



Christie Brown, 'The Uncanny Playroom', 2010, ceramic and mixed media, largest 65 x 23 x 15 cm

BRITISH CERAMICS BIENNIAL

Stoke-on-Trent, England, 28 September– 10 November, 2013

THE British Ceramics Biennial that ran for six weeks from 28 September and was the 3rd in the series. The biennials were originally conceived not only as a way of promoting all branches of contemporary ceramics, but of re-instilling pride and self-belief to the six pottery towns that were once the hub of the British ceramics industry. They also aspired to promote these Victorian industrial towns and their once proud heritage to a world audience. The latest biennial seemed to have less wide ranging aims, but still sought to show the thought and practice of leading ceramic artists across the whole breadth of current practice



Lawrence Epps, 'Take Stock', 2013, installation, Istock Brick Pavilion



Jonathan Keep, 'Random Growth', 2013, artist 3D-printed porcelain clay and glaze, average each 9 x 10 x 12 cm



Clare Twomey, 'Made in China', installed in the old Spode Factory, each vase is 1.5m high. Presented in partnership with Mima

in the UK at several different sites around Stoke-on-Trent. In the first biennial, work was scattered around the towns but by now the organisers, led by art consultant directors Jeremy Theophilus and Barney Hare Duke, have learnt to concentrate nearly all the installations into two locations – the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery and the huge empty expanses of the former Spode Factory.

AWARD at the museum was a trawl across current British talent with a variation in practice from small batch production functional ware, to highly abstract sculptural work. Twenty-two exhibitors were selected from 170 applicants to have their work on display for the duration of the six-week event, which offered a one-off prize of £10,000. Most elected to make new pieces especially for the show.

Architecture inspired both James Rigler, in his examination of taken-for-granted built elements, and the eventual overall winner Nao Matsunaga, whose rough organic forms and surface texture drew on both Neolithic forms and architecture. Multiples were another popular device. Ikuko Iwamoto assembled framed series of tiny porcelain cubes that made visitors feel that they were viewing sculpture from above.

Decomposition was explored by Tamsin van Essen with her large ceramic urns, carved using an industrial sandblaster. Marianne Hartmann Rasmussen's installation *Skifting* or changeling touched on decay in an unsettling piece – a crib containing a mass of clay against a background of wallpaper – which, on close inspection, was made from a pattern of worms. Accompanied by the strains of a lullaby, this provided a deceitful echo of the real world. Christie Brown's *The Uncanny Playroom* was similarly unnerving. Her ceramic figures, accessorised with objects from around her studio, related to her childhood play-schoolroom. The strange confabulations were eerie and rather disturbing, like a sinister fairy story with no happy

ending. They were more provocative and haunting than Claudia Clare's rather obvious political commentaries in the form of illustrations on huge pots – a poor take on Grayson Perry.

There were small batch production pieces, including work by Louisa Taylor and James and Tilla Waters. Ian McIntyre, a recent RCA graduate, whose plain earthenware tableware is produced at different locations around the world, and Katy West, whose *Common Wealth Jelly Moulds* were made for the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, were two new interesting makers in this area. Both explored the shared ground between craft and design.

There was also a sprinkling of new technology. Zachary Eastwood-Bloom investigated the blurring of boundaries between the material and the virtual world. He captured this digitally in 3-dimensions and rendered it real through the grown, built, layered, deconstructed, drawn and cast in a bust of *Asklepios*, the Greek God of Healing. Jonathan Keep elected to explore the future of the ceramics industry at a time when 3D printers will soon enable everyone to make their own, in a series of irregularly shaped pots produced with a 3D printer using liquid clay.

The majority of work was on show at the Spode Factory. In "FRESH" 33 graduates were selected from some 170 applications. Reflecting current predilections in British higher education, most of the work was sculptural. Among the most notable was Josh Bitelli who is fascinated by industrial processes and those who work with them. In his *Trophy for 75 Years of Forfar's*, he persuaded Forfar's Bakery to give him bucket-sized loaves of bread that he hollowed out and used as flammable moulds for slip-casting porcelain. Mella Shaw constructed a fluid geometric wall that exploited the pyro-plasticity of porcelain (where it sags, warps or bends

Katy West, 'The Beauties of Stowe', 2012, porcelain, 19 x 12 x 12 cm



Craft Arts International No.90, 2014



Nao Matsunaga, view of installation in the British Ceramics Biennial Award exhibition, 2013



Christie Brown, 'Sleepover' (detail), 2012, group of 23 ceramic figures installed in the Spode Factory, largest 92 x 25 x 20 cm

under its own weight during the firing process) to catch the tipping point of no return. Emily Gardiner explored catharsis, by looking at the voluptuous physicality of flow in basic cup-shaped forms from which strange proboscis appeared to emerge.

There were more practical strands to the British Ceramics Biennial (BCB). One huge hall in the factory was devoted to limited edition and bespoke tableware. It was a project that should have revealed interesting new ideas or, alternatively, tableware to go straight into commercial production. In the event it was typical of the British ceramic craft and industry's approaches to design. By and large it failed to grab the opportunity to engage artists, designers, researchers, marketeers, manufacturers and clients. Flux, a project started in 2009 at Staffordshire University with MA students designing fine bone china had, however, been

Simeon Featherstone in front of his tiled wall in the Johnson Tiles Pavilion at the British Ceramics Biennial





Zachary Eastwood-Bloom, 'Asklepios', 2013, 3D-printed object in parian porcelain, 35 x 18 x 18 cm



Ikuko Iwamoto, 'Migration', 2013, wall piece, slip cast porcelain, 53 x 58.5 x 5 cm

alcohol abusers to depict in clay tableware their personal journeys through substance recovery, and Ruth Spaak's who made individual table settings with a self-support group for the mentally ill.

The majority of work at Spode was in the form of installations. *Made in China* by Clare Twomey comprised 80 huge red pots decorated with gold flowers. Seventy-nine were made in Jingdezhen and one decorated in 18 ct gold by Royal Crown Derby. The project raised questions about perceptions of the value of objects and skills used in production, about what it is to make and what it is to witness this impressive physicality.

Phoebe Cummings' commissioned installation, based on the design *After the Death of the Bear*, recreated in 3D the location in which the "death" took place, complete with a palm tree, rocks and weeds. Made on site from local raw clay, it sought to raise questions about power, collapse, labour, interpretation and the exotic.

There was some limited engagement with ceramic manufacturers in the Pavilion section, where in four on-site installations artists were paired with industrial producers. In the Ibstock Brick Pavilion Lawrence Epps investigated corporate culture with his extruded clay figures boxed into the office at their desks. He created several versions of the figures installing piles of serried ranks of them on site. Visitors were encouraged to take home a cubed worker. A film of them doing this was shown in reverse as though visitors were creating the installation, rather than demounting it. This was extraordinarily moving, as the figures encapsulated contemporary office life. At the Johnson Tiles' exhibit Simeon Featherstone designed a tunnel with blue-and-white tiled walls that fully exploited Johnson's technological capacities in ink jet

Phoebe Cummings, 'After the Death of the Bear', 2013, installation made from raw clay on site at the original Spode Factory

successful and its work, now in commercial production (in blue, white and gold), was on display. Contemporary Applied Art tried to promote designs by makers for manufacture. Curated by Brian Kennedy and Sue Pryke, their chosen makers didn't experiment with new pieces, but rather put forward their usual ware and few demonstrated an understanding of manufacturing. More interesting works were displayed in an RCA-Art Food project aimed at weaning students away from sculptural projects to investigate tableware. The designs were a collaboration with students in Poland, food critic William Sitwell, chef Tim Allen of Launceston Place restaurant and a porcelain manufacturer called Cmielow.

The most moving displays were projects by Joseph Hartley, which encouraged recovering drug and

Aimee Lax, 'Agar' (detail), 2010, porcelain and silicone rubber, 25 x 45 x 35 cm



'Untitled', 2013, work by Longton Ladies Self Support Group, completed by participants of the Rebuild Project and lead artist Ruth Spaak



printing. Based on the Wedgwood Memorial Institute in Burslem, it looked at heritage skills, mechanisation, the role of design and the advancement of contemporary ceramic art into public consciousness. It was one of the few attempts by ceramists to engage with real industrial process.

Peter Jones, however, reflected on the processes employed at Ceram, a materials technology company. He played with its structures, state of the art testing labs and its slow energy kiln in four different art works. Although obvious, his wall roundels (after Wedgwood), featuring today's workers, including a burka-clad woman, were punchy statements. Corinne Felgate was fascinated by society's relationship to the act of making in art, craft



Jin Eui Kim, 'Luminosity No.28', 2013, porcelain, 44.4 x 12 cm

James Rigler, 'High Tide Place', 2013, ceramic, wood, metal and acrylic paint, 100 x 180 x 50 cm



Claudia Clare, 'Pageant', 2012, glazed earthenware, slips, enamels and lustres, diam. 8 x 55 cm



Tamsin van Essen, 'Vanitas Vanitatum (Vanitas XII)', 2012, porcelain, 27 x 19 cm

and industry. In her *Steelite International Pavilion* she created a kind of shrine to the process of industrial production which comprised 1000 ceramic objects made by Feldgate in collaboration with the company's employees. The majority of installations were

centred at the Spode Factory which has been on the site since 1700. Bought by the City Council to prevent its acquisition by property developers keen to build housing, it is now a monument to the past, with only a vague hope of regeneration. The Hothouse 9, a group

of nine young ceramic artists who met on a Crafts Council development course, saw the space as a repository of the histories of those who had worked there, the things they had made and the things they had left behind. The most touching was Miche Follano's installation of 367 *Vessels*, each of which represented an employee at Spode the day the factory closed. Four other artists created interventions including Stephen Dixon whose contribution *Excavate* was an archaeological dig into the factory floor.

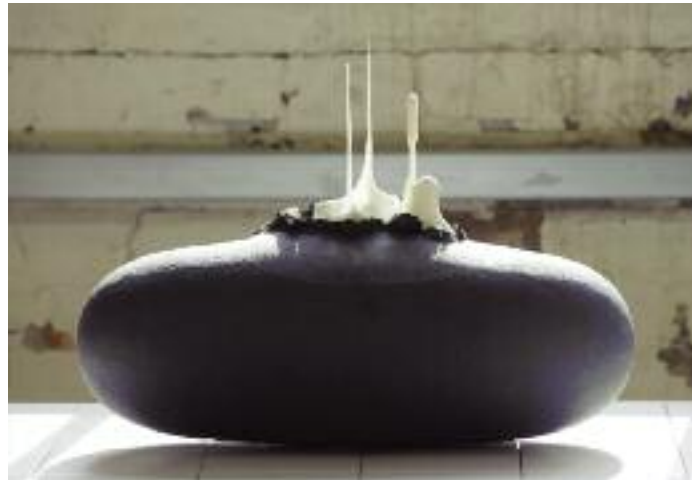
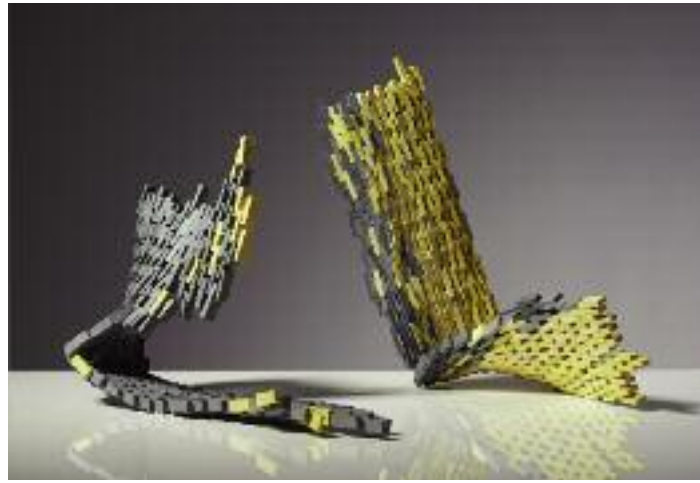
The major installations were carried out under the banner of *Topographies of the Obsolete: Vociferous Void*, a site-specific research project by the Bergen Academy of Art and Design with partner institutions in the UK, Denmark and Germany and jointly curated by Professors Neil Brownsword

James and Tilla Waters, 'Naked Tea Set #1', 2013, thrown stoneware, with inlay decoration, power 11.5 x 6 cm



Jonathan Keep, 'Salt Pots', 2011, 3D-printed ceramic with glaze, 8 x 9 x 8 cm





Mella Shaw, 'Bridges (Grey and Yellow)', 2013, ceramic, 48 x 34 x 15 cm

Emily Gardiner, 'Release', 2013, black stoneware, glaze, 40 x 54 x 24 cm

and Anne Helen Mydland. The project explored how ceramics and clay could be understood as both a material and the subject of contemporary art practice. Some 32 artists investigated the post-industrial landscape, using the Spode Factory as their starting point and placing installations in different spaces. Johan Sandborg and Anne Helen Mydland ardently restored the wooden panelled Board Room, whilst Erna Skoldottir painted



Ian McIntyre, terracotta, bowl 8.3 x 2.5 cm and pinch pot 15.8 x 5.4 cm

vegetation in the factory yard with ceramic dust. There were several interventions using objects abandoned in the factory. Mydland used unpainted, white plates arranged in the examination room to depict the current landscape of Spode. Danica Maier used transfers found on the site to create her slipping pile of "plates".

Unusual and moving interpretations included Numi Thorvarsson's use of old moulds to create lenses like camera obscuras with which to view the Spode site, while Anne Stinessen created the surprisingly powerful *An Interview with the Original Spode Works*. This was in the form of a book of imaginary conversations with the factory as a person. The book was placed on a desk replete with the fine white porcelain flowers for which Spode was famous. Most successful was Neil Brownsword's installation of furniture from the workers' canteen, abandoned and reinstalled complete with old food wrappings, fag ends and dirty clothes in the "Blue Room" where the company had housed its most treasured ceramics. It was an indictment of both sides of a failed industry.

In fact, it was hard for any of the 40 installations to say more than the empty factory said for itself. This huge site, once the centre of a worldwide trade, is now a semi-abandoned shell. Its poignancy was hard to exaggerate and few of the installations could rival or amplify its sadness and bleakness. The site was redolent of failed management, poor industrial relations, lack of understanding, deficient design and inadequate investment. It was all a bit depressing. Where was the innovation? Well there was a little in the BCB shop where visitors were able to buy work by less established makers.

Corinne Julius

Nao Matsunaga, 'Into You', 2013, ceramic, 50 x 30 x 30 cm

Josh Bitelli, 'Trophy for 75 Years of Forfar's', 2013, slip-casting ceramic



Malene Hartman Rasmussen, 'Skifting (Changling)', 2013, ceramic and mixed media installation



Joe Hartley, 'Portraits of Recover', 2013, Type-cast Project Reflection on ceramic, 25 x 3.5 cm



PHOTO: JOEL CHESTER FILDERS



PHOTO: JOEL CHESTER FILDERS