

STEPHEN FARNAN WEIGHS UP THE PARADOXES OF MAKING TABLEWARE.

'Here it is, if you like it buy it, if you don't, then don't'. Pots, tableware, nowadays do not have to be all pots for all people and yes, there is certainly space for a little potters' arrogance, space for individual makers to indulge and to do their thing. Fortune would have it that there is no ideological romance story in the style of 'boy meets pot, boy falls in love' within which I can contextualise and openly covet what it is that I do. Over time tasty aspects of ceramic production have brought me closer to, and more excited about, making tableware. The most prevalent being the potter's wheel and the responsive nature of clay when caught between this tool and my intention. However, the simple act of making something with my own hands for people to use has grown, not just in response to the joys of ceramic production or via the relentless striving to serve food that little bit better, but largely as a result of habitual circumstance; by where, how and with whom I have grown.

As an English boy brought up, for the most part, in a provincial Irish town, there existed a need to 'please' and to be part of this insular community. Later, as a young student in the big smokes of Belfast and London, I continued to reach for an identity in order that I should have a place to rest, both socially and professionally. The experiences, memories and expectancies that come with being a parochially detached, uncomfortable and yet determined young person moving into a world of ceramics, have shaped very much my journey from boyhood to being a studio maker of tableware. Currently based in the transforming North of Ireland I am still that uncomfortable person, this time in the skin of 'the local potter', often looking over the water anxiously to a more discerning, questioning and demanding audience. Yet it is in this uneasy space, practising through the medium of tableware production, where I exist most happily; gaining inspiration from the allowance of personality, inventiveness, flexibility, entrepreneurship and interaction with customers. And it is in this space, where affordability meets gentle excitement and where the maker's intent meets the user's practical enjoyment, that great honest pots/tableware shine and earn their deserved right to be celebrated.

Lucie Rie referred to teapots as being 'for discipline'. An honest verdict on and use of an object that for me epitomises what it is to be pottery; rather, what it is to be tableware and what it is to be a maker of the crowned prince of pots. From a lady who let her pots do the talking, enjoyably, outside the constraints of puritanical studio domestic ware, the suggestion that one should use process of production as a tool to check natural instincts is a potent request. As such, Rie's reminding that responsibility to inherited processes allied with the freedom of being an individual studio potter increasingly costs me to examine my own stylistic practice of the questionably instinctive and contradictingly self-aware making of tableware.



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1 Stephen Farnan – Teapot, stoneware, 2009, H30cm

OFF-CENTRE



It was said by Josiah Wedgwood that if you could put a pot on a table and use it, then it was tableware; if you could not, it was decorative. With this in mind I should point out the importance I bestow on my ceramics having more than just a visual or emotional function – it needs to do it, physically; that is how I as a person want to communicate. As a maker of cups, bowls, plates, serving platters and more experimental wheel-based forms it is fairly clear that my way of working does not conform to the catalogues of traditional British standard tableware; but neither does it need or want to.

My customers range from restaurateurs and corporate buyers to individual collectors, more often than not looking for one-offs, something a little bit different; they will either like it or they will not. Still relevant though is the modest yet special 'dinner-set'. Commissioned and gifted in that age old ritual of the wedding present, it still manages to invoke nostalgic memories for people whilst catering to their contemporary aesthetic. But the market open to studio makers of tableware is changing rapidly and the homes of those once loyal to the matching sugar bowl, milk jug, storage jar and side plate are both overpopulated and simply dying out. Acknowledgment that mass supply and demand of 'handmade' domestic ware is neither the responsibility nor within the fiscal capabilities of studio potteries is key to makers like myself being successful. Recently, it has been something of an education to watch once-dominant studio manufacturers of tableware being brought to the knee of extinction, many closing, some downsizing and hoping to chance upon new patterns and handles to inspire a revival, and those who have become mercantile importers of white label pots.

I feel that a window of opportunity has allowed space again for individual makers to employ more tactile, playful, personal and honest sensibilities, to be less rushed or influenced by a wholesale buyer's in-store profit margin when it comes to production of tableware. The level of accomplishment, humility and honesty reached by studio makers is undoubtedly appreciated by patrons and fellow makers who share in the appreciation of the individual maker and their contemporary slant on possibly the most ancient reason for making pots: to serve. ☐

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