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Are you a Potter or a Sculptor?

While studying at Alfred University in the United States Katherine West was once asked by her tutor "Are you a potter or a sculptor?" She struggled, she told us in Grennan Mills to answer the question. Her confidence not yet developed, she answered "...no, I'm not a potter, potters would not be happy to be categorised with me..." As for a sculptor, well no she wasn't one of those either. Her tutor was not impressed, "you're a Sculptor" he told her and it seems that she is. To see her now there is little doubt that whether a potter or sculptor - she is quite something.

When I saw last years line up, to say I was excited would be to put it mildly. Ruthanne Tudball and Bernard Irwin both gave excellent demonstrations, but my fascination was with Cormac Boydell and Katherine West. These are the kind of people that get me out of bed in the morning! As potters we are often questioned about what motivates us. Why would any sane person work long hours for very little money? Up to your elbows in muck and alone in your studio you might honestly say, "I have no idea!" But of course we are potters because we aspire towards the idea that someday we might be half as talented as a Katherine West or a Cormac Boydell.

What I noticed - and this was true of all the demonstrators - was that they were remarkably self assured and given their level of skill, very modest. They all seemed to embody a quiet unassuming confidence. There were no exaggerated egos in Thomastown on the 11th and 12th of September, just pure talent.

Cormac Boydell was the first to demonstrate his skills. He told us he was uncomfortable in the falseness of the demonstration process, pointing out that he didn't usually have a hundred people watching him in his studio! Despite this he was incredibly open and honest about his practice and work process. His glaze recipes, despite the

fact that it has taken him twenty years to develop them were available for anyone who wanted them. He told us about his studio in Allihies on Beara peninsula, which he likes to keep very tidy. This he feels helps to clear his mind. He likes to start the day in a clean space, with no noise or external distractions. Cormac is a self taught artist, who borders on the religious about his practice. He only uses Irish Terracotta clay, shuns the use of tools and can often fire a piece thirty times before he is finally happy with it. He produces about two hundred pieces a year and it is obvious that glazes are what get him

Cormac Boydell





Cormac Boydell considering final colours

out of bed in the morning! He develops all of his glazes from basic earth materials. The form is secondary in his process, merely a vessel to hold his extraordinary colours and textures. His pieces have strong echoes of the earth he loves so well. Having trained originally as a geologist the influence of this is clear in this work. He loves to draw and he encouraged us to carry a notebook with us but not to be too precious about this process. He pulled out his own notebook which contained everything from a humble shopping list, to a drawing done by a friend and much to our surprise - some badly drawn cows! At one point he showed us a piece that he was in the process of finishing, typically he could only see the faults in the piece, but we the audience could only see what was right about it - which of course was everything.

The first surprise from Katherine West's demonstration was how she actually coils her work. Even a novice potter



Katherine West making a double walled vessel

knows the agony of trying to roll out perfect coils of clay in order to build up their piece evenly. West simply dispenses with this and quickly squeezes large lumps of clay into rough sausage-like shapes. She effortlessly joins the clay together inside and out and opts to leave the marks of her fingers on the inside. Her



Vessel - Cormac Boydell

forms are very organic both in shape and construction. Abandoning with normal practice her pieces have no bases, she prefers instead to usurp the idea of the top or bottom of a piece. This of course adds great fluidity to her work. The inside of her work is as important to her as the outside; she is captivated by the air inside her pieces and the play of light around the objects. Her pieces utterly capture the amazing dexterity of clay as a material, in her skilled hands it can be anything. Her forms are left unglazed, the antithesis of Boydell. The form is all important to her and decoration secondary.

It was the last demonstration on the last day of the workshop, the building shook in the wind and rain and a dozen or so die-hards sat captivated by Katherine West. It was during this demonstration that she casually began to create these tiny morsels in porcelain. Had the organisers not stopped her she might still be talking and sculpting now, and we her enraptured audience would still be listening.

When asked about pricing and selling their work they both simply said that they did not make work so that it would sell. Such an act of commercialism would lead to work that no one would appreciate anyway. As artists it is clear that they are not interested in compromising their work in the pursuit of financial gain. They leave appraisal to others. The key is to be true to yourself and to your craft and the rest, it seems, will follow. Are they Potters or Sculptors? Is it art or craft? The answer, indeed the question is unimportant it is the journey that matters. As Virginia Wolf said, "To look life in the face, always, to look life in the face, and to know it for what it is..." For me West and Boydell allowed all of us who attended Grennan Mills to look life in the face and indeed to know it.

Michelle Maher