

ABOUT: DEREK WILSON

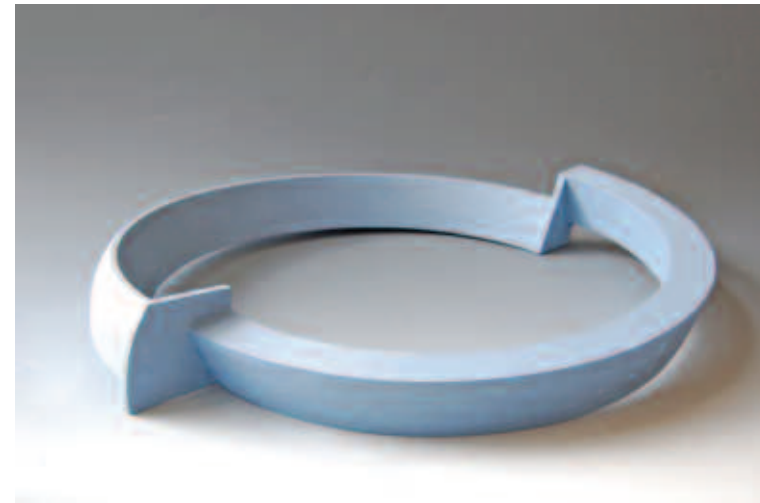


“Wilson is an unapologetic hand-thrower and hand-builder and has managed to produce work that accepts, even confronts, the utilitarian past of ceramics whilst simultaneously offering striking new possibilities of form and conception, depth and meaning. In many ways his search for the ‘perfect form’ in hand-making has created a form of ‘natural engineering’ that is at once commonplace yet uniquely beautiful.”

Very few ceramists ever straddle the divide between the dutifully functional and the conceptually challenging. For ceramists working at a professional level it is really one or the other. Although historically both have seemed essential (in varying measures) to work that challenges, pushes boundaries and redefines ceramic identity. Ceramic training and the commercial market in today’s world, however, tend to polarize makers into either end of this spectrum and with the increasing loss of manufacturing and making skills in the West a healthy future for both seems increasingly bleak. This

situation has, in many ways, fuelled prevailing attitudes to the conceptualisation of ceramics, which like a great of conceptual art, can often end up a wasteful mixture of obscurity and superciliousness,

turgidity and banality, absurdity and alienation, based on nothing more than empty thinking. For ceramics, which is a form of cultural practice that crosses all ages and all cultures, it seems a rather sorry state of affairs. ▶



Above / Continuity and interruption series, thrown and altered stoneware

Below / Continuity and interruption series, thrown and altered stoneware



Above / Concave thrown vessel form

Below / 2 thrown vessel forms



▶ One rather original exception to this trend is the work of Belfast-based ceramist Derek Wilson, who as an artist has managed to emerge from the dual path of functional production pottery and clay sculpture/conceptual ceramics with a startlingly clear and fresh vision. Wilson is an unapologetic hand-thrower and hand-builder and has managed to produce work that accepts, even confronts, the utilitarian past of ceramics whilst simultaneously offering striking new possibilities of form and conception, depth and

meaning. In many ways his search for the ‘perfect form’ in hand-making has created a form of ‘natural engineering’ that is at once commonplace yet uniquely beautiful. Emphatically hand-made but resonant of the industrially-made, Wilson’s work resists being read as some glib comment on the production-line globalisation of ceramics but rather feels like an elegiac tribute to the fast disappearing possibilities ‘of the fusion of craft and industry’ in our rapidly diminishing ceramic culture.

Wilson’s ideas centre on a desire to create a form of pottery which satisfies both ‘the need to make a living’ and the creation of beautifully-crafted ceramics that serve a real role in daily life and that are, without question, ‘accessible to all’. It may make him sound anachronistic – like a Victorian or an early Modernist. But beauty for all. What’s not to like?

Grand ideas perhaps but Derek Wilson is a clear thinker and an exceptionally talented and disciplined maker. He trained at Belfast School of Art and Design at the University of Ulster, earning both a BA and MA in ceramics. In 2002, he successfully completed a Pottery Skills Course run by the Crafts Council of Ireland in Kilkenny. Wilson then honed his skills through serious work as a production potter for Colm de Ris in Dublin and at Ballydougan Pottery in Lurgan. His work has been exhibited widely in Belfast, Dublin and London, most ▶



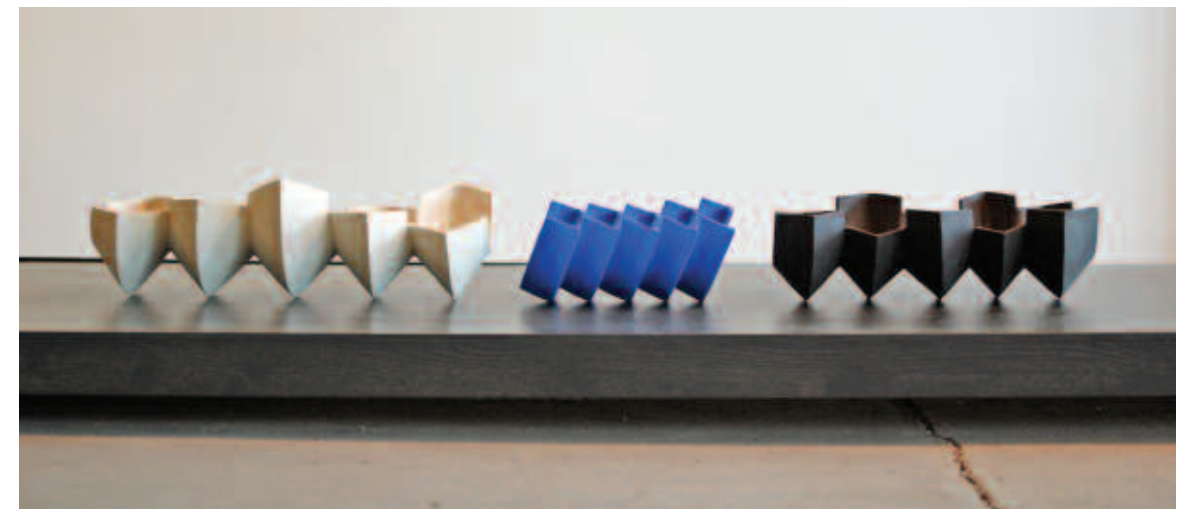
Top / Systematic series, thrown and assembled stoneware

Above / Systematic series, thrown and assembled stoneware

Below / Exhibition at Guldaagergaard ceramic research centre, Denmark



Above / 3 porcelain cylinders with engobe



► recently at the National Craft Gallery's 'Breaking Out' exhibition in 2009. Wilson's work to date has evolved within an eclectic framework of reference; most directly he looks to inter-war and mid-century abstract and constructivist painting in England and Ireland. His pieces seem organic but are often cut up and reformed, restructured and reconstituted. Perfect lines, sinuous curves and the sharp meeting of the two fuse ideas of function and expression whilst at the same time avoid alienating the viewer.

Unsurprisingly, Derek Wilson has already received several major awards including one from the Crafts Council of Ireland and in 2008 he was commissioned to make a 25-piece porcelain tea-set for the Office of the Chief Executive of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Earlier in 2006, he won the prestigious Richard K Degenhardt 'Belleek Collectors Scholarship', with which he went to Helsinki in Finland to research Scandinavian examples of ceramics which drew on both 'craft and



Above / Experimental work, thrown and assembled stoneware

industry'; such as the work of the historic Arabia factory in Helsinki. In April/May 2008 Wilson held a residency at the Guldagergård International Ceramic Research Center at Skælskør in Denmark. Here he began to perfect the explosion of colour that emerged in his work a few years earlier, which saw the application of deeply gorgeous primary painted lustres to his sculptural pieces. The work continued to explore the lexicon of industrial ceramic forms and shapes that are conversely, and expressively,

'made by hand'. But at Guldagergård Wilson embarked upon his most experimental work to date. New considerations such as the combination of form and colour, placement and scale created a new type of object, at once organic and industrial, that were not unsettling like a great deal of current ceramic work but a satisfying meeting place of the functional, the expressive and the aesthetic. A fusion of ideas which Wilson is capable of realising in both abstract sculptural objects and beautifully elegant functional ware (very often taking the form of teapots). Derek Wilson is currently on the 'Making It' Craft NI programme and is based at the School of Art and Design in Belfast, where he continues to produce remarkably rich ideas and objects. ●



Above / 3 thrown and dimpled porcelain bowls

Below / Arts Council commission



Joseph McBrinn

All quotes are from conversation with Derek Wilson, to whom I am grateful for his giving me his time.

Derek can be contacted at www.derekwilsonceramics.com, through contacting the School of Art and Design at the University of Ulster or Craft Northern Ireland.

