

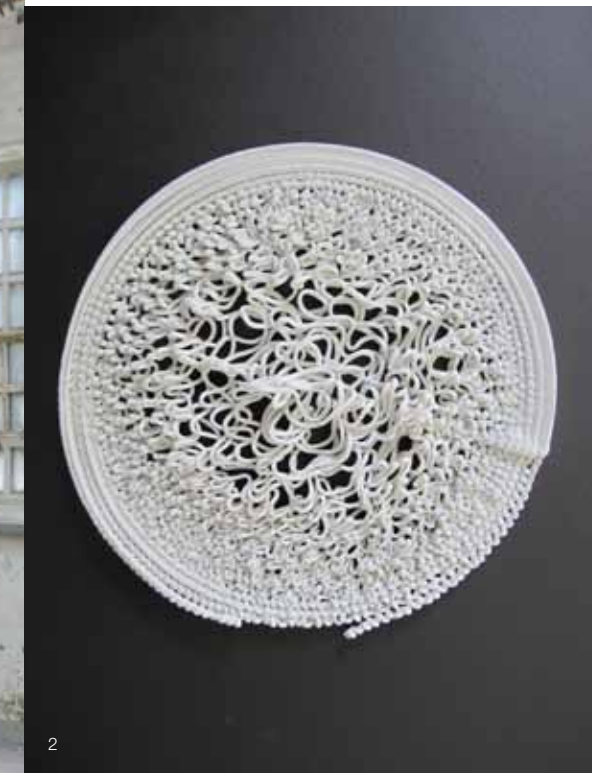


Ceramics Sensation

Pottery goes for a spin

Uniting past and present, this year's edition of the British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-on-Trent identifies the uncharted territory between handcrafted and digital. A young generation of ceramists and artists has entered the picture, addressing the ceramic production process in an assertive hands-on manner. From the reinvention of the materials through to the reinterpretation of past classics, there seems to be no approach left unturned. This has not only made for an excellent biennial, it serves as fuel for the industry worldwide and as a saving grace for Stoke.

NORMAN KIETZMANN



Guldagergård Tree (after Spode), part of the Cumbrian Blue(s) series, by Paul Scott (1)

FRESH, by Ragna Mouritzen 3D-printed porcelain and stain, 2015 (2)

Geysers, 2014 by Caroline Tattersall (3)

Unfolding Secrets, detail 3, 2015, by Anne Gibbs (4)
Bone china, fused pins, and pins; dimensions variable
Image courtesy of the artist



tween art, decoration, and the functional object. Ceramic is understood by them to be a material of poetic lightness and tactile sensuality, in equal measure. Dazzling colours and tactile textures are a fundamental feature, significantly differing from the sterile sheen of mass-produced pottery. Barney Hare Duke, artistic director of the 2015 Biennial, states: "The works are brought together by a spirit of creative endeavour, thereby testing and skilfully demonstrating the potential of clay."

Since the 17th century, Stoke-on-Trent has been at the centre of the British ceramics industry. While china clay was imported from Cornwall, the area around North Staffordshire provided the requisite coal to fire the material. Some 50,000 workers were employed in the Stoke potteries in 1980; today, less than 9000 make their living from these breakable wares. For years, the decline seemed unstoppable. But the current trend toward craft has revitalised the British ceramics scene – and thus the area around Stoke-on-Trent.

As a platform for tomorrow's talents, the FRESH section, with items by 22 graduate designers and artists, serves its purpose well. It demonstrates very clearly that ceramics aren't passé, that the traditional artisanal processes have been extended to include the possibilities of 3D printing. One such example is found in the refined and fragile objects by Danish designer Ragna Mouritzen that neither machine nor man could have produced on their own. But completely analogous works also achieve strong results, like Hannah Townsend's vessels that combine the techniques of slip-casting and throwing. Instead of appearing plain and repellent, the surfaces possess complexity and irregularity in intriguing graphical patterns.

Sensuality and atmosphere are important aspects, too. An archaic effect is present in Geysers, by English ceramist Caroline Tattersall. Clay melts inside large, curved vessels – emitting bubbles and steam like a gurgling geyser. The material has lost its solid, physical presence. Instead, the ephemeral and variable is frozen in a current reality – showcasing the particularity and magic of clay. A documentary approach is adopted by ceramist Neil Brownsword, who works with experienced craftsmen from Stoke. With his project Re-Apprenticed, he records on video the skills and tricks of copperplate engraving, china painting, and ceramic flower making, to save the knowledge for future generations.

At AirSpace Gallery in the centre of Stoke, Ian McIntyre examines the nuances of a British ceramic icon: the Brown Betty teapot from the 1930s – said to be the ideal shape for developing the aroma of the tea. Like a surgeon, the London-based designer and maker cuts the pot into segments and creates a fresh look for the long familiar: past and present overlap in its interwoven pattern. ◀

British Ceramics Biennial, until 08 November 2015, Stoke-on-Trent, England UK. britishceramicsbiennial.com



Within, Without, by Alexandra Simpson, 2015

Untitled, 2015, by Aneta Regel Porcelain and other stoneware clays, rock components, slips, and glazes; 25 x 27 x 22 cm
Image courtesy of the artist