



'Book of Hours', 2013, *ceramic, etc.*, dimensions

## TO THIS I PUT MY NAME

A palette of blue, black, white and gold are used to portray the convergence of art history and ceramics history in the androgynous, single standing, porcelain figures of Claire Curneen. Profile by Laura Gray

As a curator, unbridled access to stored collections, license to root through boxes and to handle objects, is one of the best parts of the job. And so it is to the stores of the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) in Dublin that Claire Curneen has been in search of inspiration. During 2012–13, funded by an Ambassador Award from the Arts Council Of Wales, Curneen was able to spend time with the historic ceramics collection at NMI and its curator Audrey Whitty. This research develops Curneen's earlier ideas that have provided a strong and constant thread through her work and also forms the underpinning of a recent body of work which draws substantially on ceramics history, art history, and the enigmatic aura of objects whose meaning isn't freely disclosed. Curneen's androgynous figures have always had a formal relationship with art historical sources. Drawing upon medieval and Renaissance approaches to depicting the human figure in painting, since 1997 she has modeled standing figures in white porcelain that carry overtly or

more quietly references to this period in art. The alteration in her current approach stems from her close attention to ceramic objects and her engagement in the negotiation of a formal relationship with ceramics history which borrows from and re-articulates aspects of objects in the National Museum of Ireland Collection. While she continues to use (though not exclusively) the single standing figure, the treatment of the surface of this figure has developed in response to objects such as the *Fonthill Vase*, Japanese blue and white porcelain, and Belleek pottery held in the Irish National Collection. *Guardian* (2012) makes use of the traditional and very recognisable elements of ceramics history – blue and white. In the manner of an historian returning to the primary source material, Curneen has spent time with Japanese and Medici blue and white porcelain wares, but in her hands the blue and white decoration slides off the figure onto the base upon which it stands. Given its organic foliate form, one starts to wonder whether the



'Over My Dead Body (St Sebastian)', 2013, *ceramic, etc.*, 75 x 23 cm



'Guardian', 2013, ceramic etc, 58 x 20 cm



'Portent', 2012, ceramic etc, 58 x 20 cm

decoration is creeping upwards, stifling the skin. Taking this traditional decorative palette and transplanting it from dishes to a human figure gives an uncanny effect: while the pattern and colour are familiar and domestic in their associations, the figure appears like a porcelain tattooed lady, her skin excessively inked until very little of her white flesh remains visible. Gold is also a recurrent visual motif for the artist, and while it often symbolises the value of the interior (for instance in her *St Sebastian* figure, who has gold oozing from his wounds), the gold mouth and branch tips of *Guardian* is suggestive of the Japanese art of repair known as *kintsugi*, in which lacquer resin sprinkled with powdered gold is used to fix cracks and breaks in porcelain. In *Portent* (2012) Curneen demonstrates the durability of the figure in contemporary ceramics practice, and the durability of blue and white, not only as decoration, but as a stimulus for interpretation and a repository of memory. The branches that form a crown on the head of this figure have blue and white at their tips, as if they have been cut and their blue and



white core revealed. Always interested in the human condition, Curneen's work is charged with symbolism. The slim branches suspended around the head of this figure suggest individual lives bound together, and most obviously recalls Christ's crown of thorns. Apart from this specifically biblical interpretation, the reference to the branches of a tree could symbolise nourishment, protection and support for figures that the artist has always described as fragile and vulnerable. While she emphasises the hands, the faces of her figures are anonymous. In medieval sculpture, and in much figurative sculpture since, the head is thought of as the seat of the soul, central to identity and the key means for human expression, emotion and character. The faces of these figures with their downward gaze give little away, conveying only an impression of muted sadness or withdrawn contemplation. As with *Portent*, this *Stick Figure* appears with a bundle of slim branches by the head. Instead of forming a protective crown, in this instance they are portrayed as a burden to be carried. In this way Curneen uses her figures to address universal themes, such as questions of mortality, as well as more specific art historical and ceramic-specific concerns. The tree also calls to mind both the support often used in classical sculpture owing to the low tensile strength of marble (to prevent marble figures snapping at the ankles), and the tree that dominates Piero della Francesca's *The Baptism of Christ*. In this work the supportive role of the tree trunk is both literal and metaphorical. With this reference, the branches lose the appearance of burden and instead assume a sheltering role. Though it is worth bearing in mind that the withered tree in Renaissance painting indicates a reference to death; a clear link perhaps with the broad themes of Curneen's figurative works. While there seem to be strong art historical associations in *Book of Hours*, Curneen has also turned to ceramics



'Cut To The Quick' (detail), 2013, ceramic etc, 58 x 20 cm



'Stich Figure', 2013, ceramic etc, 58 x 20 cm



history. The tangle of limbs and branches that make up *Book of Hours* also have a close relationship to the well-mannered and intricate forms found in traditional Belleek porcelain. Belleek, an Irish porcelain factory known for producing uncoloured and intricately modelled wares, provides a nexus between Curneen, the collection at the National Museum of Ireland and ceramics history. The touchstone of Belleek porcelain is a reference to the discipline in which she works, her identity as an Irish artist, and an acknowledgment of ceramics' own particular history – an allusion which feels increasingly important as ceramics courses continue to be marginalised within



'Rain', 2013, porcelain, etc, 38 x 33 cm



Claire Curneen

higher education. The bird that settles within the branches may be a reference to transcendence, an experience beyond human physical experience. In painting, such a bird is often depicted on the branches of the Tree of Life, and its presence here is interesting considering the departure from Curneen's standing figures that this work presents. The iconography of ceramics history infuses all her current work. The use of gold (recalling repairs), blue and white, the intricate forms and unpainted appearance of Chinese grotto, the Fonthill vase and the Belleek porcelain in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland, demonstrate a relationship between tradition and innovation in Claire Curneen's work. At the same time, her expression of ideas through historical art symbols has strengthened. The use of trees, medieval faces, gold (recalling icons), and references to saints, create a complex system of meaning.

**Laura Gray**

*Laura Gray is a UK-based freelance curator and writer. The itinerary for the touring exhibition "To This I Put My Name" featuring new work by Claire Curneen, is as follows: Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales, 12 April – 20 July 2014; Harley Gallery, Nottinghamshire, 20 August – 19 October 2014; Kunstforum Solothurn, Geneva, Switzerland, 25 April – 30 May 2015.*

