

Virtuoso displays from masters of their craft

Aidan Dunne

Much of the work in 'Five into Four' inhabits an in-between zone where craft becomes artistic

As contemporary art has embraced conceptualism and various kinds of socially engaged practices, the traditional notion of the artist as someone who works with a particular medium, and builds up an expertise in it, has largely faded into the background.

For obvious reasons, this is less true of craft, which is still a mode of cultural production that entails sustained, skilful, individual involvement with particular materials and forms.

This is not without some soul searching. As Frances McDonald writes in her introduction to *Five into Four* at the Oliver Sear's Gallery, "We could... consider whether or not a continuing focus on material and technique has lessened the value of craft and undermined its soul?" She quotes the great design and craft theorist David Pye: "Craft is a word to start an argument with."

In the 1960s, Pye, who died in 1993, argued strongly that design was being increasingly promoted at the expense of what he termed workmanship, to the detriment of our living environment – a trend

that continues to this day.

Thinking about craft, he developed the idea of what he called "the workmanship of risk". That is, a process of making "in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works".

It's not at all a question of handmade as opposed to machine-made. You can fetishise craft, he pointed out, by insisting that it is purely handmade, something that accounts for the mediocre quality of much of what passes for craft as encountered at many craft fairs or craft shops. The reality is that skilled makers will use whatever contributes to the best result.

All five exhibitors in *Five into Four* practice "the workmanship of risk", and all employ tools, machines and technology of various kinds.

Lambe's ceramics

Rather nerve-rackingly, Frances Lambe builds up intricate, rhythmic patterns of piercings in elegant thin-skinned ceramic ovoids, a process that has to take untold hours of calm, meditative application and perpetually runs the risk of failure.

Equally Liam Flynn, probably Ireland's best-known wood turner, has made a series of exceptional, inner-rimmed vessels, all quarried, so to speak, from the one ash tree.

The viability of Flynn's turned vessels depends on his instinctive, accumulated experience of both his material and his technique. It's clear that it could all go horribly wrong – presumably on occasion it does –



■ A vessel on base by Liam Flynn, one of Frances Lambe's elegant thin-skinned ceramic ovoids, and one of Nuala O'Donovan's sculptures

and part of the appeal of the vessels, and Lambe's ceramic sculptures, is that we are aware, as we look at them, of how close they come to not being there at all and how they depend on a sense of when to stop.

Sara Flynn plays audaciously with that formal boundary in her thrown porcelain vessels. Flynn graduated from Cork's Crawford College in 1998 and her work has since been acquired for several major collections at home and abroad.

She takes the idea of the technically perfect vessel and subverts it by "manipulating, pushing, pressing, cutting and reassembling freshly thrown forms to highlight movement and volume".



Her feeling for form is crucial. Though they are deliberately distorted, the symmetrical, classical shapes still have to look right, and they do. Her subtly coloured glazes are outstanding.

Flynn says that initially she was inspired by "the curves and contours of the local landscape" and, close up, the roads, pathways and hedgerows.

Occasionally there are also body-like echoes in some of the shapes she creates, though she feels that, increasingly, her work emerges not from observation but from process. Still, associations with natural forms are inevitable.

'Regularly irregular' patterns

Lambe alludes directly to her interest in marine organisms and Nuala O'Donovan develops her incremental, constructed porcelain sculptures in a way that references growth in nature.

She is particularly interested in masses made up of repeated forms that are similar but vary slightly individually and, by extension, patterns that are consistent but "regularly irregular" in the way that most plants and many other organisms are.

Even her more geometric works are based on natural engineering as encountered in skeletal structures of radiolaria seen through the microscope. Works based on Australian banksia and teasel flowers are more overtly plant-like.

In Cólín Ó Dubhghaill's silver *Ritual* vessels, the "legs" give the bulbous forms an udder-like as much as a cauldron-like quality.

His squared gold-copper alloy containers, *Ceo*, are beautiful, though he is best known for circular vessels in unusual combinations of alloys.

He is fascinated by the range of colours and surfaces alloys can produce and has

studied the subject intensively, including the completion of a doctorate in Japan in 2005.

To paraphrase Pye, craft is a word to start not just one but many arguments. One that habitually comes up is the art-craft question, with craft traditionally being consigned a lesser status.

While it's true that some work clearly aspires to be craft, there is a curious, in-between zone, a zone in which craft makers find themselves in artistic territory, sometimes by design, sometimes by accident. It isn't remotely a question of better or worse. Much of the work in *Five into Four* is in that zone.

Five into Four, featuring Sara Flynn, Liam Flynn, Frances Lambe, Nuala O'Donovan and Cólín Ó Dubhghaill, is at Oliver Sear's Gallery, 29 Molesworth Street, Dublin, until July 26th, oliversearsgallery.com

