

# REVIEWS

## A way to bring ceramics back to the Potteries

**British Ceramics Biennial 2009**

Various venues, Stoke-on-Trent

3 October – 13 December 2009

Reviewed by Grant Gibson

'The British Ceramics Biennial seems to me to be the right event in the right place at the right time,' said critic Emmanuel Cooper in the BCB's early publicity. And he's quite right, of course. If ever a city needed a successful festival then it's Stoke-on-Trent, and on paper the event had much to recommend it. It was to be led with an installation by designer *du jour* Jaime Hayón. By showcasing the work of recent graduates, the *FRESH* exhibition would provide a dash of youth; run by the likes of Cj O'Neil and Denise O'Sullivan, participatory programmes would involve the local populace. And to cap it all, it dangled a glamorous awards scheme, £40,000 prize money, the scale of figure that attracts national media attention. It all sounded rather enticing. So why, after spending the best part of a day and a half touring the six towns that make up the conurbation, did I feel an important opportunity had been spurned?

Certainly there was good work on display. The awards exhibit, held over three levels at the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, was selected by Cooper, Alison Britton and Alun Graves, curator of ceramics at the V&A. It was split into three categories (Batch Production; One-off; Built Environment) and featured pieces by such makers as Clare Twomey, Jacob van der Beugel, Philip Eglin, Fran Priest and others. So far it all bodes well. Yet bizarrely, the curators decided to include little or no text about each piece. For the One-off section in particular this denied visitors a potentially vital layer of understanding. Stephen Dixon, for instance, was showing a series of cast pigheads, complete with dog tags, representing various MPs who stand accused of having their snouts in the trough (including Douglas Hogg and Hazel Blears). I only know this because the artist happened to be there finishing off the installation: nothing on the wall threatened to give the game away.

Held at a cavernous space at Emma Bridgewater Pottery, *FRESH* suffered



Left: *Monopoly*, Stephen Dixon, 2009  
Right: *Entomoi*, designed by Monica Tsang, from *The New English* at *FRESH*, 2009

from the same flaw. Once again there was plenty of good, interesting work, staged unfussily, but the installation was hampered by a lack of information. Directly adjacent was the Jaime Hayón ceramics retrospective. Now broadly speaking I'm a fan of the exuberance the Spanish designer brings to all his work – but somehow this show lacked his usual brio. Perhaps unfairly, but inevitably, it's impossible not to contrast it to his recent, extraordinary installation at Trafalgar Square, which effectively led this year's London Design Festival: the Stoke show was anaemic by comparison.

These criticisms made, it should be pointed out that there was indeed work to cheer. If the pictures dotted around various points of the trail are an accurate guide, then *Breaking the Mould*, Dan Dubowitz's photographic exhibition, exploring some of Stoke's hidden spaces, is enormously promising. (Sadly it had yet to open when *Crafts* visited.) And Neil Brownsword's *Marl Hole* project (see p.12 this issue) flowered into an enthralling and beautifully sensitive film by Johnny Magee, which was shown at the AirSpace Gallery.

The intention is that this event will contribute to the regeneration of the city itself, hence the support of the North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership. But to achieve this the BCB must be on a



far larger scale. Stoke is a nebulous sprawl, tricky for a visitor to navigate – as I discovered when travelling to some events on foot. The truth of the matter is that this inaugural year had too few events to pique tourist interest and encourage them away from the Wedgwood visitor centre, let alone to impinge on the city itself. And what events there were were too dispersed – there was never a satisfactory quorum of activity in any one gathering point. To really work the BCB needs far more than a handful of interventions in some of Stoke's galleries; it needs to stage a complete takeover.

Many are willing the Biennial to be a success. While the region's pottery industry may be withering (the diplomatic description in the official press blurb is 'changing and diversifying'), the city should in theory still have plenty going for it geographically: it's only 90 minutes from London and a much shorter hop from both Manchester and Birmingham. It also contains some extraordinary old building stock. Yet there's a palpable sense that this former industrial powerhouse has been forgotten now by a whole sequence of governments. With the right combination of budget and creative talent the BCB has the potential to put Stoke on the map – but in 2009 this potential was not realised.

Grant Gibson is the editor of *Crafts* magazine



## What happens when you leave four artists at the bottom of a clay pit? Grant Gibson finds out

# Material values from the play pit

**The Beginnings:** Curated by Neil Brownsword, the *Marl Hole* project eloquently combines the ephemeral with the lasting. An exercise in the process of making, the initial brief allowed four internationally renowned artists five days and a rudimentary set of tools to experiment with the clay found at the bottom of a pit owned by Ibstock Brick Ltd at Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Brownsword has long been fascinated with the red burning clays found in the area, and the official blurb describes the project as a chance to 're-evaluate the status of a material logically consigned to its dominant industrial connections.' But there's also a rather more personal angle – as a child he used to play in a similar pit at the back of his parents' house.

When the allotted time was up, the pit was to return to its industrial use and the results destroyed. Only a 25-minute film shot by Johnny Magee, who shadowed the artists as they worked, would remain. Finding this idea irresistible, *Crafts* made two separate visits the Marl Hole (on the first morning and final afternoon) to witness how they got on...

**Day One:** In an environment best described as imposing, the artists – Brownsword himself, Torbjorn Kvasbo, Alexandra Engelfriet and Pekka Paikkari – arrive with very different working methods and expectations. The sky is battleship grey, the clay in the pit cloyingly wet. The pit feels distinctly isolating.

While Kvasbo and Engelfriet attempt to come to terms with their surroundings, Finnish maker and designer Paikkari has a very specific idea. With the help of a dumper he is trying to flatten a 25 square

metre section of the pit floor – this is to be his 'canvas', for a series of letters lifted from *The A-Z of the Clay Industry*. 'What I'd like to see is the clay cracking. I think that will happen after Wednesday when we're expecting rain. Maybe Thursday we'll paint and then it will disappear.' But things aren't looking too promising, as the dumper leaves deep furrows in the slurry.

Nearby, Norwegian artist Kvasbo is working at the pit face on a very different scale, rolling the clay into over-sized sausages and inserting them into the landscape. He's palpably still finding his feet. 'You have to find practical methods to understand the surroundings,' he explains. 'It's very, very existential. You make solutions where you are, from scratch. You start with nothing; your self-esteem really is zero. It's a good lesson. Everyone should do that now and then. Then build themselves up again slowly.'

Dutch artist Engelfriet, meanwhile, has elected to use a slope at the edge of the pit. Her reason is simple. 'I'm from Holland and it's very flat. So I'd like to use the opportunity to work with slopes and with gravity.' She's digging out the stones with a spade and then intends to use her body to manipulate the clay. 'If it rains it's OK,' she says. 'It's the dryness that could be a problem.'

Brownsword has the difficult job of making sure the other artists are happy while simultaneously concentrating on his own work. 'It's a sense of responsibility because you can't help but feel a bit paternal. You've got 'em over here and if it goes tits up...' He trails off for a moment. 'But I think they've all got a kind of open attitude. It could be great or it could be a complete disaster.'

**Day Five:** I return on the final afternoon and things have definitely changed. The floor of the pit itself is drier. Remarkably Paikkari's canvas is flat and he's working with his wife to finish the final letters in time. Engelfriet's slope, by complete contrast, is pocked with craters made with an intriguing combination of a digger and the artist's knees. And Brownsword has made a number of interventions in different places across the pit that emphasise contrasts of colour and texture.

Without doubt though the greatest transformation has come from Kvasbo, who used the dumper to create a slope and shift a series of boulders. The rocks were then moved by hand, and slip was added layer upon layer from the top of the slope by the machine. 'You get here. You have no idea what it's about and you're totally overwhelmed,' he explains. 'So you start with something very small and comfortable. But then you stay here and you get a little more qualified to understand what's around you and how to deal with the massive surroundings.'

Magee has quietly been filming how the pieces unfold, the one permanent reminder of the entire project. 'They were responding to the clay, and I was responding to them,' he says. 'So in the end what I've come to is capturing the energy: the physical exertion, the breathing, the grunts, the stabbing of spades in the ground, the mechanical diggers.'

**The Aftermath:** The film is shown at Stoke-on-Trent's AirSpace Gallery during the British Ceramics Biennial, alongside a mound of clay from the pit itself. The idea was that visitors could get their hands dirty creating something. As Brownsword pointed out: 'Kids aren't allowed to get dirty or go out in the woods to play any more, so it's about opening up the possibilities of materials again and people handling them in a very low-tech way.'

And this gets to the nub of the project – the second and perhaps most charming aspect of both its ephemerality and its lasting legacy: watching a bunch of grown-ups give themselves license to play, taking their time to understand and experiment with both material and environment. If it encourages even one visitor to think about the material in a different way then it will have served its purpose.

*The British Ceramic Biennial is reviewed on p.60 of this issue. A trailer for the Marl Hole project can be seen on youtube at [tinyurl.com/jzyvr9b7](http://tinyurl.com/jzyvr9b7)*



Clockwise from left: the quarry site; Alexandra Engelfriet's piece; Neil Brownsword in action; Torbjorn Kvasbo's piece; detail of Pekka Paikkari's piece





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