



# CLAIRE CURNEEN BODY OF EVIDENCE

Claire Curneen's award-winning new piece *Tending the Fires*, shown at Collect 2017,

represents a distinct shift in her practice. *Emma Crichton-Miller* takes a closer look



In the middle of the small studio Claire Curneen has built in the garden of her home, an enormous black ceramic form lies horizontally propped on plinths. Like a giant tuber, black roots wriggle out at both ends, blindly searching. The marks of Curneen's pinching and patting are evident across the entire unglazed stoneware body and yet the object has the subterranean energy of something ancient dug up, brought into the light, or like an idea that has surfaced.

Curneen is one of Britain's most esteemed sculptural ceramists. Her works are in major public collections in Britain and abroad. She is known for her affecting standing figures, pinched by hand in white porcelain, sometimes with a wild array of blue and white or gold glazing, or caged in ceramic branches. Their round, anonymous heads, unusually small, tenderly tilted, their hands unusually large and expressive, their bodies naked rather than nude, unemphatically gendered, these figures exude a patient stillness.

Sometimes they can be identified as saints – Saint Sebastian, youthful, bearing arrows, bleeding gold; Saint Catherine holding her gold spiked wheel and sorrowing for her wounds – or angels, supporting their wings sadly like a weight of wisdom. Sometimes the figures suffer a miraculous sprouting of branches, or the seemingly involuntary eruption of flowers all over their bodies, as if nature is insistently redeeming them from a trauma that has shocked them into silence. More than parading their own identities and stories, however, these figures seem, as Elizabeth Moignard observed in 2014, to reflect 'a saint's or hero's persistence in moving past their personal pain and need to a responsibility for others'.

This black form, though, marks a recent departure, Curneen tells me, as she shows me into the studio. 'What you see here are in-between works. Sometimes they get exhibited, sometimes they don't.' But of this powerful black piece, she adds: 'I am very connected to it as an object.' Although it gets in the way in this small space, where much of her sketching and smaller works are accomplished, she has not yet moved it to her larger studio in the Canton area of Cardiff. Curneen has made ambiguous objects before, but this one has a peculiar power. It seems to have emerged with unarguable clarity from the creative unconscious

Previous spread: *Portent*, 2013, black stoneware, 80 x 25cm.

This spread, clockwise from left: *Over My Dead Body*, 2013, porcelain, 75 x 23cm; *House*, 2013, 43 x 44cm; *Marrow*, 2013, porcelain, 35 x 33cm

ALL IMAGES: COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTOS: DEWITTANNATTI-LOYD. PREVIOUS SPREAD: PORTENT: COCA YORK. OVER MY DEAD BODY: PRIVATE COLLECTION



that has seen her output evolve continuously over the last 25 years, and which has most recently found expression in *Tending the Fires*, the magnificent, complex work she produced for this year's Collect. This white porcelain piece – with touches of gold and dark cobalt blue, a compendium of ideas and motifs that have preoccupied Curneen for years, brought together in a virtuosic choreography of parts – is perhaps the alter ego of this singular dark brother, but together they testify to the opening of a new phase in the artist's creative development.

Curneen first came to Cardiff in 1991 to study. Originally from Tralee, County Kerry, in the south-west of Ireland – as her soft Irish voice and intense blue eyes suggest – she had studied ceramics both in Cork and Belfast. She explains that, whatever the task, 'I always found a figurative element to it.'

At first she made playful observational pieces, reflecting the world around her: 'The topsy-turvy worlds of a girls' night out.' Her mood changed, however, as she embarked on the more searching MA course. 'I had only just moved out of my early 20s. I was very cross with the world, but I couldn't make sense of what I was doing,' she tells me. Her figures, at this point mostly built in a heavily grogged crank clay, grew, and became more like self-representations. They were awkward, fallible, not overtly concerned with their own femininity.

Simultaneously, Curneen began to question the sources of her own imagination, and especially the Christian iconography she had absorbed as a child in the local Catholic church in Tralee. She is not a practising Catholic today, but was brought up within the Catholic tradition, with an uncle who was a priest and an aunt who was a nun. Her mother was privately devout, while her father railed against the Church, even while accepting it as a fact of nature. But, as she explains, 'I realised, going home, the richness of the imagery I had been exposed to, [it was] very visceral. I began to realise – that is why I am drawn to this body, this human figure. So I started to explore imagery.'

Today, the wall of Curneen's studio is a private museum of images, mixed up with sketches and the odd note ('my father's shoes'). This record of her researches includes Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, Joos van Cleve's *Suicide of*

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*Lucretia*, Giotto's fresco of St Francis feeding the birds and Andres Serrano's shocking photographic image *The Morgue (Knifed to Death I)* from 1992. But as well as these icons of pain and sanctity, there is a version of Giuseppe Arcimboldo's exuberant painting of *Spring*, a man constructed from flowers and vegetables, and right in the middle, a little skew-whiff, is a postcard of Piero del Pollaiuolo's extraordinary rendering of the myth of *Apollo and Daphne*, which is in the National Gallery. The artist has depicted the surreal moment when the fleeing Daphne, already in Apollo's hungry arms, begins to turn into a laurel tree, her arms transformed into great branches. Out of trauma and fear comes this astonishing moment of metamorphosis. 'I return often to that painting and that story,' Curneen says. She is drawn to images where something is about to happen and, in her work, to figures that reflect the impact of the outside space upon them: 'You see the objects that signify the act - the arrows, say - and then the figure that has absorbed the blow. This sets up an interesting way of looking at the human body.'

Curneen also draws our imagination to the interior space of her figures, painting the tears in their flesh with precious gold or cobalt blue glaze, using these traditional signifiers of value in the history of ceramics to suggest the strength and beauty of the human spirit that can endure these incursions. Some of her figures are also positively fruitful, sprouting twigs or blossoms, the ends of these twigs also glazed. 'I am trying to communicate the idea of pruning,' she says. 'If you prune well, you will get a better crop.' Moreover, she sees these protrusions as portals back into the human body, encouraging us to imagine the interior of these figures. This incitement to empathy is accentuated by the gold and cobalt glazes the artist often drips onto the ends of fingers or onto the skin, exciting our own sense of touch.

Critical to the evolution of her work was the discovery of porcelain, with all its technical challenges. 'I made a small, seated figure that was poorly observed anatomically but had a sensitivity about it that became important,' Curneen tells me. 'I had to change my approach. The figure was still rather than active.' She realises, in retrospect, that what she wanted to do was create a sense of monumentality, without needing to build big, and

Left: *Rain* (detail), 2013,  
black stoneware, 38 x 33cm



Left: *Bird Figure*, 2013, porcelain, 60 x 18cm.  
Right: *Book of Hours* (detail), 2013, porcelain, 40 x 40cm



that the porcelain was crucial for conveying an essential fragility, 'even before you touch them'. What has become expressive are small inflections of the body and the head, almost unimaginably difficult to control in the kiln (as Philip Hughes, director of the Ruthin Centre, and a long-time admirer, comments: 'Unless you see her working, you do not realise the level of skill'), and the articulate hands, which Curneen admits are like her own, 'long and bony'.

Over the years she has also worked with terracotta and black stoneware, each of which enables her to explore different moods and ideas. Her primary material, however, is this fine, white, translucent porcelain, whether glazed, covered with cobalt blue transfers, or left unglazed to allow

the ethereal bodies with their graceful gestures to speak for themselves. Hughes, who has mounted several of her exhibitions of her work, adds: 'She has really found a material in which she is completely eloquent.'

In 2012 Curneen was given a Creative Wales Ambassador Award. This enabled her to travel to Dublin to investigate the collections of porcelain held by the Museum of Decorative Arts. While there were individual objects that captured her imagination – the Fonthill Vase, for instance, allegedly the first piece of Chinese porcelain to find its way to Europe in the 14th century, or the 19th-century brooches made from intricately carved bog oak – it was the collective presence of the objects that inspired her, with their

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histories and all that they have meant and continue to mean to us. A subsequent visit to the Centre of Ceramic Art at York Art Gallery also impressed her with its great walls of pots, a mass of ceramic. She tried out the idea of a piece that would combine different objects with *Book of Hours* (part of the 2014 travelling exhibition, *To This I Put My Name*), a nested cluster of twigs, birds and flowers and a small head of Christ.

*Tending the Fires* is a work of an altogether different level of ambition. Offered the opportunity to make a single piece for Collect 2017, Curneen set about making all the individual parts that have now become this monumental work. This 2.3 metre-long panorama offers us a world blown apart, broken, jagged, dismembered. And yet

there is also resilience – figures propped up on crutches, a simple house intact, a gorgeous bird mask with a gilded interior – and luxuriant new growth, with twigs we can barely distinguish from fingers and flowers smothering the ruins. The figures are of different scales. Two lie awkwardly, their postures distorted, perhaps by pain, and there are two busts of Mary Magdalene, wrapped in her dishevelled hair.

Curneen cites among her many sources Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Saint Sebastian*, also pinned to her wall ('He stands like someone lying down,/ propped up by his own huge will...'), Hieronymus Bosch's visions of hell, Rachel Kneebone's ceramic fantasias and Donatello's wooden *Penitent Magdalene* in Florence. This work seems

both to mourn and to suggest new growth, tending the fires of hope and faith, as in a physical embodiment perhaps of T.S. Eliot's line from *The Waste Land*: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins.'

Yet for all the weight of cultural reference, *Tending the Fires* is an immediately touching work, rooted in the dark earth of our common humanity. As Philip Hughes commented to me: 'While a highly intelligent, even cerebral maker in some ways, that just goes when she makes the work. It is totally instinctive. Very special.' For Curneen, not only does the piece seem to channel all the work she has done to date, it 'feels definitely like a bridge to something else'.

[www.claircurneen.com](http://www.claircurneen.com)

Right: *Tending the Fires*, 2016, porcelain, and above, left: detail from the work

