

ABOUT: MAKING IT Developing Creative Entrepreneurship



Above / *making it 07* designer-makers with representatives from their host organisations.

Craft has occupied, and continues to occupy, a curious position in Northern Ireland's cultural landscape. Undeniably vibrant and diverse it offers both a rich legacy and living tradition of objects, skills and thinking. Only a century ago Northern Ireland was producing some of the greatest crafts figures of the age. But as the twentieth century drew to a close, and in the 1970s in particular, it is sad to discover that the now-defunct Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), perhaps the only Government-sponsored body to invest in the practice, admitted that its promotion of crafts was 'intended as a shoppers' guide' as much as a serious attempt to support individual makers.

In 1981 when the critic Peter Dormer came to Belfast to interview local makers for an article in the Crafts Council's 'Crafts' magazine he saw the LEDU policy as an important but slightly unclear step where the real needs of craftworkers as well as consumers were not being directly addressed. The LEDU initiative to encourage small business and equation of craftworker and entrepreneur has persisted up to the present day.

Since its inception in November 2005, Craft Northern Ireland has spearheaded a number of innovative programmes that have not only supported but have also helped to shape the region's nascent craft

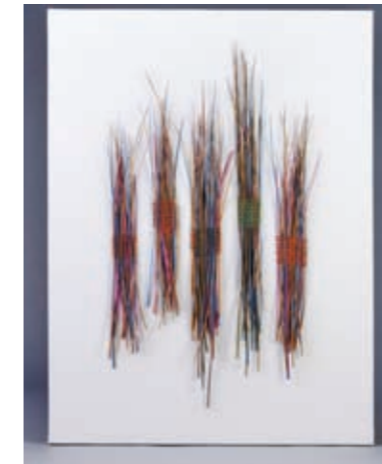
"Since its inception in November 2005, Craft Northern Ireland has spearheaded a number of innovative programmes that have not only supported but have also helped to shape the region's nascent craft identity in the twenty-first century."



identity in the twenty-first century. In reviewing its achievements four years after it was founded reveals just how dynamic Craft Northern Ireland has ▶



Above and left / designer-makers on the *making it* programme access studio space, specialist equipment and state-of-the-art technology.



Above / 'Colour Construction', hand-dyed rushes on canvas by Naomi Whan, *making it 07* placed at Island Arts Centre.

▶ been as aside from their listings and website it has also initiated, regional networking partnerships, professional development seminars, published a major survey 'A Future in the Making' (2006), and mounted the first major exhibition of contemporary craft from Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC (2007). Given the growing concern of how skills-based training can be turned into successful business acumen, particularly in the current economic slump, Craft Northern Ireland's *making it* scheme founded in 2005, and operative from 2006, has been not just a landmark in craft advocacy in Northern Ireland but a life-line to makers.

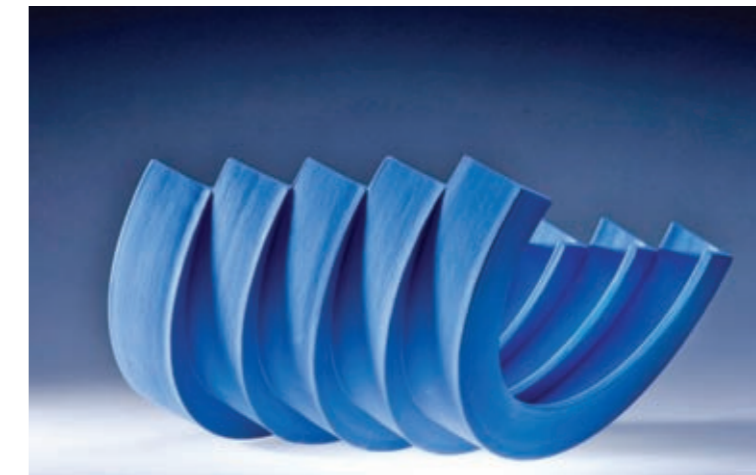
making it is essentially a business start-up, or 'business incubation', programme for emerging craft makers. It was established by Craft Northern Ireland in conjunction with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Invest



Above / Craft NI's tailored business support is an integral part of the *making it* programme. **Right** / Ceramicist Adam Frew, *making it 06* at his studio in Flowerfield Arts Centre.



Above / Ceramic jugs by Andrew Frew, *making it 06*.



Above / Continuity and Interruption series, thrown and altered stoneware by Derek Wilson, *making it 07*, placed at University of Ulster.

Northern Ireland and was loosely based on the UK Crafts Council's 'Setting Up' and 'Next Move' schemes. Through the formation of a partnership with a number of host institutions, the programme offers a two-year placement for makers. These host institutions reflect the breadth of organisations invested in the

teaching, promoting or selling of craft. So far partnerships have been formed with education institutions such as Further and Higher Colleges, the University of Ulster, Arts Centres and other arts and cultural venues including the National Trust and the Ulster Museum. ▶





Above / Ceramicist Gail Mahon at her studio in North West Regional College, Limavady, *making it* 06.

► These host organisations provide both studio facilities and access to specialist technologies as well as administrative and business support. They also provide makers with an appropriate intellectual environment in which to work. If the studio crafts in Ireland have been perceived as lacking any real sense of intellectual respectability, or even an intellectual framework in which to operate, as most Irish craft artists and designers do not teach in colleges or universities where the training in these practices largely takes place, then by strengthening of the links between host institution and individual maker the *making It* programme may well challenge this.

Furthermore, the programme also engages makers very directly in the fundamentals of commercial thinking and planning which is only beginning to be broached in the academic environment. The aim of this is to enable the maker to establish a



Above / 'Dancers' (series), Coloured woven flax by Naomi Whan, *making it* 07.

sustainable craft business as well as a response to evolving networks, markets and audiences.



Above / 'Triquetra Table', Ash walnut, toughened glass and lacquer finish by Ronan Lowry, *making it* 07.



Above / Designer-makers have opportunities to exhibit at their host organisation.

For the ceramicist Derek Wilson, who had a residency at the University of Ulster, the 'access to a workshop space and equipment offered me the chance to concentrate and develop my work'. Other ceramicists on the programme, including Adam Frew, Kinga Pers, Michael Rice, Gail McMahan and John McKeag, echo Wilson's comments about the benefits of access to the all-important kilns and studio-space but also the 'focus placed on business'.

This was also evident in the experience of the silversmiths and jewellers on the programme. For Lotus de Wit, who was placed at Ards Borough Council, it was 'great to have the support of a dedicated business support' and for Suzanne Harbinson, who was placed at the Newry Campus of the Southern Regional College, 'the creative team at SRC Newry provided invaluable feedback and support for all aspects of my business'. For Rachel McKnight, who was placed at Newry Institute, the programme offered invaluable support 'in developing a new range of jewellery' and in 2009 she was the first Northern Irish maker to be represented at 'Origin', a major international selling event for contemporary craft.

Work by these makers, and others such as the textile artists and designers Naomi Whan, Andrea Hayes, Rachel O'Neill and Genevieve Murphy; the glass artists Heather ►



Above / Flowerfield Arts Centre is one of 15 arts and cultural organisation to host a *making it* placement.



Above / Each maker on the programme has access to one-to-one mentoring with a business advisor.

► Wilson and Lydia Smyth; the furniture designer Ronan Lowry; and the wood turner Stephen Mackey, has regularly been seen in exhibitions and selling fairs throughout Northern Ireland as well as further afield including shows organised by the Crafts Council UK and the Crafts Council of Ireland.

Now in its fifth year the *making it* programme has, in total, matched twenty-two makers with fourteen host organisations. Examples of work by several of these makers, spanning the *making it* programmes from 2005 to 2009, can be seen at several current exhibitions: at Craft Northern Ireland in Cotton Court; the Merchant Hotel; and the University of Ulster in Belfast. The production and consumption of well-conceived and well-made objects can only improve our material environment and has much to offer architects and urban



Above / Dish stack by John McKeag, *making it* 05 at Clotworthy Arts Centre.



Above / Smoke-fired beaker by Michael Rice, placed at Down Arts Centre, *making it* 06.



Above / Double twin-rings by Eddie Doherty, placed at University of Ulster, *making it* 05.



Above / Polypropylene Ring by Rachel McKnight placed at Southern Regional College, Newry, *making it* 06.

planners not just domestic buyers who seem to be the focus of much of the marketing from the craft sector. As such the impact of the *making it* programme and its implications for Northern Irish crafts in the twenty-first century are yet to be fully realised. ●

Joseph McBrinn

Building on the success of Craft NI's *making it* programme, in January 2010 Craft NI will launch a new programme, *making it +*. This 2-year programme will offer studio space to designer-makers in arts, cultural & business venues across Northern Ireland.

Craft NI is inviting designer-makers, creative industry businesses and arts and cultural venues to apply to the programme by visiting www.craftni.org > programmes > *making it +*



Above / Vases by John McKeag, *making it* 05.