

'WHITE GOLD'

A HANDTHROWN PORCELAIN CERAMIC CELEBRATION EXHIBITION

Helena Brennan's hand thrown pottery speaks of a lifetime of making. To the keen eye it bares the influence of her mentors, continuing a legacy of simple, functional pottery that draws on the oriental philosophy and techniques developed by Bernard Leach and Hamada Shoji. Helena's introduction to the Leach school was through her late husband Peter Brennan, the pioneer potter in Irish hand studio ceramics, who had visited Bernard's studio at St. Ives in 1941. Initially studying under Peter in the early 60's while studying pedagogics at the National College of Art (now NCAD), it was an introduction to Bernard's eldest son David, which would lead to two formative summers spent as his student in his Devon studio. There, Helena was trained in the skills of repetition wheel throwing, and the intricate task of throwing a functional teapot. Describing this process, she explains, "It has always been such a challenge and wonderful thing to make teapots, because a teapot is the most complex, functional pottery you can make, in that there are four different parts. It has to hang together aesthetically, feel good, balance well, and pour properly."

Establishing a studio at their home in Dún Laoghaire in 1965, Helena and Peter immediately began exhibiting their work nationally and internationally. With work in many private collections, she has an impressive history of exhibitions, residencies and awards. Of note is the exhibition in 1966 at the Irish Times Gallery, Dublin, where Helena exhibited the first native high fired hand-thrown stoneware teapots. Two years later, she was exhibiting the first Irish clay hand thrown porcelain at the World Trade Fare, Osaka, Japan, and again at the World Crafts Council in Lima, Peru that same year. In 1996, Helena was accepted on a six-week ceramics residency in Tokanome, Japan. Speaking of the experience she says, "I had had a lifetime of making, but I was being affirmed in a whole lot of areas. I was given a wheel and four tonnes of different clays, and of course, it freed me up." The experience also introduced Helena to a cultural sensitivity towards the drinking vessel: "If you spoke to a Japanese person, they would tell you that a different shaped vessel will be used for the breakfast, for elevenses, for lunch, or dinner," adding that, "the tea ceremony allowed people of interest and culture to spend time feeling, appreciating, and talking about the vessel they were using." While holding one of her cups, she explains, "If you are invited to drink from this piece, you couldn't help but feel it and think about it, and decide which way was best to hold it." The tactility, weight and texture of a hand thrown piece of functional pottery all contribute towards an intimate aesthetic experience, what Helena describes as a process where the "liveliness in the making transfers itself to the user." Since 2005, Helena has been living near Avoca, in Wicklow, where she continues to produce work, ranging from her pottery, to life drawing, and more recently also woodwork and furniture making with Chaim Factor at Hill Picket Studio.

Born in Dublin into a family of artists and musicians, it was a lidded teacup sitting atop her mother's piano that Helena recalls as an early appreciation of beauty in everyday objects. Now, at the age of seventy-five, she continues to explore the range of possibilities within functional pottery, further developing her knowledge of formulas and processes behind the preparation of clay and glazes, and focusing on the reduction firing of fine porcelain pieces in her self-built, gas fired kiln. She says, "It's only when we mature in the work that our pots are different. Initially you're just learning, trying out a whole lot of things, but when you've explored a lot of areas and find what you like doing, the pot speaks of you." Her latest development has been working with the ashes of sycamore trees that grow near her home and studio,

located amongst the woodlands of the vale of Avoca. These ashes are incorporated into glazes for her porcelain ware. Describing the alchemical process, she says: "ashes are mostly silica, and if you melt silica you get glass. You can influence the colour of the glass by adding oxides such as ochre or cobalt, iron or copper, and then of course the atmosphere, oxidizing or reducing ie smoky, firing of the glaze also influences the colour and texture turning copper green to copper red" Through the use of native materials, Helena's pottery directly references the surroundings in which they were made, adding to the highly personal approach towards texture and colour that she has honed over the years. "When I make pots," she explains, "I'm decorating by throwing and cutting the pots so that the glaze will fall thin on the sharp edges, or pool at the bottom. At worst, a glaze looks as if you've put on paint or varnish. Glaze should have texture and depth, you know." Holding up a translucent green beaker into the light, she remarks: "you can look into that glaze and almost see a woodland, or a mossy bank, or a sky." Turning the beaker upside down to reveal the base, Helena points out a subtle pattern: "Do you see the swirl mark of the twisted wire that I've used to cut it from the wheel? I've moved the wire a little bit so that you get a nice variation. It looks a little like the ebbing tide." This barely noticeable mark is the thumbprint of an experienced potter, leaving a trace of the vessel's hand making intact.

The writer and potter Edmund de Waal (*The White Road*) has written at length of his love of porcelain, summarising its history as one of failed attempts that spans across the centuries from East to West. Originating in China over one thousand years ago, the story of porcelain, also known as "white gold", is full of accounts of discovery, alchemy, rarity, trade, secrecy, and rediscovery — a continuous quest for an elusive material that is at once natural and artificial, delicate and durable, opaque and translucent depending on the light and fineness. The name porcelain derives from the Italian word *porcellana*, used by Marco Polo to describe its vitrified, diaphanous white surface, akin to a shell. He brought the first piece of Chinese porcelain — a small white vase — to Europe in the thirteenth century by way of the Silk Road. The Marco Polo Vase now sits in the Treasury of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice. Closer to home, the Fonthill Vase, one of the most rare pieces of celadon porcelain from the fourteenth century, is in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. It would take another four hundred years or so until the creation of European porcelain, accredited to a young German alchemist by the name of Johann Friedrich Böttger. Having worked with porcelain since her time studying with David Leach, Helena is very familiar with the material's special and contradictory properties. However, it is the liveness of the moment that occurs when your hand encounters one of her pieces that makes Helena's work all the more valuable- White Gold in fact.

Interview and article by Sharon Phelan

'*White Gold*', a ceramic celebration exhibition of hand thrown porcelain drinking vessels by Helena Brennan is at The Vintage Teapot Gallery from Friday 13th to Sunday 22nd October.

Address: The Vintage Teapot Gallery, 8 Cathedral Street, Dublin 1.

Opening hours: Daily, 10am to 7pm.

Late opening Thursday until 9pm

For more information: www.helenabrennan.com/whitegold