

## ABOUT: HELEN MOORE



In the late summer of 2009 the Medical Biology Centre at Queen's University Belfast played the unlikely host to a major ceramics exhibition by the young Belfast artist Helen Moore (from 6th August to 6th September 2009). Commissioned by The Naughton Gallery at Queen's the show entitled 'Material Morphology' is made up of hundreds of small fragments of porcelain in a spectrum of blue and white in an installation inspired, according to the artist, by 'the hidden, the obscure, and the unknown and concealed.' The small fragments themselves are arranged, organised or collected into groups like clinical specimens and Moore further reveals her approach to be informed by the 'metaphysical, geological and archaeological.' Two long floor cases have channels for these fragments arranged into a gradation of colour. A further wall case houses fragments in small, pristine white, wheel-thrown vessels, individual fragments are also housed in small Victorian glass-domed wooden-based geological cases, and further fragments dissolve into liquid in larger glass cases. Moore suggests that 'through the context of mixed-media installation I aim to elevate the status of these small unfamiliar



**Above** / Material Morphology (detail of installed fragments), 2009, Porcelain Fragments

"Having established a concern with the object or commodity 'in a cultural perspective', Moore has been, in the past few years, developing a means to marry object and installation. Her 'Collections' and then 'Material Transmutation' installations were the first to strike upon the idea of the gradating colour harmonies."



**Above** / Mixed Fragments (detail), 2009, Porcelain

objects and emphasise their relevance and value to our everyday existence. The ceramics become specimens to be collected, analysed and investigated.'

The installation is, in many ways, a philosophical reflection upon the nature of the relationship between science and art. Indeed, Moore argues that 'although art and science have clear and distinct boundaries' these are not immutable and like all boundaries, and indeed hierarchies, these can easily be blurred. Having come into contact with ceramics at school Moore was captivated by 'its malleable, transformative and expressive qualities' and returned to it after having completed courses, and qualifications, in Modern History and then Criminology at Queen's



**Above** / Material Morphology Series, Wheel-thrown Vessel Form (detail), 2009, Porcelain, W10cmxH4cm

University. She has recently also completed a degree in ceramics at the University of Ulster in Belfast but her earlier, academic interests have engendered an 'approach to ceramics [that] is often logical, organised and conceptual.' Although this is a far cry from what the public might consider ceramics' job to be Moore further explicates that by exploring these fragments, or traces, 'through traditional material combinations, such as porcelain, celadon and lustre' that it is possible to open up 'interesting contemporary dialogues that are indicative of emerging craft practice.' Indeed, Moore hopes that her audience will be prompted to think by the work and thus be able to trace ideas from the micro to the macro and make the leap to see the ▶



**Above** / Specimen Series, 2009, Porcelain & Display Domes, 3x4.5cm

▶ work as a musing on the current status of ceramics as an art-form.

Indeed, the issues raised by Moore's arranged and isolated porcelain fragments reveal much about wider concerns within not just ceramics but other hand-made, material-focussed, process-driven practices. Moore's work hinges upon two central concerns: material and process. Her material is explored not just in terms of its inherent physical potential but also the politics of its social and cultural value. Lustres and colour are used to increase our visualisation of porcelain as a form of 'white gold' and indeed like many makers in the crafts for Moore, her process or the method she uses, like her material, is in some ways the actual message or point of what she does. Thus, although she is of course sensitive to



**Above** / Material Transmutation, Wall Installation, 2009, Porcelain & Wood, 300x40x20cm

**Right** / Collections (detail), 2009, Porcelain, Terracotta, Wood



the formal aesthetics of the finished object, she is more fundamentally concerned with the concepts of alchemy and metamorphosis that transform a mundane thing into a desired object. Her delicate, fragile and ephemeral porcelain pieces also evoke a spectral history of ceramic forms. Like lost objects excavated in an archaeological dig, they reference, in their form, material and creation, iconic historic ceramics such as nineteenth-century Sèvres or middle-period Belleek and other eerily-organic, decoratively-spiky porcelain.

Having established a concern with the object or commodity 'in a cultural perspective', Moore has been, in the

**Below** / Blue Specimen, 2009, Porcelain & Glass Dome, 18x9cm



past few years, developing a means to marry object and installation. Her 'Collections' and then 'Material Transmutation' installations were the first to strike upon the idea of the gradating colour harmonies. The blue and white colours she settled upon using can perhaps be read as an oblique reference to the most ubiquitous known form of porcelain, i.e. the blue and white patterned Chinese ware that transformed modern Western ceramics from the eighteenth century onwards. Nearly every household in the West has had, at one stage or another, a blue and white plate, bowl, cup or some other everyday object. By presenting the concept in an abstracted form ▶



**Left** / Presence of Absence Series 1 (detail), 2008, Porcelain & Celadon, 16x12x5cm

**Above** / Presence of Absence Series 2, 2008, Porcelain, 14x11x6cm

► Moore aims to promote an 'awareness of the contemporary dialogues that traditional materials such as porcelain are engaged in today. Many people have preconceptions about craft objects and see ceramics in particular as solely related to pragmatic, utilitarian vessels. Of course pragmatic vessel forms will always remain a significant aspect of ceramic craft, but collectively contemporary makers are challenging established preconceptions and pushing the associated boundaries.' Although Moore's ideas are best expressed through the arrangement of her porcelain fragments, or traces, she also pays a remarkable amount of attention to the individual pieces

themselves. Her 'Presence of Absence' series draws attention to individual beauty on a micro scale through combining porcelain with celadon, terracotta, tin glazes and other lustres to show how the morphing of material through process can reveal much about value. These pieces are also on show at Queen's Medical Biology Centre exhibition.

Although Helen Moore's work illustrates how ceramics is both 'mentally and physically demanding' she also acknowledges that the materially-bound creative process

equally involves 'subconscious mental responses' and in many cases philosophical reflection. It is this paradox that has so vexed the modern art world. In 1997 Rosemary Hill argued that craft is, without question, 'a fit subject for philosophical argument - [and] that it has, like all art and science, something to tell us about the human condition.' And more recently, in 2005, Tanya Harrod pointed out that the 'alchemical transformation' in ceramics, in pottery especially, through the 'creation of clay bodies and glazes and slips, the risky, elemental ritual of firing, the importance of touch in most processes aside, perhaps, from casting, the ability to appreciate serendipitous accident' and more especially 'the moral redemption offered by intense physicality' are all key aspects of contemporary, as much as historic, ceramics. Such ideas can, without question, be easily seen in the porcelain installations of Helen Moore. ●



**Above** / Presence of Absence Series 4, 2008, Terracotta, Tin glaze, Lustre, 9x3.5cm

**Joseph McBrinn**

All quotes are from conversation with, or from other material supplied by, the artist Helen Moore.



Helen can be contacted at [www.helenmooreceramics.com](http://www.helenmooreceramics.com), or through The Naughton Gallery at Queen's University Belfast at [www.naughtongallery.org](http://www.naughtongallery.org)