

GETTING INTO SHAPES

ADAM WOOG talked to the Dublin-based artist DEIRDRE McLOUGHLIN

Deirdre McLoughlin's sculptures lie casually amongst the cheerful chaos of her Mountjoy Square studio-home, mysterious and understated, ambiguously beautiful and elegantly simple. Light streams in from the high windows on this rare sunny day in Dublin; slowly, deliberately, the Dublin-born and bred artist patiently polishes one of her pieces and says, "I just like making shapes."

Those shapes — smoothly sensual ceramic curves, quiet and strong — invite tactile as well as visual appreciation; you can't help but touch them. Evocative of everything from Eskimo art to Chinese burial pots, Polynesian statuary to African masks, they reflect a lifetime of worldwide travels as well as lengthy residences in Holland and Japan.

"At Trinity I'd done philosophy, English lit and history, because I'd wanted to be a writer," Deirdre McLoughlin says. "But I found I couldn't string words together, and by the time I finished I had nothing to say."

"All through college I'd done a lot of physical labour; I thought if I could combine physical work with mental work, that might be the answer. When I went to Amsterdam after college, I met a woman who threw a lump of clay at me and said, 'Make something.' And as soon as I got my hands on that clay I couldn't stop."

"I found I like working with three-dimensional shapes; it's like another language. I was never really interested in sculpture, I just wanted to make shapes. Before Amsterdam, I'd thought pottery was pots; but because I didn't know anything I just kept going — I had no standard."

"When I came back to Dublin, I moved into a studio with other artists, but eventually I came to an impasse. The shapes were getting technically quite good, but nothing was selling and I was seldom accepted for exhibitions. I thought that if I went to Japan I'd find a tradition I could connect with; in Kyoto there's a well-known group of ceramic sculptors, people who were doing similar kinds of things."

"So I went. I set up a studio in Kyoto, and I worked with an old man who did very fine Kiyomizu-style small bowls. He helped with my sense of finishing something; it really had nothing to do with sculpture, but it gave me a sense of how fine a piece could be, and my standards went up. I exhibited there, a one-woman show at the Gallery Beni in Kyoto and also at the Kyoto Municipal Museum."

Japan created a paradox of simultaneous isolation and

involvement with fellow artists. "Ireland's a small country, and sculpture isn't traditionally strong here like literature or music. Being in Japan was good for me, in that there were a lot of people doing very good work in my field. But Japan also puts you at an extreme — it creates an isolation, and isolation teaches you a lot. You meet other ceramicists, but it's lonely work. You say: I'm working, and then what else can you say?"

If Japan is good for nothing else, Deirdre found, it's good for doing work. "One of the most basic things I got out of Japan was a sense of the attitude summed up by the phrase 'gambatte kudasai.' It means something like 'keep fighting,' or 'keep up the good work' — but there's an almost militaristic feeling, of always doing things to the limit of your abilities. "Japan," she says with a smile, "can be very intense."

"When I left there, after two and a half years, I spent three months travelling in China before I came back to Dublin. Then, for the first six months, nothing happened. The first lot of work I did when I got back was very bad — stiff and cramped. But then I started to relax, and it got better. People started coming to see me, and I started getting offers of exhibitions."

Besides the shows in Japan, Deirdre McLoughlin has exhibited at the Tulfarris, Davis, Lincoln and Neptune Galleries, the Limerick Art Show and the Craft Potters Show. She has taught ceramics at Trinity Art Workshop, and her work has been purchased by the National Museum, the Arts Council of Ireland, and private buyers — including "a group of seminarians in Carlow who banded together to buy one of my fish — they were lovely boys." The fish referred to also appeared in a show by several artists, inspired by the classic of epic Irish literature "Sweeney Astray."

Most recently, she was one of seven Irish sculptors in the annual *Objets d'Art* exhibition in Paris last September. And the future? "More pots," she says with a smile.

Describing her work doesn't come easily. Trying to explain the shapes she makes, Deirdre says, "A couple of friends of mine went to the Arctic once. The custom there is to make a knoll of stones with an explanatory note to commemorate your travels. The shapes I make are something like that, I suppose, something like one person's journey."

Suddenly she looks up from her work, with the sunlight streaming in through the high Georgian windows, and she grins wickedly. "Oh God," she says, "don't make me sound too serious, will you?" And, with that, she turns back to her work.

Photograph by the author.

