

Emmanuel Cooper

Potter, writer, educator, critic



JULIAN STAIR

Carefully grouped vessel objects

SARA MOORHOUSE

Brightly banded bowls with an optical twist

MICHAEL DOOLAN

The darker side of fairy tales

The Controlled and the Uncontrolled

Michael Rice describes a personal journey of discovery.

'All true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness.'

Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*

When looking at a shell on the beach, a stone made beautiful by the endless caress of the tide, objects, forms, things created over time by the earth, I am awed by the skill of nature. I have longed to be able to make things that look as natural as if nature had made them, to create objects that resonate with a timeless quality, with a feeling of a genesis beyond the constructed and manufactured.

People come to art because they are hungry. I want them to be satisfied in the same way your belly is satisfied when you have had a meal or your eyes are satisfied when you see something attractive. Although I enjoy philosophy, I feel mildly annoyed by art that needs over-explanation, even whilst seeing the necessity for it, as it can really work. Of course, the irony of explaining that I do not like explanations is not lost on me. For the most part I have simply wanted beauty – tangible beauty that is actually present – not ideology. I love intelligence in work but primarily I first need to be drawn in by aesthetics. With my mind aroused by intellectual stimuli I can get great satisfaction, but it is a feeling quite different from the immediate appreciation of beauty, of honed natural perfection.

Occasionally I have been lucky to make a piece I feel is especially beautiful. I used to think it was the feeling of achievement and satisfaction that I could make something that pleased me, and maybe at some point it was. Now I realise that when I have created something that seems really distinctive, the feeling is one of being overcome with a strange and compelling sensation that I did not really make the piece at all, that I was the medium in the process but not the maker, a guardian of the work but not the parent. Often the works I feel are the most successful are born out of little unplanned calamities. I have learned to treat these spontaneous 'accidents' with respect and at times to encourage them, as they may be a great source of potential inspiration.

DISC FORMS The new standing disc forms were a useful example of being lost in the work and play, not necessarily interested in an outcome, but just seeing what happens. I had been throwing large discs to create off-centre tops for vase/vessel forms and was becoming seriously irked by the effort that was going into throwing these 50cm discs when I was only using a third of the finished form. With the leftovers, I cut, assembled, re-cut, and assessed. Then, in a moment of pure unadulterated providence, I lifted one of the uncut complete discs and in one unconscious flowing movement cut a straight line from the inside to outside edge, twisted it, and stood it up on its edge.

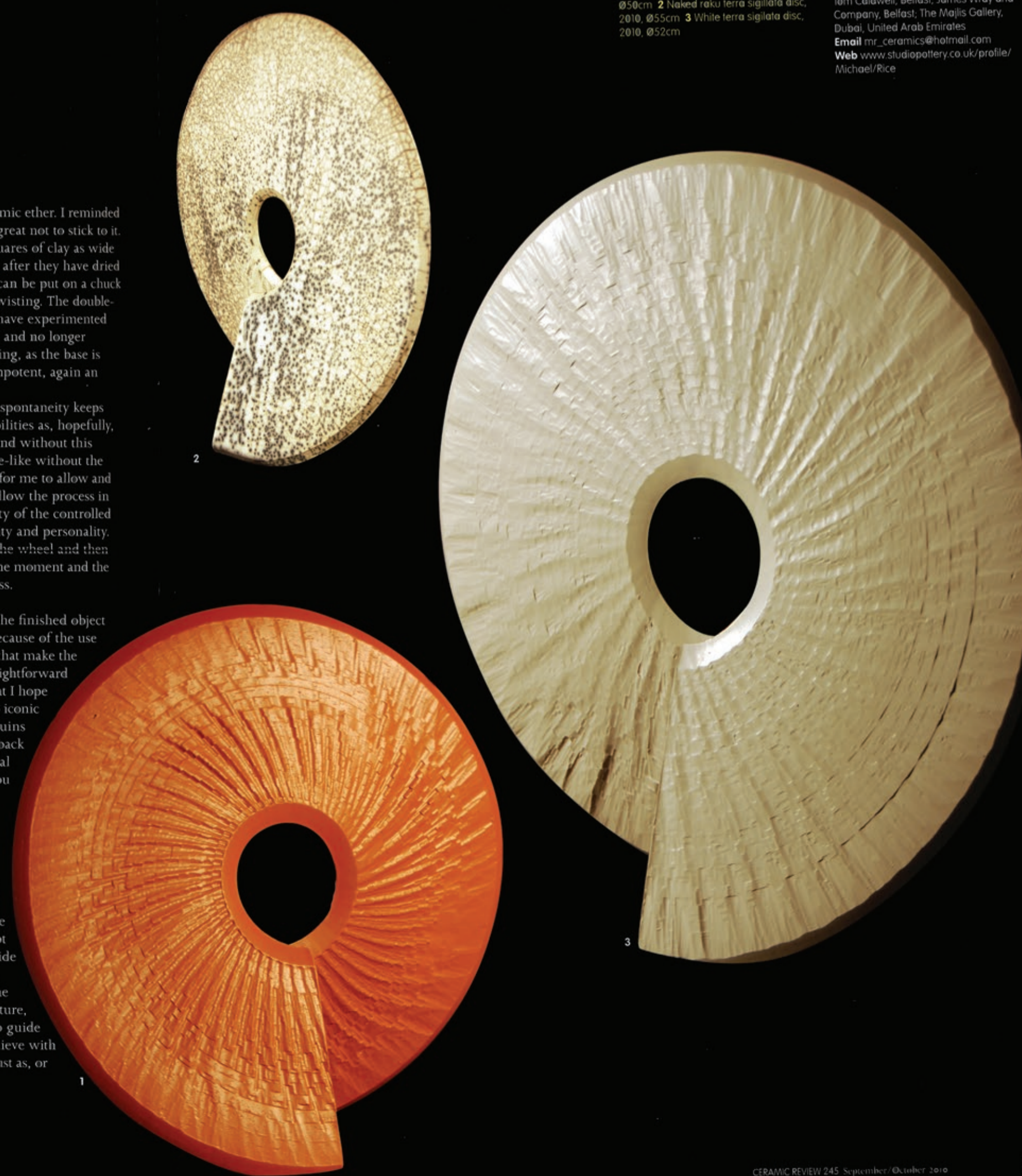
Surveying this new twisted form, a sense of excitement grew as I scrutinised it from every angle, each of which offered something different. I was sure I had not seen the form before but it was so simple that I could not be sure. With a bit of cutting and surforming

it was totally stable, a perfect gift from the ceramic ether. I reminded myself that it is useful to have a plan but it is great not to stick to it. Now I no longer throw the discs, I roll out squares of clay as wide as the slab roller will allow (about 60cm) and after they have dried for a week between two pieces of wood they can be put on a chuck and turned and juddered before cutting and twisting. The double-walled forms are also a departure, although I have experimented with this idea before. They are more complete and no longer have any reluctant ambitions to contain anything, as the base is completely open and therefore functionally impotent, again an idea that 'just happened'.

I hope this methodology of trying to court spontaneity keeps the work fresh to viewers, open to new possibilities as, hopefully, it does for me. It is a vital part of the process and without this component the work could be stagnant, corpse-like without the spark of life. Moreover, it feels intuitively right for me to allow and even encourage a freedom of making and to allow the process in some ways to shape itself. It is this tense duality of the controlled and the uncontrolled that gives the work vitality and personality. The careful planning to work from design to the wheel and then give away that control to the random want of the moment and the secondary firing flames is all part of the process.

SERENDIPITY My hope is that the aesthetic of the finished object is visually striking but also has a familiarity because of the use of terra sigillata and the post-firing techniques that make the most out of the least materials. The finish is straightforward yet complex and therefore creates a dialectic that I hope transcends simple visual meaning, moving into iconic or ceremonial territory. Just as when visiting ruins of a once great civilisation you are connected back to something that supersedes your own cultural familiarity, the work should seek to remind you of the past in the present.

Having spent years trying to make things as well as I could, I am now at a stage where I am happy to give up some of that control. Fundamentally I am trying to achieve serendipity by allowing the work to flow from the skill of my abilities and to be an expression of the moment. The basis for my practice is to be as skilled a practitioner as possible but to attempt to allow the process to be driven by forces outside of me, to become the medium not the maker. Although wholly interested in aesthetics and the way things look, I believe that the beauty of nature, and acting in accordance with it, may be able to guide my hand towards a beauty that I could not achieve with careful planning alone – that intuition may be just as, or even more, valid a reason. ■



1 Terra cotta terra sigillata disc, 2010, Ø50cm
2 Naked raku terra sigillata disc, 2010, Ø55cm
3 White terra sigillata disc, 2010, Ø52cm

Stockists Spacecraft Gallery, Belfast; Tam Caldwell, Belfast; James Wray and Company, Belfast; The Majlis Gallery, Dubai, United Arab Emirates; Email: mr_riceceramics@hotmail.com; Web: www.studiopottery.co.uk/profile/Michael/Rice