



JANE JERMYN

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Clay, which itself is part of the earth, has a close relationship to the natural world. Loosely speaking, it is the base from which all plant life grows, and it lends itself kindly to pieces that express their geological origins. The ceramic sculpture of Jane Jermyn is a celebration of nature in its mineral and vegetable manifestations; an expression of pleasure in shapes and surfaces, and in the spaces that they occupy. Her tall Standing Forms could be read as male and mineral, the enclosing Pod Forms as female and organic, although both are hollow. They occupy and enclose space, signifying both atrophy and growth. Both Standing Forms and Pod Forms naturally incline to gallery groupings, relating to each other and to the spaces between the pieces.

Although they are the work of a relatively new artist, the pieces have a surefootedness that comes with maturity. This could be because Jermyn started her career relatively late in life. 'I was 44 before I started studying, but it gave me a lot of advantages over other women leaving college. The childrearing thing had already been done. Maybe that's why I got on so well.' Jermyn, who had been married to the artist Vincent Browne for more than twenty years, was no stranger to the art world. 'Even when I first went to college I knew what had to be done to get recognition. So many Irish people just sit in the pub and complain that it's all a big conspiracy, and then other people get the job. If you want to get somewhere you just have to keep applying. Eventually you do get funding – even if it's only to make you go away. And you develop good survival skills. If you step off the precipice something will come up, especially if you can live simply and learn not to take it personally when you don't get what you want.'

She first studied ceramics in Grennan Mill Craft School, Thomastown, County Kilkenny. 'I've had a lot of good years, but that was the best year – it's the most fantastic place on the planet.' Initially



she wanted to train as a production potter, but shortly after starting to work in clay Jermyn discovered that it had far more possibilities than she had first realised. 'The reason that I work in clay is that I love the material. There's something very elemental about it. I discovered coiling and liked the fact that 6,000 years ago people were working in the same way.'

Since then she has combined the two loves of her life – clay and travel. Some of Jermyn's most recent work began as a response to time spent in Australia. The pieces are hand-built, using Scarva flax-paperclay and are decorated using copper carbonate to emphasise the surface textures. In 2002, she was awarded a travel bursary and went to Australia to work at the studio of wood-firer Ian Jones and his wife Moraig McKenna, and was to visit Australia three times between 2002 and 2004. 'When I arrived in Australia I felt as though I'd come home. I fell in love with the environment; the red clay and the white gum trees. The colour of the earth in Australia is very connected to ceramics.'



Her recent tall pieces have their origins in wet fired pieces that Jermyn made for her degree. 'They were made using mixed clay and hay, and were slightly innovative. I wove formers from willow and other hedgerow materials. I covered these with a mixture of clay/hay, porcelain slip and other additions. I then fired this work, soaking wet. I found this method worked very well when I used unrefined clay straight from the quarry, but I began to have difficulties when using refined clay from a supplier. When I was travelling I wasn't in a position to search for clay directly from the ground, so needed to try and develop a method that gave the sort of results I was looking for some other way. Some of the clays that I was using in Australia were too refined and I started to use paperclay, hoping it might be suitable. I became interested in building in a less ephemeral, more enduring way.'

Jermyn's Standing Forms are built over formers made from dowels and cardboard tubing stuffed with bubble wrap or newspaper, and the Pods over balloons of various sizes. 'I texture individual sections of clay and gradually build up the surface and form. I allow it to dry enough to hold the shape, and then I deflate the balloon. With the long enclosed forms I cut them around the middle and gently pull out the former, reassembling with some more pieces of clay, which I secure over the join. The pieces are then bisque fired and given a second oxide firing.'

Her latest 'Biomorphic Forms' are hand-built using a pinching technique. The smaller forms start off as a thick-sided pinch pot, the raised texture gradually pinched from the excess clay. With the larger versions, the forms are built over a former and the raised areas are pinched from the clay body. 'When the work is firm enough I make a small hole in the base to release the air and prevent the piece from blowing up in the kiln!' she says. The work is then left to dry and is sometimes textured using dry clay crumbs. The piece is finished with copper carbonate after the bisque firing, and subjected to one of a variety of finishing techniques including smoke firing, or glazing and raku firing.

Jermyn's work evolves intuitively. 'I don't design, as such, I feel very strongly that skill, technique, and tradition are where ideas come from – and that this can sometimes lead to innovation as we are stretched beyond our knowledge. My inspiration comes from the natural world – geological formations, strata, and textures. For example, the paperclay forms developed gradually as I became familiar with the material and in response to a visit to the Botanic Gardens when I was submitting work for the annual outdoor sculpture exhibition, Sculpture in Context. I don't plan my work, except in the broadest sense – evaluation of previous work leads on to new ideas – my decisions are pretty intuitive, and I enjoy the spontaneity of working in this way. I really want to know and try to understand my materials and tools as well as I can, and it's important to keep experimenting, though the outcome can only be controlled so far. The end result depends on the serendipity of





the combination of clay, oxides, and the firing process.'

She lists the Catalan artist Claudi Casanovas among her influences. 'His work is very organic and a lot to do with strata. I love it that he adapted machines to turn some of his larger pieces – I like the way that he rises to a challenge and finds his way out of it. I love the international world of ceramics, especially in Europe. There's a tendency to think of ceramics as centred on the UK and the US, completely overlooking countries like Cuba that have a wonderful legacy of ceramic art – like magic realism in clay.'

In 2007-8 she was one of three exhibitors in Surface Tension, part of the Irish Arts Council's Touring Experiment and an exhibition that is considered to have played a pioneering role in the exhibition of craft-based media in a fine art context. Travel continues to play an important role in her work and she describes recent symposia in Turkey, Estonia, Cuba, Poland, Croatia, and Belarus as invaluable and fascinating. In 2009 she received the Scarva / Ceramics Ireland Travel Bursary, using it to travel to Belarus.

Jermyn remembers the invitation to demonstrate at Aberystwyth Ceramics Festival in 2003.



'It was a really big deal – most people only get to demonstrate there after about twenty years! I had been a student helper at the previous event and, as far as I know, I am the only person who has made work and fired it immediately, then on the following day decorated it, fired it again and exhibited it. In the 2009 festival she assisted Nina Hole in the building of one of her fire-sculptures. In the same year, Jermyn completed an MA in ceramics in the National College of Art and Design. In 2010 she spent 6 weeks undertaking a residency in the ceramic department at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. During 2011 she has been invited to return to Croatia to take part in a further symposium there; by Seunggho Yang to exhibit in Korea and Shozo Michikawa to take part in a ceramic festival and exhibitions in Japan.