



Images: courtesy of the artist

# Emotional metaphors

Claire Curneen's latest sculpture *Tending the Fires* is an assemblage of broken ceramic fragments representing everything from natural forms to religious imagery. Here *Andy Christian* reflects on her influences and his emotional response to her work

During my train journey to and from Cardiff to visit Irish ceramic artist Claire Curneen, I spent some time reflecting on Irish culture. On a fundamental level Claire's work reflects her origins and the Catholic iconography of the land of her birth. She is witty, astute and open-minded. Her work evokes storytelling, it suggests an inner life of quiet contemplation, rather than an ambition to challenge us in the outer world.

Most of Claire's pieces are based on figures or trees, sometimes these are combined and on occasion a figure stands in conversation with another. They vary in size but some are about a quarter of the stature of an adult human. The overall whiteness of her porcelain is broken by the use of strong cobalt blue and bright gold lustre. Occasionally she makes entirely in a matte, peat-like clay body. I do not think it is in any way conscious, but in each figure, particularly in each face, I found aspects of self portraiture. It is as if in the making she finds either mirror or shadow.

Claire has two studios. One is attached to her house and shares its warmth and homeliness. The other is a short

drive away, where her work is in storage or on view on plinths and tables – it is half way to being exhibited externally. In this second studio she has been moving 'fragments' into assemblages within which she is experimenting with the idea of the broken. This suggests a major move – edgy, interrogative and awaiting resolution.

Back in the home studio, postcards, sketches and pages from books are collaged onto one wall. It does not seem out of place that many of these depict Christian art. Claire's own drawings and paintings that have also found a place in the studio seem largely free from religious connotations. Even when she depicts Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows he seems a long way from the original accusative Catholic iconography. She has made him one of us and we empathise with that sense of ordinariness.

### STIRRING EMOTIONS

The underlying sense of shared humanity is, I believe, one of the reasons why Claire's pieces are so affecting. In her works can be found the evidence of mankind's inhumanity, but

there is also a presiding sense of gentleness and serenity. These are personal attributes mirrored in clay. We feel these qualities because Claire transfers them into the clay bodies directly through her hands.

It may well be that we are also affected by the proportions of Claire's work. A number of figures – although they are unquestionably adults – are the size of vulnerable children. She certainly does not shy away from our inevitable mortality; in fact her figures might be seen to be of the angelic orders. Not the traditional winged messengers of heaven and hell, but rather those that live anonymously, integrated among us.

On my windowsill at home stands a naked male Han dynasty figure. It was moulded and low fired; its missing arms would have been made of wood. The affinity of this figure with Claire's work is in its naked vulnerability. I wonder if my understanding of the fragility of the materials used makes me feel apprehensive, protective even about both the Han figure and her works. It is as if they have cast an enchantment and hauled me in by a thread to stand




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with them as some sort of awkward 'protector'. Of course what is actually happening is what can happen with all good art. In her work Claire has managed to hold a mirror to us and some of what we see is what we bring to it from our own emotions and fixations.

**CONFRONTATIONAL STATEMENTS**

To date Claire's work seems reflective, contemplative and occasionally melancholic. What she was beginning to assemble in her second studio is something more unsettling. She would not be so subtle as to try to illustrate the gross lack of humanity in the contemporary world, but 2016/17 must be the years of refugees, and the general official indifference to their plight finds a metaphor in her 'shipwrecked' assemblages. As a member of the Irish diaspora who has been so welcomed in Wales she must feel part of the joyful cross cultural feast. If her martyred or oppressed saints are reflections of our inhumanity and mortality, the assemblages are brittle and rather more confrontational statements.

There is undoubtedly poetry within Claire's work but she absorbs, distils and re-presents influences. Her surfaces are marked by her own unmannered 'hand writing' and her textural treatments and colours are limited but knowing.

What is clear is that Claire has used the treasury of a particular heritage but so absorbed it as to permit and encourage an international experience to it. These works are not culture bound. Even for those who are unaware of the Christian myths, a sense of emotional response, even a spiritual response is possible. In this way Claire is a poet whose language needs no translation. To date she has given us works that find affinity with us. They reflect us and we may even feel a sense of familial protection of them. Her metaphors are succinct and though we may be challenged by her work it is if she has taken us kindly by the hand and shared her vision. As I write and prior to the publication of this piece works may well emerge which we may find more uncomfortable, more challenging. If one of the duties of an artist is to make visible the invisible then Claire has done that. If another duty is to confront us with what we are allowing to happen in our time, then she may be about to fulfill that also. 

For more details about Claire visit [clairecurneen.com](http://clairecurneen.com)



**CLAIRE'S JOURNEY**

- 1990: Diploma in Art and Design (Ceramics), Crawford College of Art & Design, Cork
- 1991: Postgraduate diploma in Applied Arts, University of Ulster, Belfast
- 1992: MA Ceramics, University of Wales, Cardiff
- 1995: awarded Crafts Council Setting Up grant
- 1997: first solo show at Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales
- 2001: *Figurative Ceramics*, Crafts Council shop at the V&A
- 2003: selected for World Ceramic Biennale, Korea International Competition
- 2004: exhibited at *Collect* at the V&A
- 2005: exhibited at The International Art & Design Fair, New York, represented by Adrian Sassoon
- 2006: *One Piece, One Artist*, Galerie Marianne Heller, Germany
- 2008: *Myths and Legends*, Contemporary Applied Arts, London
- 2010: *Pretty Young Things*, Lacoste Gallery, Boston, USA
- 2012: Creative Wales Ambassador Award 'The Museum Object as a point of Reference'
- 2014: *To This I Put My Name*, Mission Gallery Swansea and Ruthin Craft Centre
- 2017: *Tending the Fires*, Collect Open, Saatchi Gallery, London. Awarded the Outstanding Exhibit by the Crafts Council



**Tending the Fires**

Claire Curneen's sculptures are poignant reflections on the nature of humanity and our precarious place within it. Universal themes of loss, suffering and sacrifice underlie her intricate porcelain figures, their translucent and fragile qualities offering potent metaphors through which to consider the human condition.

*Tending the Fires* is an ambitious new work, which was first exhibited at *Collect Open 2017*, as part of *Collect: The International Art Fair for Contemporary Objects*. Claire constructed a porcelain diorama where figures jostle with birds, trees, branches and broken pottery; the status quo has been disrupted. Tension arises as the decorative and unadorned, elaborate and raw all come together in this fragmented reality...

