

# Swimming in the Pool

Writing about the work of Irish-born artist Deirdre McLoughlin in the catalogue of her exhibition at the Ulster Museum last year, Michael Robinson, Curator of the show, placed the work in its broader cultural context

*Deirdre McLoughlin – Maggot h. 80cm. Photograph Rob Bohle*



saying 'Japan has always had the most highly developed appreciation of ceramics and has given ceramic objects and the people who make them a greater artistic value than any other civilisation. Earlier this century there was a great revival of traditional crafts and old manufacturing areas, elevating the status of the work and stimulating public and critical responses to its standards and technical skills. The importance of the Sodeisha group is that in the '60s they began to use ceramic as a contemporary sculptor's medium. The history of their development problems and successes is part of Japan's modern art history and whilst the same sort of thing was happening elsewhere in the world, nowhere else did the ideas and language of modern sculpture meet such a wealth of technical and material possibilities as it did in Japan. The forms and statements might have been new and initially to their audience extravagant and exaggerated, but the materials and techniques were familiar, appreciable and expected to meet standards unattainable elsewhere.'

'McLoughlin's significance is that she is the sculptor who found in ceramic the medium to express herself, and very selectively chose and developed what she needed without any reference to existing conventions.' Here Deirdre McLoughlin reflects on the ideas she follows and the methods she uses.

The forms come through my hands from that part of my mind I call the void. The forms reveal themselves in the making and in any series, each work leads me into the next.

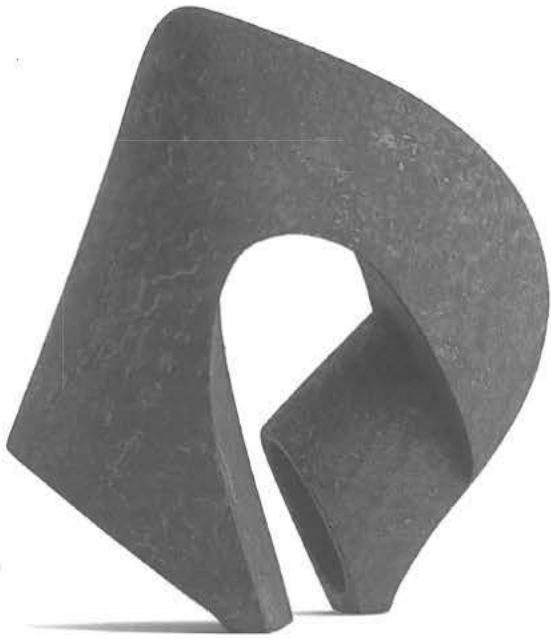
## Early pieces

I have to consciously begin a work. It is in these beginnings that I see clear development through the years. Starting with normal bases, I then moved to curved ones, from there to poles with the forms on top, works balanced on three points, works with suspended bases balanced by earthed ones, works with precarious balance, works with no bases that can lie any way. In the past year and a half, I have had a conscious desire to free my work off plinths. I made a breakthrough in the final piece made for my recent exhibition by hanging pieces, such as 'Maggot' on the wall.

The forms develop with time. In the beginning to help this development I took dance and body movement classes,

*OPPOSITE Deirdre McLoughlin. TOP 'Detent', h.52cm. LEFT 'Resist Arrest IV' h.36cm. RIGHT 'Anxiety II' length 46cm. Photograph Rob Bohle*





*Deirdre McLoughlin 'Arrest Resisted' h. 45cm. Photograph Rob Bohle*



*Deirdre McLoughlin in her studio. Photograph Carel Buenting*

later Tai Chi. In 1981 a tragedy in Northern Ireland committed me to the path of forming shapes full time. I was beginning to understand that these abstract forms I was making were a language of the spirit, as say music or painting can be and so on. I understood that they were to do with creation, and I saw very simply that creation helps keep a balance in the face of destruction. I went to live in Japan for three years 'to swim in the pool where there are those who are good at what I wanted to be good at'. I chose Kyoto, the base of the Sodeisha group which had been started by potters and sculptors in '48 to help each other 'express with clay as a painter expresses with paint'.

I am influenced by everything, loves, friendships, where I live, the news, books – *Zen and the Art of Archery* was a good one. The work that most excites me is that made by artists who with passionate discipline break new ground in whatever medium. All conscious influences I try to leave outside the door of my studio.

#### **Working methods**

I make eight to ten works a year, my full-time occupation. The forms are coiled. My making process is rough, going

back and forward on a piece, adding and chopping, yet I keep the surface fairly smooth so I can see what is happening. I have been using T material for eight years until last year when I started to experiment again with other clays. I found a high fired Wagner red grogged clay with a strong body, whose colour pleases me. I have been polishing the skins in the last years using a hard rubber at the greenware stage. I was using grinding stones to polish after the biscuit and again after the maturing temperature of the clay body, 1160° to 1240°C depending on the body. I now use diamond polishing pads which I get at an art supplies shop. I sometimes use a black skin on a work, the last one was a copper and black stain wash applied after the body had been fired to its maturity, and fired again to 1100°C. I fire slowly, 25 to 30 hours for both biscuit and the high firing, in electric kilns usually computer controlled. I had my own kiln in the seventies, but since then I have been renting them as necessary. As I like living in cities this is not the problem it would be in a more isolated situation.

*Since 1988 Deirdre McLoughlin has lived and worked in Amsterdam. She showed her sculptures in Ulster Museum November 93–January 94.*