

## ABOUT: JACK DOHERTY



In ceramics, the most philosophically articulate of the craft disciplines, there is a strand of thought that sees life and work as an integrated process. These ideas, most famously articulated by Bernard Leach, are linked to the branch of ceramics that refuses to accept the separation of beauty and utility. The conscious integration of living and working, with the intention of producing objects that combine the properties of art and the utensil, is a stubborn, demanding, vocational path. It has produced both remarkable ceramics and remarkable people; the Irish potter, Jack Doherty, among them.

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he has stripped down his process until all his pieces are soda-glazed porcelain, made using just one colouring material. This combines one of the least forgiving clays with a notoriously revealing glaze. Neither porcelain nor soda glazing has the reputation of allowing much margin for error and their successful combination requires that the kiln is built into the creative process. ‘The simpler it gets’, he says, ‘the more aware you have to be about finish and detail’.

Doherty entered foundation year at the Ulster College of Art and Design in 1966 with no intention of becoming a potter. His attitude changed when, on a college trip to London, he was among a group to visit Lucie Rie’s studio. An afternoon spent looking at Rie’s own work and that of Bernard Leach, Hans Coper, and Hamada Shoji opened Doherty’s eyes to the potential of ceramics. ‘It all added ▶



Above / Tall blue cup porcelain 10cms high



Above / Cylindrical bowl porcelain 40cms wide



Above / Black Cannister porcelain 23cms high



Above / Green and Black bowl porcelain 19cms wide

a young couple coming from the relative cultural isolation of Belfast, it opened the door to a network of international design. ‘Even at the time the Kilkenny workshops felt important,’ Doherty says. ‘They were very different from anything else that was happening in Ireland.’

In Kilkenny, Doherty worked in the industrial ceramics design studio, ▶



Above / Dark ribbed bowl porcelain 32cms high



Above / Leach Tableware salad bowl

▶ up,’ he says, ‘and made sense as a way of being and of living with things.’

He finished college, specialising in 3-D Design Ceramics, and had not been long in a teaching job in Belfast when he was offered a job as a pottery demonstrator at the Kilkenny Design Workshops (KDW). In the early 1970s the ceramic workshop at KDW was reaching the peak of its significance, undertaking projects for international companies like Rosenthal and WMF. Abandoning teaching, he and his wife Joan Doherty, a significant potter in her own right, moved to Kilkenny. For



Above / Wide bowl porcelain 36cms wide



Above / Yellow porcelain bowl 20cms high



Above / Leach Tableware espresso cups



**Above** / Leach Tableware mugs



**Above** / Leach Tableware stacking bowls

► building prototypes and working on glazes, but also as a studio potter. In retrospect, he sees the experience of designing for industry as crucial to developing the conceptual basis of his studio work. 'One of the more significant projects that KDW had undertaken at the time was for the German manufacturer WMF. I was working on different sorts of tableware and having to think about designing knobs for casserole dishes. It took me beyond studio pottery to look at function.'

The Kilkenny years were fruitful ones for the Dohertys, who worked both independently and together. Of their creative collaboration, Doherty comments that: 'Joan has probably been the biggest influence in my life, full stop. She created a big space for me to work with, in all kinds of ways.' Their work was selected for exhibition in the V&A Craftsman's Art



**Above** / Ribbed bowl stoneware 38cms high

exhibition in London in 1973, and they were awarded a gold medal both in Faenza in 1974 and at the 5th International Biennale of Ceramic Art in Vallauris in 1976.

The Dohertys stayed in Kilkenny for five years and, when they left it, was because they 'wanted to do what potters do' and set up their own studio pottery. In 1976 they bought a ruined cottage in Banbridge, County Down, and built a pottery where they made tableware and individual porcelain pieces. The studio ceramics movement, which was at an embryonic stage of development in Ireland, was in full flow in Britain and, for lack of an Irish gallery structure, they travelled repeatedly to England to sell their work. Eventually, motivated by the desire to put their own work among that of the people whose work they admired, they decided to leave Northern Ireland and move to England. In 1983 the Dohertys set up both home and business in Herefordshire, on the edge of the Forest of Dean. During this time, Doherty became deeply involved with the Craft Potters Association, an organisation that he chaired for a number of years.



**Above** / Leach Tableware pouring bowl

Early in 2008, Doherty was offered the position of lead potter at the Leach pottery in St. Ives. His marriage having ended a couple of years previously, he was in a position to accept the job. He has found that, with the upheaval, his work is changing. Currently, in preparation for a solo exhibition in the National Crafts Gallery, Kilkenny, he has been working in stoneware – a rough clay and almost the opposite of porcelain – for the first time since he left the KDW. 'A change like this strips you down and makes you think about where you are,' he says. 'It has forced me to rethink everything about life and about work and the relationship between them. You can't just pick it up your work from where it was before. You're in a different place.' ●

**Eleanor Flegg**

As part of August Craft Month Jack Doherty will give a talk on 26th August at the University of Ulster, Belfast. Contact [info@craftni.org](mailto:info@craftni.org) for more information. Jack Doherty's solo exhibition will open at the National Craft Gallery, Kilkenny on 8 th August 2009.



**Above** / Grey and blue ribbed bowl porcelain 22cms high