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CERAMICS IRELAND INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

THOMASTOWN, KILKENNY

ELAINE FALLON

Each year when the Ceramic Ireland Festival comes up I always mean to go but something invariably happens to scupper my plans. I attended my first festival four years ago and I can honestly say it was a highlight of my 'ceramic train spotting' tendencies. In 2012 I was just returning to work in ceramics full time and spent a full weekend mesmerised by artists including Tip Toland, Rafa Perez and Ken Eastman. For a ceramicist it is such a wonderful indulgence to have these makers gathered under one roof here for our entertainment and learning.

Four years later and the pottery I have set up is growing, orders are piling up and there never seems to be enough time to get it all done. But I was determined to get to the festival and bring my colleague Marz Lawler and recent Thomastown graduate Karen Cody with me for a pottery girls' day out!. Unfortunately Karen was sick but Marz and myself were delighted to go. I'm sure I bored Marz senseless with all of my nostalgia about the Mill and attending the Thomastown course some 20 years ago! But it is always lovely to come back to such a special place and especially so when this event is on.

First up on Sunday was American artist Randi O'Brien who by Sunday was half way through making one of her well known bird sculptures. For the lucky attendees in Thomastown she was working on a Trumpeter Swan. I was fascinated to see the sling apparatus holding the swan up like a wounded soldier from World War I. Randi worked quickly, all the while talking in such a direct and honest way about her practice and life as an artist. She explained the whole process to us from her approach of working from the back of the bird and layering the feathers up to the importance of textural lines on the bird's neck and feathers that draw the eye along the form of the bird. As a functional potter to see someone sculpt in such a free way using tools and moulds was very interesting, opening my mind up to different ways of working with clay. I loved the way towards the end of her session she took a soft wet brush and liberally brushed the sculpture all over to create fluid lines and finish the piece. Such a simple thing to do but so very effective and important.

Belgian artist Ann Van Hoey brought us back across the Atlantic to a very different way of working. Ann's work was super clean, heavily influenced by her interest in origami and her Etude Géométrique. Again I found Ann's presentation so down to earth and refreshing. She spoke about her almost meteoric rise to fame as she first began to exhibit and the surprise she felt at this, describing it as her very own, 'Alice in Wonderland' experience! Ann started her ceramic career later in life and her husband's advice to her

Jim Behan



Randi O'Brien



Ann Van Hoey, *The Earthenware Ferrari*

was brilliant – 'Aim as high as you can, you don't have the time to start lower'. That is the kernel that I will take from her talk, her courage, her sheer enjoyment of what she does and her honesty. Her message was clear: Love what you make, do it to the best of your ability and aim high, what else have you to lose and you know what? She's bloody right!

Ann spoke about getting to grips with Facebook and being open to her daughter's suggestions about her presentations. She realised that her descriptions of her work needed a bit of pzazz and gladly took her daughter's suggestion to rename one piece the eye catching title 'The Earthenware Ferrari'. This piqued the interest of a larger group of people including her former corporate colleagues. I found there was a fearlessness to Ann's approach and a collaborative element to her practice which opened up a lot of ideas and avenues for her. She clearly illustrated the importance of coming out of the studio and sharing ideas in order to grow as an artist. Ann spoke about her design work for the Belgian company *Serax* and how she established the brand *A+A*, a collaboration between the artist and *Den Ateljee*, a workshop for people with physical disabilities.



Next up was artist Owen Quinlan who showed us how he uses layer upon layer of slip, volcanic glaze and other slips to create multi layered rock like sculptures often pierced or compressed by metal plates and bolts. While working away Quinlan spoke of the influence of his teacher Peter Castle in Cardiff where he completed his Masters and how he continually challenged him as a student. He uses many of the objects he found beachcombing in Cardiff in his work, collecting objects that feed into his ideas. His practice is informed by a fascination with geology and showed us two sculptures that perfectly illustrated what he calls the 'miniaturization of geology'. The sculptures exuded a force and energy, conveying shifting land plates and prehistoric rock formations that have been unearthed from the sea bed or some volcanic landscape. Looking back on this demonstration I was struck by how meticulous Quinlan was in the construction of his sculptures, using a spirit level to balance the base so each layer of slip he pours is the correct thickness. The vigour, energy and surprise of each sculpture is created through the firing process. I liked the way he spoke of the permanence of ceramics and how he enjoys the ability to speed up processes through his work which look like they take millennia to achieve.



Owen Quinlan

I thoroughly enjoyed the demonstration by American artist Susan Beiner. Beiner is a lecturer in Arizona State University and teaches in a very direct, confident way. She got stuck in, in a no-nonsense approach constructing a sculpture of an urn decorated with fantastical tubular and hand cut flowers created from plaster moulds. The flowers were cut from unlikely looking moulds, none of which I would have expected to be suitable but in her hands were perfect.

Beiner trained as a painter and uses glaze in a very free way, she explained how she uses a pipette slip trailer with a fluid glaze, that accentuates the edges of her work and melts down the sides. This unifies the entire piece for her. Her desire is for 'the viewer to see a silhouette in her work, an overall form, made of multiple elements whose possibilities are endless'. Her dry wit and confident mastery of her materials stayed with me long after the festival, I really found the work fascinating and since have looked up her large scale gallery pieces, made of hundreds of highly glazed elements many feet high.

Jim Behan no stranger to Thomastown travelled all the way from Carlow! He regaled us with tales from his early adventures with clay and talked of what had influenced and inspired his practice over the years. At the end of his presentation he left us with the thought 'May your dreams be the stuff that your life is made of'. And it was clear he was living the dream. Jim demonstrated on the Friday and Saturday the skills of his craft in his own modest style –throwing large platter and jar forms that he decorated with slip. Unfortunately I missed his demos but managed to catch up with him in his preparation area.

Australian potter Janet DeBoos was a godsend for a production potter like me. DeBoos is famous for her very fresh, fluid throwing and her highly patterned, eastern influenced work with decals and block colour. To see her throwing style, stopping and starting, working with the porcelain as it wobbled and using a heat gun, totally in control of her craft but always on the edge of collapse was very inspiring. Her demonstration of making handles has changed the way I make my own handles, which is a pretty huge thing for me since I have been making handles the same way for 20 years, so thank you Janet! It really was such a treat to see someone else throw, hear them talk about how their throwing has developed over the years and the nature of working with porcelain. It came at a very opportune time as I had been having a bit of bother in the studio with a new stoneware porcelain clay I had been working with.

At the end of the day I left totally elated, my head buzzing with new ideas and replaying particular moments that made an impression. What did I take away from my day at the 2016 Festival? – many things, among them: A huge appreciation for Randi O'Brien's work, the organisers kindly unwrapped one of her sculptures that had been sold so I could marvel at it again and I wish I had bought one! Randi's wonderful smile, warmth and her easy way of working with the clay, her honesty and openness speaking about the highs and lows of her work as an artist. Ann Van Hoey's enthusiasm and approachability, her invaluable advice to aim as high as we can, her courage and how genuinely grateful she is for all that she has achieved in a career that she came to late. Susan Beiner's wealth of information on what she looks for as she works; the importance of line in her compositions, her total concentration on what she was doing and how wonderfully immersed she was in it, I felt her connection to her work and began to see it through her eyes; Owen Quinlan's meticulous making skills and his huge interest in surface, texture and process. Jim Behan's modest delivery belied the mastery of his craft, he wooed the audience with his lovely fluid throwing and slip decoration skills. Janet DeBoos sense of humor and fluidity in her making, her experience as a thrower, her ease and style, such an antidote for a production potter who may feel hemmed in by production schedules.

Susan Beiner

From a practical point of view I found the day most enjoyable with plenty of baked treats, wholesome foods available and great company throughout the day! I even won a year's free membership to Ceramics Ireland in the raffle and look forward to being exposed to more artists' work, new ideas and getting more plugged into what is happening in the wider world of Irish ceramics and not just what is happening in my own tiny studio... So Thank you Tina, Elaine, Cathy, Sinéad, and all the other organisers whom I have yet to know for organising this event. My hope is to come for the full weekend the next time!!





