosters and nurtures the growth of young talent and promotes exhibitions that celebrate the skills, both rising and recognised, that flourishes on both sides of the Irish Sea. The exhibition *17 Prime Makers* is the final major event during the three year Féile Clai project, in a true celebration of the diversity that exist within modern studio ceramics.

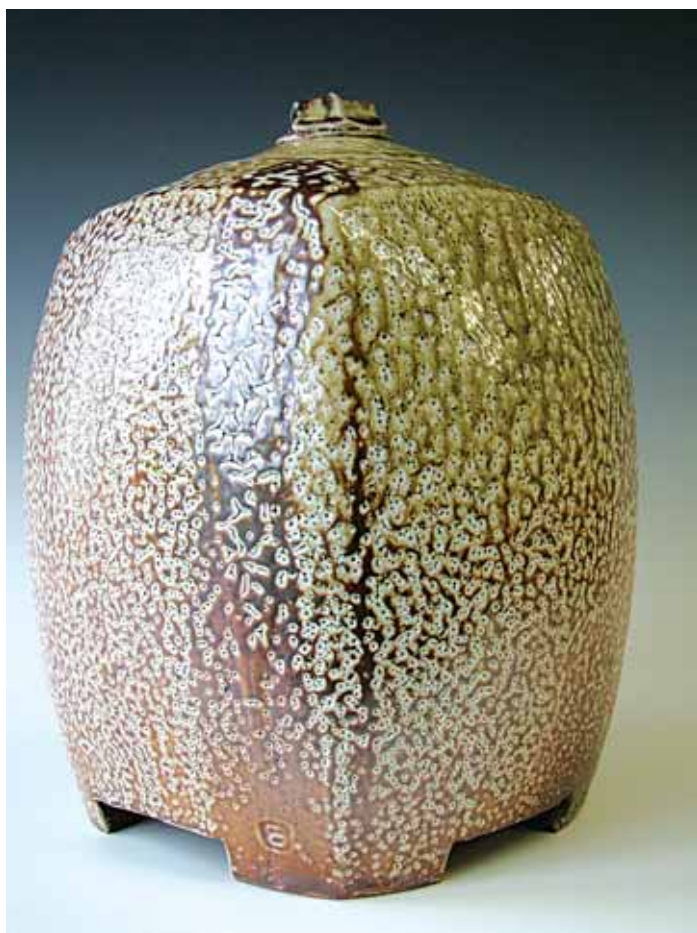
We have arrived at a point in the development of the ceramic arts in these islands where it is apparent that, despite the best efforts of the education authorities, we still retain a depth of talent that is the envy of most other countries and is certainly viewed with longing by our European neighbours. Young makers appear on the scene each year with outstanding skills, these days often figurative in nature which is slightly worrying for an old thrower, but nevertheless their talent is mature and resolved.

Art galleries are more and more coming around to the idea that ceramic-based work should be viewed alongside and on equal terms with paintings and sculpture. Indeed, one or two have embraced the belief that ceramics is so worthy of its own place in the sun they are publishing dedicated catalogues of quality with specially commissioned critical writing. The attentions of at least one major London auction house and events such as *Collect* and *Ceramic Art London* in the UK and *Portfolio*, an initiative by The Crafts Council of Ireland, have combined to create an atmosphere of intense interest in contemporary ceramics. There has developed, in recent years, a true collectors' market for ceramics, a new wave of committed and passionate admirers who are knowledgeable and selective in their choices. It is apparent that there now exists a sophisticated appreciation of clay that has brought with it higher prices and a respect that wasn't as obviously apparent even 10 years ago. At long last ceramics has achieved high status – pottery is cool – pottery, ceramics – call it what you will, has come of age and deserves its position on the pedestal. It is, though, strange to reflect that Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada and Michael Cardew were all attracting reviews in the quality press in the 1930s – what happened!?

The established makers showing in this exhibition are part of the reason for that new wave of enthusiasm. If we need evidence of the fine and flourishing state of ceramics then we have it in this diverse collection of works. The artists represented here illustrate that individuality within the ceramic arts is thriving in Wales and Ireland. Clearly, the versatility of clay as a medium, although a capricious and often unforgiving material, once mastered, provides no barrier to a myriad of expression. It is not possible here to mention



David Binns. Wales. *Textured Sculpture*.



Marcus O'Mahony. Ireland. *Vessel*. Thrown and altered, salt-glazed, woodfired.



Left: Grainne Watts. Ireland. *Textured Vessel*. Right top: Justine Allison. Wales. *Porcelain*.
Right above: Meri Wells. Wales. *Procession*. Coiled, grogged clay.

every exhibitor by name. There are too many for that. However, I will discuss some that illustrate precisely the diversity and quality of the ceramics shown.

David Binns creates objects that say little about clay as a soft and pliable material. Here, clay has become a convenient medium in which to capture and contain the aggregates which create the complex textures that are the focus of his work. Binns's sculptures are enigmatic, monumental and deceptively minimal. They speak of stones carved out in a previous age. Magical, mysterious – they are relics left behind for us to wonder and to hypothesise about.

In contrast, Marcus O'Mahony makes pots – not ordinary pots – they too have a sculptural, often hewn quality with a monumental sense of scale that belies a relatively modest size. However, they are vessels, thrown and altered pots which have their roots in a European/Asian hybrid. Salt-glazed and woodfired they represent the synthesis of a European glaze with Eastern forms and surface treatments. O'Mahony has achieved much in the past couple of

years – the cover images on both *Ceramic Review* in the UK and *Ceramics Monthly* in the USA and a London exhibition. One of his fellow exhibitors, Michael Moore, said of O'Mahony when writing for *Ceramics Monthly*, "When one meets Marcus O'Mahony it is impossible not to remark on his passion for ceramics and his talent."

Michael Moore is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics and constructs polished abstract sculpture inspired by contemporary architecture and the Irish landscape and coastline. Moore's pieces are hard-edged and clean-cut and he says of his work: "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."

Beverly Bell-Hughes is also moved by the landscape near her home in North Wales yet her interpretation is

different to Moore's. Whereas Moore sees landscape and architecture as abstracted interlocking subtly undulating shapes that rely on light to reveal the relationship of one element to the next, Bell-Hughes wants us to feel the texture of landscape. Here clay and glaze are used, not to slavishly recreate geological characteristics, but to impart an impressionistic glimpse of nature at its most elemental. A tactile experience, these pots are to feel as much as they are to look at.

Similarly, for her most recent body of work Grainne Watts has found inspiration in the natural weathered surfaces of found objects discovered along the Connemara coastline. For potters who work in this direct and visually-moving way there is a difficult line to walk. Mere faithful reproduction is, despite cleverly overcoming technical hurdles, just that – clever – superficially skilful. The difficult and creatively more imperative mission is to cut to the

essence of the stimulus and converse with the viewer on an emotional and not just on a visual level. Watts achieves this with subtlety. Her pieces combine poise and balance with a dynamic tension in the rim that separates the textured exterior from the smoother interior. In explaining her work she writes, "Using simple gently-bellied vessels acting as a canvas for layered slips of varying thicknesses, my current body of work reflects a response to personal sources of inspiration. A lifetime of holidays on the Connemara coastline has provided me with numerous 'found' treasures – rusted metals, bleached bones, gnarled bog oak, claws and corals in various stages of decay. The visual and tactile marks of erosion and of time are elements I have tried to capture in the decorative techniques I have been developing."

Ashraf Hanna is an Egyptian potter living in Wales making raku and says of his work: "My work is concerned with achieving the balance of creating



*Mandy Parslow. Ireland.
Stacked Bowls. Stoneware,
salt-glazed.*



Left – right: Ashraf Hanna. Wales. *Burnished, smoked raku-fired*. Alison Lochhead. Wales. *Iron Pour*. Henry Pim. Ireland. *The Good Teaset (detail)*. Ceramic Fragments.

ceramics which are inextricably linked to the forms and techniques of the ancient world yet contemporary in their personality.” He refers to his pots as ‘naked raku’ which is an explanation for the absence of glaze. Instead, Hanna burnishes the surfaces of his pots and then, after an initial biscuit firing, they are smoked employing various masking techniques to provide the linear patterns. Finally, a layer of wax is applied to enhance and seal the surface.

Ashraf Hanna began working with clay in 1997 and established a studio near Havorfordwest in 1998. In a short time he has achieved a level of expertise in his chosen style. His pots are quite immaculate in their execution and display a mature sense of form combined with an intuitive understanding of the relationship of surface pattern to contour.

The discovery that Meri Wells is an accomplished theatre set and costume designer places her ceramic work into a visual context. The personal mythology and sense of theatricality is apparent as is Well’s innate ability to pose her creatures to best effect. Some glance upward as if looking at the stars, others are watching a passing bird or search the heavens to find their way. Almost all are sad, pathetic even, lost, depressed or tortured souls. Just occasionally there is a comedic face, quizzical or surprised. Wells, writing of her work says: “The figures from the *Procession* come out of the hedge that I can see from the window. They march past reviving forgotten imagery of childhood stories and our cultural myths. I try to draw them in that first fleeting glimpse. They are made

from coiled, grogged clay and either wood and salt-fired or burnished and low-fired. I see them as elemental beings. Some of the pieces on show are part of a large and ongoing collection of creatures, eventually to be exhibited in their entirety.”

Seventeen makers and 17 styles – 17 different viewpoints all eloquently and expertly expressed. This exhibition is a celebration of diversity and of professionalism – of hard working, committed, driven individuals who set store by high standards and by their fundamental need to make the best work they can. It is clear that the best of contemporary ceramics is imbued with a potent personal vision, an individual expression and imaginative expertise. The overwhelming desire to expand personal boundaries and constant creative reinvention is why pottery has survived being merely a relic of a pre-industrial past and why studio ceramics will continue to develop and expand in the future.

The exhibition *17 Prime Makers* marks a significant moment in time. Not only does it provide the cement to further bind the union of Irish and Welsh ceramic endeavour but it is a timely reminder of the quality and depth of talent with which we are blessed in our two countries.

Phil Rogers is a ceramic artist living in Rhayader, Wales. The exhibition *17 Prime Makers* opened at Farmleigh Gallery, Phoenix Park, Dublin, and then transferred to Aberystwyth Arts Centre in June in time for the 2007 International Ceramics Festival. This article is adapted from the catalogue essay for the catalogue.