

Louise Darby: Potter, Photographer, Artist



Louise Darby

On a dull day, and with all too small an audience, we were treated to an engaging and informative talk from a master potter. Those who had got to the Art Gallery early enough could enjoy a sneak preview of the pots on display, and took the opportunity to contemplate their elegance of colour and form, as well make close inspection of the very real drawing skills and lively movement of Louise's incised decoration. Otters, hares and frogs leapt and gambolled in harmonious counterpoint with 3D forms as varied as lamps, platters, and hollow vessels.

Louise had a conventional art education, but one that left open her choice of discipline in a way that has born rich fruit, both in her work as a potter and photographer, and in the draughtsmanship and artistry she bring to both. Even as a student, she was particularly drawn to ceramics, aided and abetted by her parents. After college, her first job was as a studio technician to Reg Moon in Henley in Arden. There, she learned the lifelong technical skills that have enabled her to run her own studio as a craft potter, as well as continuing to develop

her own work, and acquiring also experience of gallery curation. An offer from a former tutor of part time teaching in college did wonders for her confidence, as well as her wages. Five years on from her first job, she established her own studio in 1983. The business grew organically, at first in the freezing conditions of a semiconverted barn on the family farm. Now much upgraded, the Clay Barn is also her home.

Like any artist and maker, Louise found her personal voice after a period of experiment. Much her work is formed on the wheel – although she has found ways of encouraging even a cylinder into a more geometric form, or a distinctively different and sometimes daring sculptural identity. Linear decoration originally inspired by railway lines, and deeply carved incised drawings and textures, have both become integral to her artistic signature. Louise works in white stoneware and porcelain. She makes her own glazes. These fire as matt or semimatt, in subtle blues, greens, browns and blacks.



White stone ware incised and carved otter

She held her audience spellbound as she described some of the details of the making, of the three-dimensional jigsaws that precede kilnfiring, and the ways in which she manipulates the glazes on and around the forms to reveal pattern and decoration, as well as to achieve technical perfection.

Louise Darby: Potter, Photographer, Artist continued

She told a lovely story of the way in which one auction house once confused her work with that of the iconic craftsman potter, David Leach, and her valiant efforts to get them to correct their mistake. Louise's visual language is varied and nuanced, from minimalist elegance to quiet or even subversive humour – what better place for that than a naughty otter on the base of a bowl? Photography, her second love, began as a journal and sketchbook, to observe and record the colours, patterns, and textures of nature. It has developed as an art form in its own right, both as an income stream and as exhibited gallery pieces.

Part of Louise's talk addressed, in the clearest and yet most inclusive way I have yet heard, the essential differences between a professional artist, relying on their art or craft for their living, and the part time amateur, however talented. Her CV includes an impressive list of galleries that have showcased and sold her work, and she is cited and illustrated also in several publications, including Jo Connell, *The Potter's Guide to Ceramic Surfaces* (2002).



White stone ware incised and carved otter

Louise's audience included painters and printmakers as well as a solitary potter. There is much to learn from, as well as admire, within an interdisciplinary conversation, including ways of finding inspiration, and managing practice. This was a prime example of a presentation that was both enjoyable and well worthwhile.

Margaret Condon