

1 *Spores*, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china and porcelain on a slate base, 2011, H13cm 2 *Colony and Spores* (detail), slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china and porcelain on a glass and aluminium base, 2011, H33cm



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## Delicate Forms, Daring Practice

Chris Wight's innovative working techniques result in compelling bone china creations, writes Ian Wilson.

There is an unmistakable sense of the artist passionately devoted to a single medium inherent in Chris Wight's twenty-plus years' dedication to the 'purity' of bone china and the constant challenges that it presents. Concomitantly there is his ongoing involvement with the tension existing between the clay's constraints and his intent as an artist to counter or exploit them in order to reveal its intrinsic beauty and demonstrate its (perhaps unexpected) versatility. He aims to capitalise on the allure of bone china by adopting high-risk techniques – often unconventional and invariably flouting the safety offered by traditional good practice – to push the clay to its very limits, relying on intuition and experience to realise his objectives.

**SOURCES OF INTRIGUE & INSPIRATION** The pre-occupation with how light affects the translucency and opacity of bone china is a

fascination of Wight's. It dates back to his postgraduate studies in ceramics at the then Staffordshire Polytechnic. It characterises much of his oeuvre and was realised on a large – one could say astonishing – scale in the four-metre-high pair of doors that he was commissioned to make for the chapel at Minster School in Southwell, Nottinghamshire.<sup>1</sup>

The interconnectedness that is present in a multitude of different ways throughout creation has long intrigued Wight – it finds ceramic expression in his *Curvilinear Constructions*, where the element of a child's slot-together toy is allied with a sense of a modernist sculpture that has the potential to be assembled in numerous different architectonic configurations. Along with a sense of precarious but meticulously attuned balance is the suggestion that while these are complete and independent entities they might well be capable of almost infinite additive growth.

3 *Biolith Forms*, grouping of five slip-cast and hand-carved bone china forms on a polished concrete base, 2010, H12cm max  
 4 *Curvilinear Construction*, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china, 2009, H30cm



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This motif of accretion finds fuller expression in *Colony and Spores*, which along with *Bioliths* was one of the two bodies of work that evolved from the various strands that made up his *Construction* series. The *Bioliths* – which received an honourable mention at the 7th Cheongju International Craft Biennale, Korea, 2011 – carry the subtitle *Borrowed Forms* as their provenance lies in the direct casts that Wight made from pebbles chosen for their shape, form, and ‘feel’ from a beach in Cornwall; they are slip-cast vessel forms with hand-carved surfaces. They are informed by a sculptural nature and especially when presented in groups – standing on polished concrete bases – they powerfully affect the more general surrounding space while ‘shaping’ the more intimate spaces between them, inviting viewing and reflection akin to that which is encouraged by the stones in Japanese rock gardens.

*Colony and Spores* might seem to be closer to the ‘natural world’ than the *Curvilinear* cycle, but it should be emphasised that Wight does not see himself as a ‘nature artist’. His work is never an imitation of nature, because, as he unequivocally states: ‘Bone china will not allow such a copying. It is the nature of bone

china that I am copying,’ and it is the dispersing, reforming, renewing capacities within the organic growth patterns of life that Wight wanted to convey in *Colony and Spores*. Whereas the latter are like satellites, ‘seeds which float off’ within his imagination, *Colony* has the idea of building up, of other parts becoming attached, and in order to truly exemplify its title every single element had to be connected.

**ARCHIVAL ACCESS** Some years ago Wight was invited to look at the archival material in the Royal Crown Derby Museum and generate ideas in response to what he found. This is one of the last remaining producers of fine bone china still manufacturing in the UK. The brief was very much of Wight’s own making, but he was well aware that he was dealing with an old and traditional company that had a history of inviting artists to work with them. He was also conscious that this opportunity to immerse himself in the 260-year-old archive holdings was a privilege, as was ‘having pretty much a free rein’ in the project that evolved from his research.

The hundreds of pen and ink illustrations in the leather-bound

‘Shape’ and ‘Pattern’ books that he studied gave rise to the *Royal Crown Derby Silhouettes*, which re-imagine classic shapes and patterns from the company’s past. They combine traditional clay making techniques, such as slab rolling, with waterjet cutting undertaken at Swansea Metropolitan University’s Architectural Glass Department, and CAD [computer-aided design] programming, and celebrate the heritage of this historic manufacturer through thoroughly modern forms. The process from archive drawing, through CAD interpretation to waterjet cutting and on to completed sculpture was a long one and evolved over about a year and a half, often via time-consuming and labour-intensive experimentation.

These pieces – some black, others white – share qualities with the ‘flats’ of theatrical scenery, their ornamental flourishes reminiscent of the décor for a rococo opera, but simultaneously – and seemingly conversely – possessing a depth and dimensionality. Lighting is able to create effects of a ghost-like vessel contained within this silhouette and illuminates the elaborate cut-out patterns so that shadows of great delicacy are cast.

The first pieces were just reaching completion when the company

was sold and thus the project was brought to a conclusion. However, Wight had proved to himself the potential of his ideas and techniques and approached Wedgwood, who agreed to grant him access to its archives of shapes and patterns with a view to his re-interpreting the forms. The major focus was on the famous Portland Vase, the blue and white glass original that was reproduced in black and white jasperware by Josiah Wedgwood in the late eighteenth century. Wight is currently at the stage of creating models made from laser-cut mounting card; these he views in much the same light as one would architectural models and although this is a laborious process, it is, however, more economically viable than using bone china or jasper.

**‘IMPOSSIBLE’ STRUCTURES** It is perhaps worthwhile to distinguish between Wight’s *Silhouettes* – which are ceramic creations – and certain of the equally innovative work of Michael Eden, which can involve ‘Additive Layer Manufacturing from a high quality nylon material with mineral soft coating.’<sup>2</sup>

Wight, despite all the laborious hand-rolling the *Silhouettes*

5 *Silhouette* – No.1251 - Black and White Laminate, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut black and white bone china, 2013, H31cm  
 6 *Silhouette* – No.39 (pair), slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china, 2013, H27cm  
 7 *Silhouette* – No.39 - Guilloché, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut black bone china, 2013, H27cm



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Notes 1 CR240, Nov/Dec 2009, 'A Guiding Light', p18 2 www.adriansassoon.com, accessed 11 July 2014 3 Sasha Wardell in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *In Form gegossen – Internationale Keramik*, Galerie Handwerk, Munich, Germany, 13 January-25 February 2012

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entailed, is no Luddite and employs modern technology such as waterjet cutting; but he wishes to use it creatively, enabling him to build 'impossible' structures without the interference of supporting frameworks and armatures, rather than for 'banging out a zillion identical units'.

One of the problems associated with bone china is that it is a short-bodied clay. This means that it can be difficult to achieve a thickness under 2mm and as Wight seems invariably to set himself goals of creating work of great delicacy with this beautiful, self-willed material, much time, effort, and patience lies behind each piece that he makes. Also, bone china has a high memory, so that if it is cut or if it splits these injuries will be recalled and will be re-affirmed in the kiln.

Chris Wight's involvement with 'this seductive material... [this] very "single-minded" clay'<sup>3</sup> allies artisanal labour with CAD expertise. It is inspired by a fascination with the myriad forms of interconnectedness within the natural world. It results in objects of singular and compelling beauty. ☐

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