

Touching The Void - Aidan Dunne reviews gallery artist Deirdre McLoughlin's show at The National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny



Photograph: Rob Bohle

From the moment she was given a lump of clay, Deirdre McLoughlin's life 'changed dramatically', and that hope of discovery continues to drive her work.

It's December in Amsterdam, and an icy breeze sweeps through the city, but for many Dutch people, the problem is that it's not cold enough. They look glumly at the lapping water of the canals and think longingly of their ice skates.

They take their ice skating seriously, Deirdre McLoughlin explains, as we make our way from bridge to bridge, heading to her studio on Prinseneiland - Prince's Island - a remarkably central enclave that still harbours a large proportion of artists, though the developers are, it seems, at the gates.

In the studio, she's trying to finish one or two pieces that will complete her exhibition *Shaping the Void*, which will open at the National Craft Gallery in Kilkenny on Friday.

She's had the studio on Prinseneiland for the last ten years. It's spacious, but narrows towards the back, so she works chiefly at the front, where double doors open onto the street, with an expanse of water just beyond giving a nice vibrancy to the light.

McLoughlin is a sculptor and works chiefly in clay, which, these days is relatively unusual also unusual is the way her language of form is derived equally from

craft and sculptural vernaculars. As a medium clay is more or less wedded to the vessel and the plate, to functional objects and shapes that cannot be denied. Nor does McLoughlin deny them, but the Netherlands (like many other places) does not have the hang-up about craft translating into fine art that is still evident in Ireland.

Born in Dublin, McLoughlin went to school with the Sisters of Charity and then studied philosophy, history and English literature at Trinity. After that she went to Amsterdam and her life changed direction dramatically.

She came across the work of Rosemary Andrews. "Rosemary made sculptures in clay, which was a revelation. To use clay as a medium of expression was something new to me." It sparked something in McLoughlin. "I had really never thought of working with my hands," she says. "Then one day someone gives you a lump of clay and says: 'Make something'. A little thing like that can change your life."

She started working in Andrews's studio on the Keizersgracht. Sonja Landweer, who had lived in Ireland since the mid-1960s, was a major and enduring source of inspiration and advice. "It's not just her work in itself, which I very much admire but also her absolute level of commitment."

Nonetheless, it wasn't all plain sailing. "There came a time when I really had to decide if I was going to commit myself to this – I mean, I didn't want to do it, I could see making a living was going to be a big problem, and I just didn't want to be as poor as I'd been when I was a student. But it was something I had to give into eventually. It was the only way I could get any peace."

Since then she has followed her work: "I don't lead it, it leads me. And I must say I respect artists – and I don't mean myself – who magnificently don't care about the money question."

In the 1980s the work led her to Kyoto, Japan, "because there was a thriving tradition of making sculpture with clay there". In 1985 she travelled through China - Yixing, Jingdezhen, Xian, Dunhuang. She exhibits regularly in Ireland with the Peppercanister Gallery.

From shelves at the back of her studio she brings out a succession of substantial ceramic sculptures comprising several series of works, each making up a family of forms. Broadly speaking, there is a group of rhythmically bulbous shapes, a group

of cup-like shapes, each with a single "heel" or spur and, the largest and most recent, a group of vessel-like shapes with spouts.

They all evoke both functional ceramic objects and living things – those spouts, for example, could be noses. McLoughlin likes the notion there is a vitality to them, that they have character and personality.

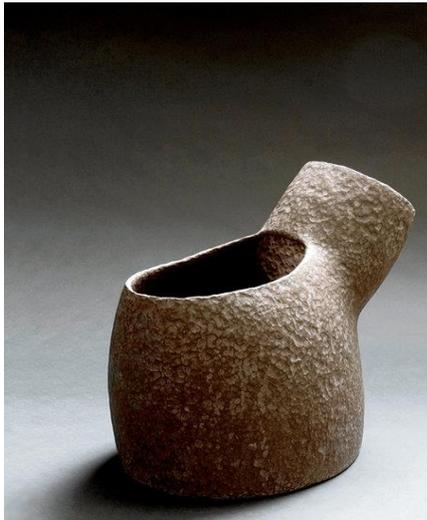


White Life III, photograph Rob Bohle

The ovoid form that is "absolutely basic to everything I do" could be read as a metaphor for the human body, the human being. The renowned ceramicist and writer Betty Blandino had no doubt McLoughlin is continuing a tradition of figurative sculpture that extends back to the earliest surviving human artifacts. She included her in her authoritative study, *The Figure in Fired Clay*, published in 2002.

The word McLoughlin favours is biomorphic, a term most commonly used in relation to ambiguous but curiously life-like abstract shapes in surrealist art.

While the forms she makes are elegant, and the coloured glazes she uses sumptuous – this is often achieved by polishing and repeated firing – there is also a distinctly humorous quality to the work, a playful sensuality. She's happy if our first engagement with a piece takes the form of a question: what is that? It's a question that is never definitively answered, but her intention is that in an effort to answer the question, the viewer is led into an intriguing labyrinth of associations and possibilities. The uncertainty is emphasized by a certain precariousness about the way each piece is ingeniously balanced, something she came to value in Japan.



Silver, photograph Rob Bohle

"That a work is beautifully poised is important to me," she says. But the appreciation of poise stems from something more than sculpture as such. "I dance," she says, "I mean, I'm no dancer, but I enjoy dance." In Ireland she attended Kalichi's dance workshops. "I've learned more about form through dance than from drawing. That's where the feeling in the work of being alive comes from."

Communicating that vitality is essential for her. "You could say everything's been done, but as with dance, I think sculpture is capable of constant renewal. I know I am more deeply alive when I'm working. It's an adventure.

"The tingle you experience when something is happening in the work, when you are finding a new direction, is very exciting, when the shapes you are making guide you in what you are doing. And when you encounter that, you feel that, somehow, it hasn't quite happened before in this way. That is what you work for." Shaping the Void: Ceramic and Bronze Sculptures by Deirdre McLoughlin is at the National Craft Gallery, Castle Yard, Kilkenny from January 20th-March 21st, then travels to the Wandesford Quay Gallery, Cork from March 27th-April 23rd



Sceitimini, Photograph Rob Bohle