



On February 29th 2020 I was on my way to the airport to begin a 3 month residency at The Shigariki Ceramic Culture Park (SCCP) Japan when I received a call saying it was cancelled due to Covid. I had been preparing for this residency for months, packing up the studio and preparing work to have it ready for exhibitions on my return. No one was prepared for what Covid had in store for the world. It was to take 3 years before the residency programme opened up again to foreign artists and our group of 9 artists were those who had our residencies cancelled in 2020.

The Shigariki Ceramic Culture Park is located in Shigariki, one of the 6 ancient kiln sites of Japan. It lies approximately 40 Km east of central Kyoto and has a population of 14,500 residents, the majority of whom are involved in the ceramic industry. There are large warehouses of ceramics throughout the town run by families who have been in the industry for generations along with smaller studios on every street. The name Shigariki translates as 'Ceramic Forest' and reflects the sites lush location, surrounded by forest, green rice paddies, rivers and winding roads, and as our mode of transport while on the residency was mainly by bicycle, it was a great way to explore the area. The SCCP itself is a 40 acre site built on 4 levels, completed in 1990, and the Artist-in Residence programme was initiated in 1992. There is an open application system to work and live at the institute as an artist in residence, for a period of between one month and a year. Up to 12 ceramists share the communal studio space at a time and a guest artist or leader in the ceramics field, is invited to work in the adjoining studio.



The facilities across the site are housed in modern concrete and brick buildings, which create a subtle tension and harmonious contrast to the more traditional wooden architecture of Shigaraki. Facilities include, 2 large studios, a walk-in drying room, kiln block containing both gas and electric kilns in a variety of sizes and one of the biggest electric kilns I had ever come across. There is a wood kiln site, glaze and plaster rooms, Museum of Contemporary Ceramics, Museum of Industrial Ceramics, exhibition spaces (internal and external), lecture theatres, library, residence block, shop, café and office block. The kilns could also be booked by artists working in their own studios in the town and this was an opportunity for us to meet other artists, visit their studios and also see what was happening outside the Park.

During my stay we had artists from Japan, India, Spain, Norway, Taiwan, China, the USA, Hungary and Hong Kong and this led to very lively discussions around the table in the evening during the communal meals or the bar-b-q's we prepared.



In the studio we all worked to our own rhythm, some started early and finished at a reasonable hour and some started later and worked late into the night. There were always deadlines to meet, either for an exhibition or for a firing as kiln space all had to be booked. We also had a communal wood firing which we managed under the watchful eye of the technicians.

I didn't have a plan to make a particular body of work during this residency but waited to see what would present itself to me. The clays were entirely different to what I normally use but after some experimenting I found a grogged architectural clay that was very easy to manipulate and very forgiving at high temperatures. I handbuilt some large pieces working through ideas related to the housing issues we have here in Ireland.

Something else caught my attention. I noticed all the different sounds that became part of our Shigariki experience, the frogs, the birds, the one carriage train and the delicate sound of the gong at the shrines. I wondered how I could keep that memory alive after my return and how could I incorporate those sounds into the pieces I was making. I took my bicycle and phone and recorded the various sounds as I cycled all around the forest and town. I then created a QR Code (which were invented in Japan in 1994) for the sounds and brought the idea to the Shigariki Ceramic Research Institute where they printed ceramic decals for the codes. I fired them onto the vessels at 800C and was delighted they worked.

I had previously created tactile work for those who are visually impaired and this adds another dimension to the experience of exploring art. These vessels were test pieces but there is huge potential to develop this idea, and one I have been exploring since my return. The Museum of Contemporary Ceramic Art has taken the piece "The Shigaraki Sound Vessel" for their permanent collection.



I cycled every day and usually took the longer route through the forest and the narrow winding streets to get to the supermarket. This really helped to get a feel for town and its surrounding landscape. Everyone was so friendly and some of the elderly residents got to know, or I should say recognise me, and would always wave and smile as I flew past them on my bike. I think they knew the only foreigners in the town had to be the ceramic residents in the Park.



It was about 6 weeks before I took a break and anxiously took the train to Kyoto. The only way (unless you have a car) in and out of Shigariki was a one carriage rural train, and, as I didn't have the internet outside the Park I wasn't sure if I would get lost. I didn't, but I became very accomplished at explaining myself with wild hand signals, much to the amusement of the station masters.

Although ravaged by wars, fires, and earthquakes during its 11 centuries as the imperial capital, Kyoto suffered only minor damage during WW2. It has been, and still remains Japan's cultural centre and retains much of its historical charm. People flock to the city to experience this and there are many shops where you can dress up in traditional kimonos to walk through the city's ancient streets.



The 3 month residency passed so quickly I felt as if I could have stayed for another 3 in this ceramic bubble I had become accustomed to. I enjoyed the challenge of absorbing a new lifestyle and culture and being pushed out of my own comfort zone. I work alone in my own studio so it was a real pleasure to be in the same space with the other artists sharing ideas and processes. The residency provided an opportunity to rethink my own practice and plan the next phase of my ceramic journey.