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 organizers, led by art consultant directors Jeremy Theophilius and Barney Hare Duke, have learnt to concentrate nearly all the installa-
tions into two locations – the Pottery Museum and Art Gallery and the huge empty expanses of the former Spode Factory.

AWARD at the museum was a travel across current British talent with a variation in practice from small batch production functional ware, to highly abstract sculptural work. Twenty-two exhibitions were select-
ed from 170 applicants to have their work on display for the dura-
tion of the six-week event, which offered one-off prize of £40,000. Most elected to make new pieces especially for the show.

Architecture inspired both James Rigal, in his examination of talen-
to-granted built elements, and the eventual overall winner Nao Matsumanga, whose rough organic forms and surface texture draw on both Neolithic forms and archi-
tecture. Multiples were another popular device. Ikuko Iwamoto assembled framed series of tiny porcelain cubes that made visitors feel that they were viewing sculp-
ture from above.

Decomposition was explored by Tamsin van Essen with her large ceramic urns, carved using an industrial sandblaster. Marianne Hartmann Raumassens installation Shovel or changing touched on decay in an unsettling piece – a crib containing a mass of clay against a background of wallpaper that, 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 bawdy than Clare’s rather obvious political commentaries in the form of illustra-
tions on huge pots – a poor take on Grayson Perry.

There were small batch production pieces, including wood by Louise Taylor and James and Tilla Waters. Ian Macintyre, 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 exciting makers in this area. Both explored the shared ground between craft and design.

There was also a sprinkling of new technology. Zachary Evans-Wood-Bloom investigated the blurring of boundaries between the mater-

cial and the virtual world. He cap-
tured this digitally in 3-dimensions and rendered it real through the grown, built, layered, deconstruct-
ed, drawn and cast in a bust of Atheson, the Greek God of Heal-
ing. Jonathan Keep elected to explore the future of the ceramics industry at a time when 3D print-
ers will soon enable everyone to make their own, in a series of irreg-
ularly 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 seems sculptural. Among the most notable was Josh Bitelli who is fas-
cinated by industrial design, and those who work with them. In his Trophy for 75 Years of Forfar’s, he

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spilled a perspex bowl to give

him bucket-sized loaves of bread that he hollowed out and used as

flammbäue moulds for slip-casting porcelain. Melissa Shah created a fluid geometric wall that exploit-
ed the pro-plasticity of porcelain where it sags, warps or bends

under its own weight during the firing process to catch the tipping point of no return. Emily Gardiner

explored catharsis, by looking at the volatolagia physics of flow in basic cup-shaped forms from

which strange preobics appeared to emerge.

There were more traditional techniques. The British Ceramics Biennial (BCB). One huge hall in the fac-
tory was devoted to limited edition and bespoke tableware. It was a project that should have revealed interesting new ideas or, alternativa-
tively, tableware to go straight into commercial production. In the event it was typical of the British

ceramic craft and industry’s appro-
daches to design. By and large it

failed to grab the opportunity to engage artists, designers, research-

ers, marketers, manufacturers and clients. Faux, a project started in 2009 at Staffordshire University with MA students designing fine bone china had, however, been

Simons Featherstones in front of his

bial hall in the Johnson Tiles Pavil-

on at the British Ceramics Biennial.
alcohol abusers to depict in clay their personal journeys through substance recovery, and Ruth Speak'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 Toomey comprised 80 shape 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 Briton Brick Pavilion Lawrence Lipski 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 witnessing it. This was extraordinary moving, as the figures encapsulated contemporary office life. At the Johnson Tiles’ exhibit Steenon Featherston designed a tunnel with blue-and-white tiled walls that fully exploited Johnson’s technological capacities in inkjet printing. Based on the Wedgwood Memorial Institute in Barlaston, it

and industry. In her ‘Still Life 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 central 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 Holhouse 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 Madie Folino’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 and Gerdts. 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.

Jon His Kim, ‘Luminosity N° 28’, 2013, porcelain, 44 x 22 x 12 cm; ‘James Rigler, ‘High Tide Place’, 2013, ceramic, wood, metal and acrylic paint, 190 x 180 x 50 cm; Jonathan Kepp, ‘Salt Pots’, 2011, 3D-printed ceramic with glaze, 8 x 9 x 8 cm

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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. Danish Maier used transfers found on the site to create her slipping pile of “plates.” Unusual and moving interpretations included Nuni Thorvarson’s use of old moulds to create lenses like camera obscuras with which to view the Spode site, while Anne Stinesen 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 replete with 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 Matsumage, ‘Into You’, 2013, ceramic, 50 x 30 x 30 cm*

*Josh Bitelli, ‘Trophy for 75 Years of Forfar’s’, 2013, slip-casting ceramic*