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Wilma Cruise — SOUTH AFRICA

THAT VOICE IN OUR HEAD - THE CLAY MONOLOGUE

The 10th International Ceramics Festival took place the first weekend in July in Aberystwyth, Wales and attracted a truly international gathering of over 1,000 potters and ceramicists from all corners of the globe. From Africa, the USA, South America, New Zealand, Australia, Japan, India, Korea and from throughout Europe and the UK and Ireland, all sectors of the ceramic world gathered together - from renowned master artists and professionals to ceramic enthusiasts. Amongst them was a merry band of 50 or so members from Ceramics Ireland who attended the festival.

So with this information in mind, picture the scene - we are all gathered in the Great Hall of Aberystwyth Arts Centre and Wilma Cruise a South-African sculptor in clay (not to be confused with a clay sculptor - seemingly there's a difference) announces that "...potters don't use their brains!" The silence was deafening, mouths actually dropped open. Interestingly, no one openly disagreed.

It was of crucial importance to Cruise that we understood that she was different from 'traditional' African potters. Those who dig their own clay, coil the most exquisite vessels, pit fire them and then carry them on their heads to the nearest market for a meagre few euros were not to be categorised with Cruise. Did I agree with her elitist perspective? Absolutely not, but I respected her honestly. After all she is merely expressing an opinion which is widely held in this and many other countries. What we sometimes forget is that there are also countries where there is simply no art versus craft debate - they have moved past this stage or decided to skip it all together! Indeed it seems to me, that it is a measure of our cultural

immaturity that we still worry about these labels.

Perhaps the advent of Feile Clai will help to bring about some positive changes for ceramics practice in



Photo: David Hurn

Ireland. In the weeks and months that have passed since the festival I have often wondered why no one unashamedly stood up and contradicted Wilma Cruise. Of course there are moments in life when you wish you had kept your mouth shut and then there are the moments when you wish you had said something. July 2nd was one of those latter moments. At any rate, I'm afraid I haven't managed to come up with an answer but Gustavo Perez a Mexican potter who also demonstrated at the festival said it best when he stated, "I think of clay as a partner, not as a material to be used, but as a material to work with, and the discoveries are for me the result of a dialogue." A clay monologue perhaps... The International Ceramics Festival was an attempt at dialogue, we may not always like what is said in the course of that dialogue but it is important nonetheless to hear all the voices. The voice that speaks loudest to all of us who work in the medium of clay is of course the clay itself and this indeed is how we potters use our brains!

By MICHELLE MAHER (Ireland)

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