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### DEIRDRE MCLOUGHLIN: SHAPING THE VOID

THE NATIONAL CRAFT GALLERY, KILKENNY, IRELAND  
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Few Irish sculptors, in any medium, can hold a candle to Deirdre McLoughlin. Her skill in execution is formidable, likewise the solidity of her intent and the blistering integrity of her practice. And, coming from a generation that routinely exported its finest ceramists, her appearances in Ireland are rare. For these reasons, *Shaping the Void*, McLoughlin's recent solo exhibition at the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny, was eagerly anticipated. It did not disappoint.

McLoughlin is best known for her closed biomorphic forms, their surfaces diamond-polished to a density that resembles stone. These were represented, some with a tiny tactile nodule of semi-precious stone inserted into the airhole of the piece. With a few, I have minor quibbles. Two have painted spots that add nothing to the composition; two more are wall-mounted: it seems wrong to remove them from the field of touch. But I cannot find fault with her ongoing *I am too* series – vessels of various sizes resting on a curved base, their balance assured by a supporting foot that also references the handle. Although in no way functional, they trigger thoughts of the drinking vessel: some mythic dipper from a legendary well. They are pieces to be understood with both hands, one cupped under the curved form, the other gripping the lever. Their making seems flawless. There is no apparent variation in the thickness of their walls but, even so, they are heavy for their size, both physically and in the weight of their dignity. They gravitate into protective pairings: big and little brother, mother and child.

The second of the NCG's two galleries shows recent work, too recent for McLoughlin to assess. 'Everything I know is in my work,' she says. 'I don't always understand what I know.' She calls them *Light Catchers* – large ovoid vessels, flat at base, with protuberant snouts. McLoughlin's work is always philosophically serious, and yet with titles like *Big Nose* and *Black Nose*, the humour in the work is not lost on her. In some, the 'nose' forms a hollow cylinder, opening the interior to the light. Others are closed, containing darkness. They work in series, one leading from another like steps in a dance and seem representative of phases in some inner journey, their mood rising and falling with the angle of their bulbous snouts. Oh, the ridiculousness of the human condition! The continuity between them is emphasised in little details: the orange under-rim of one reflected in the glaze of the next. Their surfaces are rough to the touch and invite not so much the hands as the whole of the upper body. They are too heavy to be easily lifted, but rest comfortably in the arms or on the knee. Those with open passageways fit the inserted arm. Their flat bases, pressed against the body, trigger a myriad of memories. The base of a ceramic object is an emotive thing. We have all of us, in our lives, held so many of them.

### Eleanor Flegg

Eleanor Flegg is a writer and craft historian. She lives in Dublin