

'In their element'

an exhibition of new works by

Annika Berglund, Sinead Glynn, Lesley Kelly and Freda Rupp

The Olivier Cornet Gallery

3 Great Denmark Street, Dublin 1

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I would like to thank Olivier Cornet and the four artists exhibiting today in this perfect space for the honour of speaking briefly to you all this afternoon.

Could I just take a moment, especially as we are celebrating a cultural event, to express our sympathies with the French people, the citizens of Paris and especially the victims and their families following the horrendous and tragic events of Friday evening. This was clearly an attack on our shared cultural values and in the face of this we must remain resolute in our collective belief in *liberté, égalité et fraternité*.

Working with clay is the most intimate and tactile of art forms from the powerful act of kneading and proving the material to the feel of creation through the hands and fingers—as Annika Berglund has highlighted, in her accompanying text, an engagement with 'the malleability and sensuality of wet clay'.

Clay is also a generous material, strong but yielding. This is undoubtedly what draws children to explore with it, an aspect of simple creation that goes back to the very start of pottery making over ten thousand years ago. Children are not bound by restraint or convention and left to themselves they freely experiment; however, they are most drawn to teasing human or animal figures—either drawing-out and moulding, or cutting, shaping and re-assembling creatures of the real or imaginary world. It has often struck me, as an archaeologist looking at ancient ceramics, how much more limited and conventional the work of adult prehistoric potters was. In Ireland, for example, we have only a single example of a human or animal form from the three thousand years of pottery production. Indeed, it may surprise you to know, we Irish stopped making pottery entirely at the end of the Bronze Age and did not resume tentative, and frequently inexperienced production 1500 years later.

I am particularly excited, therefore, to see the freedom of creation expressed in the work of our four artists exhibiting today. From Olivier Cornet's initial conception of works encapsulating the four elements, to Annika's inspired selection of three gifted ceramicists to share in the exploration of Earth, Water, Fire and Air in this cooperative rather than collaborative venture we have a fantastic collection, and, perhaps surprisingly, a generously harmonious one.

Clay is an inert and often hidden gift of the earth that nevertheless calls out for creative engagement. In focussing on the four elements the artists have explored new ways to coax form and expression from the material.

Annika Berglund is drawn to, and draws from, the earth itself and the natural and human imprint on soil and on rock, the mineral source of the clay she moulds. Her work allows expression of the intrinsic character and power, the raw potential energy of clay (as in her 'Earth 2' and 'Earth 3') as well as reflecting its generous malleability in accepting shape and impressions shown in her evocative 'Earth Road'.

Water is the other essential element that transforms the fine grained minerals into a pliable and elastic material. In her elegant and deliciously tactile work, created, like the pottery of prehistory, from coils and slabs Freda Rupp further explores the impact of time and especially the imprints created by water falling, flowing or crashing on the earth. Her work, in the series of interactions she has with her pieces, reflects this aspect of time and erosion stunningly evoked in 'Stone Water Bottle' and, in her occasional 'nuggets' of silver as in 'Water Traces 111', the occasional gifts and surprises that water can expose in the earth.

Again, Leslie Kelly uses hand building in her evocation of air, an essential element in the forming and firing process. Way beyond this she uses the clay, like a sinuous flowing ribbon to describe, but not to bound or constrain the air. The air—the spaces between—has an immediate sense of movement and the changing multiplicity of shapes especially when, for example with her lithesome piece 'Yellow', viewed from different perspectives. In this we also see her reflection of the Japanese Wabi Sabi acceptance of transience and imperfection.

Sinéad Glynn's work for this exhibition focuses most particularly on the fourth, and most dangerous and unpredictable of our elements—Fire. I suspect that it is this essential, but fickle, ingredient that transforms a soft and pliable material into strong, hard and durable ceramics that drives ceramicists, above all other artists, to loud expressions of intemperate language! Sinead references Fire in its many forms, from the immense if distant power of the sun ('Sol', her discs evoking the rising and setting of the sun's path), to the more immediate but entrancing danger of open flame to the slumbering but potential threat of smouldering sawdust. I am especially drawn to her post-firing techniques, the final flourish to her beautiful, often enticingly fragile work such as '4 elements'. The actual imprint of Fire, and its creation of multi-coloured finishes, is a feature of the open fired manufacture of prehistoric pottery and I am struck by her reference to colour in the firing process as it appears that the ancient potters carried out this work at night to better observe, monitor and manage the essential changes in both the fire and the clay itself.

Severally and jointly our four artists today have not only explored the four elements of their original 'brief' but have pressed—if you will excuse the pun—the boundaries of clay, their chosen medium of creative expression. They have produced a wonderland of delights that offers multiple rewards for close scrutiny and tactile engagement: while actual physical engagement with the pieces might cause undue alarm for the artists and the gallery no such restraint would be necessary were you to purchase one of these marvellous exhibits!

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