

A white sculpture of a human figure, possibly made of plaster or ceramic, with a textured, cracked surface. The figure is shown from the waist up, facing slightly to the right. It holds a large, open white flower in its left hand and a long, slender white fish in its right hand. Thin gold chains are draped over the figure's shoulders and chest, with small gold rings or pendants. The background is a plain, light color.

CLAIRE CURNEEN 'THROUGH LIVING ROOTS AWAKEN'

*Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.*

*Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down*

*Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.*

*The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.*

*By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.*

*My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.*

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

*Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.*

*Seamus Heaney 'Digging' from 'Death of a Naturalist'*

Earth squeezed between finger and thumb. A meditative and haptic bond emerges between maker and material. Slivers formed - pinched together, layer by layer. Built heavy from ground level upwards. Rooted. As the form climbs upwards the clay thins - at times revealing its often translucent nature suggestive of transformative potential - transcendence. When a figure is formed Claire Curneen's specific focus turns to finer detail in the chosen focal points of head, hands and feet, rendered with palpable sensitivity. It is in the hands specifically that her figures become animated and communicative, where subtle gesture imbues them with a sense of grace and movement and a tangible emotive and contemplative, perhaps elegiac, quality. This is dextrous, time-consuming, and technical work requiring the combination of consummate skill and that elusive unthinking magic to bring each piece to life. Once a piece is formed it must meet with the perilous ritual of flame, turning soft sediment into hard shape. From first firing the piece can be decorated. Occasionally the whole sculpture is dipped into glaze, shrouding the figure in pools of reflective light and mystery. More frequently such embellishments are accentuated, to enhance or give prominence to those most expressive elements. Once decorated, the sculpture joins the tempestuous flames once more. The intensity of this stage ensures the final metamorphosis. From temporary and malleable to a fixed state of permanence.

The human figure remains central to Curneen's work; however, these are beings which transcend prosaic, corporeal constraint and conformity, whilst never fully escaping such concerns. They occupy a symbolic, liminal, precarious space where the flesh and the other seemingly become one and time stands still. Gender is ambiguous and identity uniform or archetypal. The form is shown naked, not in carnal splendour but in a state of ease and innocence. They are enigmatic and evocative, as if quietly distracted from a moment of contemplation

which suggests both openness and introversion, strength and vulnerability and a oneness with self, nature and the divine. Qualities such as tranquillity, gentleness, compassion, and love are sensibilities that all Curneen's figures embody and express, yet a complex drama is achieved through this stillness and simplicity. Arguably Curneen's visual form of expression draws upon the iconography of her childhood in Ireland. The imagery and practices she experienced growing up remain embedded. Her studio wall is covered with reproductions of Renaissance paintings, whose subjects provide direct inspirational osmosis as a reminder of how nothing more than simple pose and gesture can be used to convey both mortal acceptance and spiritual devotion. Usually violent images of martyrdom, instead delicately evoke a capacity to both surrender and to overcome. Blood oozes precious, anointing the flesh in sacred gold. Other works have a shamanic almost votive quality, entwined with nature and equally dependent upon it.

All works in this exhibition have been made during and following the period of lockdown. Naturally, there is a pertinent sense that they have contained within them the emotive experience of fear, loss, suffering and sacrifice fused with a deep well of devotion, desire, wonder and mystery. They withhold a pleading quality alongside a calm acceptance which is both quietly unsettling yet hopeful and humbling. Ultimately, they withhold an immense power and dignity in the face of an often ominous unknown. We are reminded that wonderment is there to be sought and found in the ordinary and that peace must always triumph over our pain and our suffering. They embody what it is to be bound by our own mortality yet connected to the everlasting. They are, in their very essence; life affirming.

Joseph Clarke, 2022





*Pilgrim*

porcelain, 70 (h) x 35 (w) x 25 (d) cm





*Digging*

porcelain and stoneware, 70 (h) x 46 (w) x 40 (d) cm





*Untitled (Suspended Figure)*  
porcelain, 47 (h) x 24 (w) x 24 (d) cm





*Untitled (Torso)*  
porcelain, 47 (h) x 33 (w) x 20 (d) cm





*Empty Tomb*  
porcelain, 70 (h) x 30 (w) x 21 (d) cm





*Still Life*

glazed stoneware, 65 (h) x 30 (w) x 30 (d) cm





*Anam Cara*

tin glazed terracotta, 80 (h) x 40 (w) x 35 (d) cm





*Between My Finger and My Thumb*  
porcelain, 140 (h) x 35 (w) x 30 (d) cm





*Splinter*

porcelain, 70 (h) x 30 (w) x 50 (d) cm





*Angel*

tin glazed terracotta, 68 (h) x 40 (w) x 35 (d) cm





*Mary*

glazed stoneware, 58 (h) x 45 (w) x 30 (d) cm





*Wall Plates*

glazed stoneware

1 : *Head*, 40 cm diameter

2 : *Two Figures*, 40 cm diameter

3 : *Mary*, 36 cm diameter

4 : *Angel*, 28 cm diameter

5 : *Hand of God*, 27 cm diameter



1



3



4



2



5

*Biography*

Claire Curneen was born in Tralee, Co. Kerry, Ireland in 1968 and currently lives and works in Wales, UK. Works have been exhibited internationally and appear in many notable Public collections including the Crafts Council, London; Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead; National Museum & Gallery of Wales, Cardiff; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester; National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth, Wales; Cleveland Craft Centre, Middlesbrough; Oldham Art Gallery and Museum, Manchester; York City Art Gallery, York; Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough; Crawford Art Gallery, Cork, Eire; Limerick City Gallery of Art, Limerick, Eire; Ulster Museum, Belfast, Northern Ireland; Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece; Clay Studio, Philadelphia, USA; Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA; Icheon World Ceramic Centre, Gyeonggi-do, Korea; Taipei Ceramics Museum, Taiwan.

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