

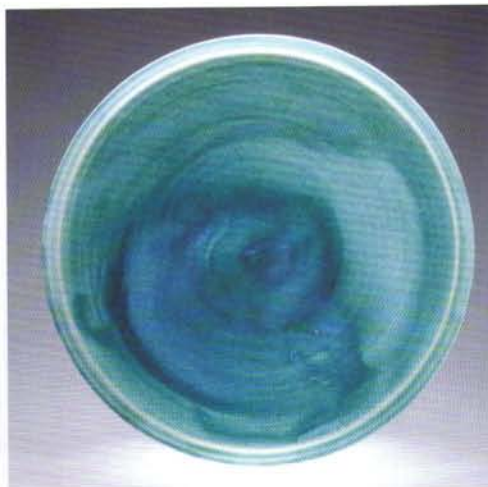
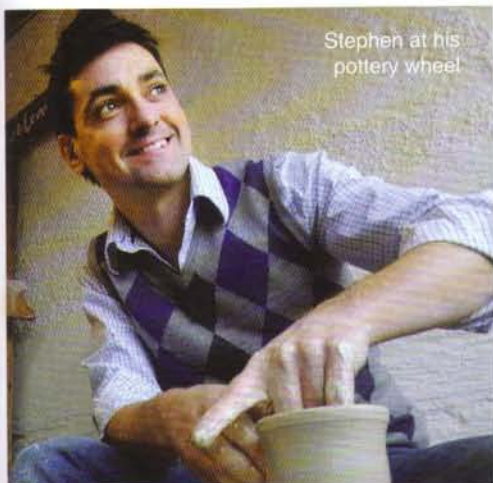
'Funky', 'quirky', 'contemporary' and 'classically timeless' are words used to describe one of Northern Ireland's most prolific ceramicists, Stephen Farnan. His work remains fresh and innovative due to his forensic approach, continually pushing the boundaries of his craft and reviewing what he produces. Rona O'Reilly explains what makes his work so impressive.

Pot Luck

I was introduced to Stephen Farnan and his work when he was studying Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Ulster in Belfast in the mid 90's. Since then I have witnessed his progression and evolution as part of the vanguard of Irish contemporary ceramics. When I undertook this task of writing about

Stephen and his work, apprehension crept in, my fear being that I would find it impossible to be unbiased. I contacted Stephen to speak to him about his work and to express my concerns over writing this piece, moreover my fear of it turning into an unabashed love letter to his pottery. I asked him to consider any

points that might help to give a more balanced view. In jest, he responded "point out that I am not actually in control, that I am in fact a completely irrational messed up Piscean" - by the end of the phone call that was the only thing I had to work with! However, this response was typical of this covertly open yet closed individual, a trait that runs through the veins of his pots, allowing us only snippets of what makes him tick as a maker.



The initial focus of Stephen's work was concerned with the relationship between food and ceramics (already I was hooked, if you love food and things that make the food look amazing, then you will understand!) Stephen took a year out of studying ceramics at the Art College to work as a chef, developing an insight into how we experience food in relation to what we serve it on. His manner of investigation resulted in Stephen graduating with top honours in his degree, which then led him to pursue a Masters in the Royal College of Art in London. For his interview at RCA Stephen presented the panel with examples of his work filled with freshly home baked scones.



strawberries, cream and sugar - they didn't stand a chance of resisting him and his pots; three years later he left London with his Masters certificate in hand! From there he spent time abroad working mainly in the USA with potter Elizabeth Kinder, but it was after something of an epiphany on top of a mountain in New Zealand that he decided to come home and set up his studio in Benburb, County Tyrone, from where he has continued to develop his practice.

To date Stephen has been prolific in his creative output. He continually reviews what he is producing; always pushing the boundaries of his craft. It is due to this forensic approach that his work remains fresh and innovative. He often experiments with form and his use of glazes, regularly playing with the conceptions of what way and by how pottery, today, is meant to function. Importantly he is not frightened to get it wrong, happy to point out the failings in his work, but when it is right, it is right. At present he is working at stripping back and simplifying what it is he does. The resulting work draws on the traditions of Staffordshire Earthenware, his take is funky, quirky, contemporary and classically timeless. Good design always remains good design regardless of what is in fashion.

Stephen also founded Priory Cottage Art, Craft & Design Studios in Benburb, where there now exists a growing community of artists, designers



Mark Mateer of Wine Inns presenting James Nesbitt with the Celebrity of the Year award which was designed by Stephen Farnan for the Ulster Tatler People of the Year awards.

and craftspeople and the award winning Priory House Restaurant where you can see his work in action. He also writes regularly on ceramics, teaches and is Director of TANK II Gallery and www.artsandcraftsofireland.com.

Back to his pots! Stephen has a number of strands to his ceramic practice. He makes work that in the fashion world would be considered prêt-à-porter and he also pursues his haute couture work! Regularly Stephen is commissioned to make one off's and award pieces, probably the most spectacular commissions are his dinner services, you can not help but be wowed by the majestic jewel-like quality as his random yet cohesive array plates present themselves to the table. He is the ultimate go-to-guy for all wedding pressies, leaving pressies....etc! Be advised, going to his studio to pick up a gift for someone else, ultimately results in a little something for you too.

Another of Stephen's most impressive, show stopping, pieces is the Levitator - named, due to the impression it gives of floating or levitating above the surface it's placed on. The form of this piece allows it to be both practically and aesthetically functional, imagine it piled with oodles of fresh fruit or a massive Pavlova (yum!) on it, the simple form and deep wandering glaze also allows it to work just as a 'thing' that is beautiful to look at. There is a pleasure and a pride in serving up the most modest of off foods on these luscious dishes, I know his pots make my food look and taste better! It is this ability of Stephen's to be able to create functional ceramics that also serve as works of art that have placed him and his work as one of Ireland's leading ceramicists. If you think I have it bad, you want to meet the gentleman, who shall remain nameless, that seriously needs some sort of Stephen Farnan Pottery Anonymous type of help. The chap in question bought three of Stephen's Lamps, one Levitator, two Tropic Bowls and two Slapper Platters, in one week! But as I have pointed out - once you're in, you're in bad!

Right, I am off to eat a little something off a Farnan pot... bliss. If you're looking for a new love interest check out some of his fab work on www.stephenfarnan.com and fall in love.... My name is Rona O'Reilly and I am a Stephen Farnan Pottery addict.



Images courtesy of Craft NI and David Pauley, The Studio 2009.