

Gathering shape



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McLoughlin's *I am too*, terra (L:19cm); white (L:17cm); ochre (L:18cm), 2014

The intense making processes that form Deirdre McLoughlin's powerful ceramic pieces ensure that each takes weeks to perfect. No wonder, says *Eleanor Flegg*, that her work has seen her gain international renown. Here she explores the stories behind McLoughlin's work

I cannot see Deirdre McLoughlin's work without weaving stories around it. Her *Light Gatherer* series has put me in mind of some small adventurer set forth on a philosophical quest. Each sculpture depicts the same character at different stages of the journey, which is one of deep forests, trials and enchantments. His purpose is to gather light, but this involves a process of becoming. He is brave and flawed, he makes mistakes, and his experiences change him. I follow this transformational journey through the texture and colour of the pieces, but especially 'the nose', the expressive protuberance that links the works, low in contemplation or reaching up towards the wide beyond. The story has a happy ending (I am relieved; there were times when it was touch and go).

In the same way, the *I am too* series reminds me of a small pod of creatures travelling through a hot and dusty land. In this story, each sculpture is a different character: not all are fully grown, not all are equally strong. They care for each other. That is the point. All

this is a flight of fancy, my own narrative and not the intentions of the artist, but I am not the first to observe that McLoughlin's work has archetypal resonances. The jury of the Westerwald Prize, which she won, described her two *Light Gatherer* vessels as 'a good compromise between the various meanings of the vessel as an archetype of mankind: a food container ... which becomes a real sculpture in an appropriate light'. In 2004 she was awarded the same prize for the *I am too* series, largely for the same reasons: she had brought the vessel to the point of sculpture. In her work, vessels become 'real sculpture' in the sense that Pinocchio became a real boy, or that the velveteen rabbit became real. I find this utterly believable. I can imagine a world where many vessels long to become 'real'.

HISTORY AND PURPOSE

Every vessel must negotiate history. There is no such thing as a clean slate; too many have gone before and



TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Black Nose* (L:51cm); *Silver* (L:40cm); *White Horse* (L:50cm), 2009-2011; **RIGHT:** interior of *Silver*, 2011; acquired by Keramik Museum Westerwald 2015; **OPPOSITE:** top: Deirdre McLoughlin; below: *Horse* (L:52cm), 2011

they are lodged deep in our imaginings. It is an ancestral form. I have often felt that a ceramic vessel carries layers of meaning that are linked to its historic relationship with human survival. They remember, from their place on the gallery plinth, that their great-great-grandparents were made for milk or barley or the ashes of the dead. Sometimes I see them as palimpsests, scrubbed clean of history but with the old stories running like a background programme underneath the skin.

One of these stories is about purpose. I do not think that any ceramic vessel can become real if it does not know what it is for. McLoughlin's *Light Gatherers*, for example, find their purpose on an existential level. 'The big noses,' she says, 'appear to move forward in search of something. They don't yet know what that is but, inadvertently, they've already gathered some cargo – small light reflections at the base of their interiors. This is why I've called the group *Light Gatherers*.'

The physical business of light-gathering is achieved through shape and surface. The Westerwald jury underlined the 'perfect dialogue' between the matt finish on the exterior and the interior, 'more brilliant and glazed in deep violet', which changes with the light. Their outer surfaces are planished, a metalsmithing technique where a tool is used to tap the surface tight. McLoughlin says that it is very important to her that a work keeps fresh through time, its skin sealed in such a way that it doesn't absorb dust. The *Light Gatherers* rest on wide bases and have a physical heft that is reminiscent of stone. 'I have rarely made forms as grounded as these,' she says. 'My impulse is to find shapes with precarious balances and these are the opposite. They are not delicate but neither are they brutish. Still – they appear to be here to stay.' Certainly, they are no part of the ceramic tradition that sees the physical lightness of a piece as an aesthetic necessity.

CLAY AND FORM

On a practical level, she has always felt free with clay: 'With it I can work in big or small spaces, anywhere and



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anyhow, with or without money.' The value of clay, as an expressive material, is that it has no pre-existing form. Unlike sculpture in wood or stone, which is cut from a shape that is already there, clay allows her to approach the work much as a writer does, with a blank page. 'I begin from the empty space in my mind and I work into the empty space before me.' McLoughlin began by making closed forms and, over time, opened them out to reveal their inner spaces. 'I realised that I had to contain the space as well as build into it. But this was like a Zen koan for me and took some years to unravel. I knew it wasn't a simple case of opening a closed form.'

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IN THE MAKING

- Irish-born Deirdre McLoughlin is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin (1968-1972)
- In Amsterdam 1972 she was inspired to work with clay on seeing the sculptures of Rosemary Andrews
- Japan: Sodeisha Group, Kiyomizu yaki, Shigaraki yaki (1981-85); and China: Jingdezhen, Liling, Xian (1985). She took classes with Kiyomizu master potter Tosai Sawamura II. Her first solo exhibition was in Gallery Beni Kyoto 1984 where she had encountered the work of two artists who were to have a significant influence on her work, Yasuo Hayashi and Susumu Arioka
- In 1988, McLoughlin settled in Amsterdam and found a studio on Prinseneiland
- Her international exhibitions include *Organic Abstraction* Garth Clark Gallery New York 2005, KOCEF 2007, *East-West Ceramics* Oahu 2008 and in 2014 *Europe & Beyond – 12 artists in clay* Peppercanister Gallery, Dublin. She is twice winner of a Ceramics of Europe – Keramik Europas Westerwald Prize in 2004 and 2014 in the category vessel. In 1994-1995 the Ulster Museum Belfast and in 2012-2013 the Design & Crafts Council of Ireland curated and toured major solo exhibitions
- She is represented by Galerie Franzis Engels in Amsterdam and the Peppercanister Gallery Dublin

Images: portrait of Deirdre McLoughlin: Anne Martensen; other image: Rob Bohle



Images: Baumann Fotostudio; Rob Bohle



ABOVE: *I am too*; left to right: terra (L:19cm), gray (L:17.5cm), chocolate (L:17cm), white (L:15cm), 2013; **RIGHT:** *Empty Form* (L:38cm), 2002; acquired by the Icheon World Ceramic Centre, 2008

In 1999 she began the *I am too* series, which is based on an opened ovoid. 'I understood that if I stayed with this series that it would help me grasp the essence of the inner space. I was working on it for two years when I came upon something that the American critic, Schjeldahl, had written about a particular sculpture of Richard Deacon's. He wrote that the artist had gone to a lot of trouble to "gather a strangely shaped body of air". These seven words gave me the answer I was looking for and I saw that, in constructing a form, I had to concentrate on shaping the inner space and the outer form would rise from the inner form.' In 2003 she exhibited the first of the *Empty Form* series, in which the vessels are open at both ends. Having opened the form, McLoughlin then found that she could close it again. She had a choice. This has been a transformational journey, a process of becoming. You can see it in the sculptures, if you look for it, that the knowledge within them was not easily won. 'Everything I know is in my work,' she says, 'but I don't always understand what I know.'

I'm inclined to build a narrative of exploration around the *I am too* vessels – they definitely seem to be going somewhere and they do not travel alone. Their making was also a story of discovery. 'I was testing different clays for their colour and workability and the best way to explore them was to make some ovoid forms. In play, I gave the ovoid a forward foot or, as I think of it, some twenty-first century attitude.' McLoughlin is aware of how work balances, and these are 'best foot forward' vessels, although they also carry memories of a ladle, of the sort that one might hold for someone else to drink from. This story, for me, is one of shared experience and how we depend on one another, although on another level they are purely abstract. Their surfaces are naked, diamond polished, all the colour coming from the clay itself; their form possesses the space



boldly and with trust. *I am too* is ongoing. 'I make a couple every year, the way that a dancer practices her steps or a singer performs scales, to get back to the source, to keep in tune with the basics'.

Both the *Light Gatherer* and the *I am too* vessels are symmetrical, as are the *Empty Forms*. 'In all the works where I've primarily gathered space, or built around the space, the forms have been necessarily symmetrical and principally ovoid. Maybe this is the secret of why these particular series are compelling.' Symmetry, as I see it, is part of the human desire to put a shape on things, but the ovoid is an archetypal form, older than the vessel. In the Chinese legend of Pangu, the universe began as an egg. 

For more on Deirdre McLoughlin go to deirdremcloughlin.com. Dr Eleanor Flegg is a design journalist, craft historian and writer of speculative fiction. She is co-editor of makebelieve.ie