

## Seminar Report

# Are you a Potter or a Sculptor?

MICHELLE MAHER REPORTS ON A CERAMIC ARTS SEMINAR HELD AT GRENNAN MILLS, CO. I

**KATHERINE** West was once asked by a tutor, "Are you a potter or a sculptor?" She struggled to answer the question, her confidence not yet developed, she replied, "No, I'm not a potter, potters would not be happy to be categorised with me". As for a sculptor, well no she didn't think she was one of those either. Her tutor was not impressed. "You're a sculptor" he told her. To see her work now, there is little doubt that whether a potter or sculptor, she is quite something. My opportunity to observe the artist in action came through a workshop run by the Craft Potters' Society of Ireland at Grennan Mills, Thomastown, Co. Kilkenny (11 – 12 Sept). This event was the latest in a line of annual events whereby invited ceramic practitioners demonstrate their skills and share the details of their work process and practices.

When I saw this year's line up for the workshops, to say I was excited would be putting it mildly. Ruthanne Tudball – a self taught potter and Bernard Irwin, a painter turned ceramicist gave excellent demonstrations, but my chief fascination was with Cormac Boydell and of course Katherine West. These are the kind of people that get me out of bed in the morning!

As artists we are often questioned about what motivates us. Why would any sane person work long hours for very little money alone in our studios? You might honestly say "I have no idea". I found Katherine West and Cormac Boydell truly inspiring. They seem to know absolutely who they are and where they are going. They both embody a quiet unassuming confidence. Perhaps this stems from the influence of their respective mothers. Katherine West's mother was Margaret Irwin an established and highly regarded artist in her own right and Cormac Boydell's mother Mary Boydell is an eminent glass expert and is the president of The Glass Society of Ireland. At any rate what I really noticed – and this was true of all the demonstrators – was that they were remarkably self assured and given their level of skill, very modest. There were no exaggerated egos in Grennan Mills, just pure talent.

Cormac Boydell was the first to demonstrate his skills. He said 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 20 years to develop, 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 30 times before he is finally happy with it. He produces about 200 pieces a year and it is obvious that glazes are what get him 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.



Katherine West at the Grennan Mills Ceramic Seminar

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. Illustrating this point Cormac pulled out his own notebook, which contained everything from a humble shopping list, 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 is in the process of finishing. Typically he could only see the faults in the piece, while we the audience could only see what was right about it – which of course was everything.

Katherine West unlike Boydell is a formally trained artist who graduated from NCAD, The School of Decorative Arts in Strasbourg and Alfred University USA. In addition she has undertaken numerous art residencies on four continents.

The first surprise in her practice is how she actually 'coils' her work. Even a novice potter 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

## KILKENNY IN SEPTEMBER.

out and opts to leave the marks of her fingers on the inside.

Her forms are very organic both in shape and construction. In her demonstration she simply took a paint brush and drew an abstract shape on the wooden 'batt' and used this as her basic outline. Again, abandoning normal practice, her pieces have no bases – she prefers instead to usurp the idea of the 'top' or 'bottom' of a piece. This adds great fluidity to her work. The inside of her work is as important to her as the outside. West is as captivated by the air inside her pieces and the play of light around the objects. Her works utterly capture the possibilities of clay as a material – in her skilled hands it can be anything. Her forms are left unglazed, which is the antithesis of Boydell's approach. For West the form is all important and decoration secondary.

West's was the last demonstration on the last day of the workshop. While the building shook in the wind and rain, a dozen or so die-hards sat captivated by the artist. During her demonstration she casually created a number of tiny morsels in porcelain, which are part of her current ongoing body of work called *Playthings*. Had the organisers not stopped her she might still be talking and sculpting now, and we her enraptured audience would still be listening! West told us we should make something everyday, even the tiniest piece in order to keep our process alive. If you can't make something in clay then you should do a drawing. West also stressed the importance of drawing one's own pieces, both from observation and then memory.

When asked about pricing and selling their works both West and Boydell simply stated that they did not produce work in order to sell. They felt that bowing to commercialism actually leads to work that no one would appreciate anyway. It was clear that they were not interested in compromising their work in the pursuit of financial gain. Likewise they were happy to leave the appraisal of their work to others.

The key point raised by these artists is that if you are true to yourself and to your practice, the rest will follow. Are they Potters or Sculptors? Is it art or craft? The answer 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...". West and Boydell, in the pursuit of their artistic forms capture the essence of all that is right about contemporary Irish ceramics. In doing so they allow us all to look life in the face, and indeed to know it.

Michelle Maher, Ceramic Artist