

Ceramics Seminar
2pm Saturday 1st February 2014

Claire Curneen | To This I Put My Name
18 January – 16 March 2014

With ceramicists Claire Curneen, Anne Gibbs
& Ingrid Murphy

Chaired by Catherine Roche, artist, writer and
lecturer. Text by Catherine Roche

The vaulted space of Mission Gallery is a potent setting for Claire Curneen's latest body of work, an exquisitely modelled cast of ceramic figures whose silent yet imposing presences offer poignant reflections on the nature of humanity and our precarious place within it.

Developed over two years, this exhibition is the culmination of an Arts Council of Wales Ambassador Award project, also supported by Mission Gallery and Ruthin Craft Centre, where it will subsequently open in March. Initially, Curneen worked in response to the collections of The National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, where the production values, materiality and narratives of her selected artefacts provided rich inspiration. Whilst artist-in-residence at Mission Gallery, drawing played an important role in the development of this research; Curneen's studio wall offers a cluster of tender resonances and relationships between watery-linear or velvety-dense drawings and the photographs of museum objects. Information was filtered and re-formed, ideas emerging as evocative human equivalents. Drawing is a conduit for this artist, the transition between fluid thought and physical expression.

The title of the exhibition, *To This I Put My Name*, is quietly assured: it is a statement of authorship and acceptance, reflecting the composed maturity of this new body of work and perhaps also Curneen's more firmly rooted own position. The ethereal qualities of earlier pieces remain, as do the references to religious and mythological narratives that underscore her practice, but here a counterpoint is added. Porcelain meets black stoneware; a subtle shift occurs, a delicate tension achieved. With the use of black clay comes solidity: unlike their fragile porcelain counterparts, these figures are more grounded, more of the world. Their gritty materiality suggests an earthy correlation, the hand-pressed sections of clay reminiscent of cracked, dried mud. Dualities occur in the gathering of Curneen's otherworldly, porcelain bodies amongst these new, dense and present characters, and through their polar positions, we find ourselves somewhere in-between: instability and vulnerability are revealed, but so too are the all possibilities of being.

While individual narratives arise, 'the in-between' is an underlying theme that seems to permeate Curneen's new body of work. Many of the pieces are undergoing subtle shifts of state or caught in spatial transition. A sense

of flux is present. Occupying the apse, an imposing figure, Portent, lies suspended; reclining or rising, this is a body of extreme tension. A haughty falcon sits aloft, surveying the vicinity, poised for flight; ground and sky connect through this avian motif. Other bodies, masked, wounded, hirsute or sprouting arboreal growth also seem engaged in transformation. Pruned nodes cover many of their frames, suggestive of loss yet also renewal. Images of growth continue in the use of decorative blue transfers: a nod to ceramic heritage, they are knowingly applied, their instability under heat causing slippage, signalling uncertainty and change. St. Sebastian's floral patterns delicately bleed and blur as they slip from his body to pool at his feet.

We understand these ceramic figures as human; their very presence embodies a persuasive and poignant authenticity, yet through materiality and scale Curneen reminds us of their objectness and of the ceramic tradition from which they originate. Rough and smooth, decorative and unadorned, intricate and raw all jostle together within these pieces. In their uncanny embodiment, these clay figures assert themselves within the space.

It is the evocative venue of Mission Gallery that provided a physical focus for Curneen's project; orchestrated relationships exist between space, sculpture and viewer. The diptych *Builders* creates an axis for dialogue between these elements; the outstretched hand both warns and beckons, we are seduced into the frame. Conceived as one piece, they are a couple, male and female. Their presence is not only pivotal within the group of artworks, but also within the gallery setting. They watch and witness; they guide; they direct. Many of Curneen's figures tend towards gestures of intimacy, small and self-reflexive. These earthen bodies however, reach out and connect. There is a motionless quality to the space, but it is not inert inactivity; the stillness of these figures generates friction. What becomes clear is that their power multiplies when grouped. Curneen is choreographing a suspended moment, a space in-between upon which we feel we have stumbled. A space that is disrupted by the powerful yet silent conversations that reverberate amongst these figures and that will pull us into their undertow.

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the [...] space | Ingrid Murphy
7 January – 16 February 2014

Ingrid Murphy is hacking her way into ceramic history - quite literally. Previous work explored the lyricism of form and space inspired by still life objects. However, a stronger interest in narrative is now emerging; new technologies and appropriated objects meld with traditional processes, offering a multi-layered and voluble experience of crafted artefacts. In technology subcultures, the term hacking means to enhance something by intervention and Murphy does just that, often placing herself within the frame of the reworked forms, becoming a tourist of her own cultural practice. In the series Hacking Histories, digital manipulation extends these unassuming Staffordshire flatback figurines, virtually and physically, as Murphy augments their passive, decorative function using QR codes to deliver contemporary ceramic storytelling with humour and insight.

Working with historical ceramic artefacts, Murphy embeds augmented reality, 3D scanning and 3D printing into traditional craft processes. The show reel demonstrates a breadth of experience manifested through her interactive ceramic practice, from poignant reflections on personal and universal themes to more light-hearted encounters between functional objects and narrative. Through her digital interventions, an enhanced experience of ceramic objects is offered, re-focusing attention and extending meaning. Murphy is acknowledging her place within an historic making tradition; celebrating its rich diversity, whilst opening a dialogue connecting ancient craft skills with those of emerging technologies.

Maker in Focus | Anne Gibbs
14 January – 23 February 2014

Unsettling undercurrents quietly emerge from the uncanny ceramic assemblages of Anne Gibbs. Working in bone china, her evocative compositions set up incongruous relationships that inhabit an indefinable space between landscape, body and object. Grouped and yet individually isolated, the component pieces suggest forensic fragments or archaeological fossils, their parts offered as evidence, laid out for contemplation. Gibbs is mining and mapping here, providing co-ordinates of displaced landscapes where internal and external collide, somewhere disorientating and yet familiar. Forms representing organic growth lie adjacent to those presenting more bodily or medical references, truncated and uncertain: a torn limb, reconstructed organs, a severed artery perhaps? Fragile narratives are suggested, but the spaces that Gibbs creates are in flux: they are in-between places where ambiguity presides. A sense of duality is key, and in these new works this binary dynamic seems even more extreme. Subtle shifts occur between the beautiful and the grotesque, neither quite able to assert its authority over us.

Weight, line, texture, scale and form are carefully considered, each component a mark, punctuating its space within the whole. Colour too has become more prominent; pale pastel hues hit a saccharine and disquieting note. The intricate and intimate quality of Gibbs' work generates intensity. Process is important: through carving, casting and collaging methods, delicacy and finesse are married with incidental moments, leaks and stitch lines remaining visible. Here, loss of detail and of control expose the tenuous character of ceramic making, bringing to the fore the fragile, uncertain nature of our existence.