



The expression of words and what they look like is now largely dictated to us by keyboards and touch screens, and although the computer in some cases has been used as a tool, the work in the exhibition is really about the material world and the free expression of the letterform. Perhaps exploring the DNA of language, as the title suggests, will lead to further collaborations between 26 and the Letter Exchange. After all, typographic experimentation has played a part in the evolution of the diverse range of letterforms that we have today. (26 Words is touring. See *Crafts Guide* for details.) Patrick Myles is a freelance art director and graphic design consultant

## Curneen's amazing head for figures

**Claire Curneen – To This I Put My Name**  
Mission Gallery, Swansea SA1  
18 January – 16 March 2014  
Reviewed by Mella Shaw

I have to admit I am not naturally drawn to figurative ceramics; the immediacy can leave me a little wanting. So I was hesitant to enter Mission Gallery, where the highly acclaimed Claire

Curneen's recent work is on display.

This intimate gallery space is an elegantly converted church. Apt then that the first figures I encountered are titled *Builders*; a naked man and woman, standing under a metre high, rendered in black clay. They are poised, quietly contemplating something ahead of them that we cannot see. The male figure gestures lightly with his left hand as if explaining an idea, a grand plan perhaps. They are deep in private conversation and the effect is hushing. This is a good start. Curneen provides us with an everyman (and -woman) as a way in, and of course, they are us, the onlookers.

Nearby is a smaller porcelain figure titled simply *Blue*. Grief is manifest here, as cobalt blue glaze covering the face of the figure. It runs through his cupped hands like a torrent of tears, finally dripping from his elbows. The comparison is so clear that I wonder if Curneen is intentionally referencing one of the most harrowing images in Renaissance art, Masaccio's fresco of Adam in *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, in the Brancacci Chapel, Florence. Similarly, a delicately modelled *Mary Magdalene*, covered head to toe in feathery porcelain fur, is reminiscent of Donatello's heart-rending wooden version, another Renaissance masterpiece.

I imagine that in Curneen's hands no reference is accidental. This show is a result of the Creative Wales Ambassador Award, given by the Arts Council of Wales, which allowed Curneen to spend time investigating the collection of the National

**Portent, Claire Curneen,**  
39 x 88cm, 2013

Museum of Ireland, Dublin, and nine months developing work in Mission's new studio space. The resultant figures are eclectic, archetypal and deeply intriguing – revealing as they do an expanse of art historical, iconographic and mythological imagery.

Not all in this emblematic cast are sorrowful: take her reoccurring image of Saint Sebastian, widely acknowledged in art historical circles as the first martyr-turned-gay-icon, here present in various guises, both mournful and flamboyant. Nor are they all figures. There is a regal bird perched on high, overlooking the proceedings – wittily titled *Preaching to the Birds*, in a nod to Saint Francis of Assisi – and a wonderful porcelain head, titled *Marrow*, veiled in rose-like curls with a strange, gold-lustred slot for a mouth.

The restricted palette of unglazed black stoneware and porcelain, combined with the lightest touches of gold lustre, cobalt blue and red, works to unify this expertly curated show. The star for me was *Portent*, a solitary figure prostrate on a red, altar-shaped plinth in the old apse of the church. Made of black clay, this piece is covered in Curneen's signature stunted twigs, beautifully lit to give a thorny shadow-halo. All her figures possess a distinct androgyny: flat bodies, wide hips and moon-like faces, and this piece is no exception. At first glance it seems to be as much a Christ figure as a Saint Sebastian, but it is also undeniably female; a perfect example of Curneen's ability to capture the complexity of humanity in the simplest of forms.

Much has been made in the past of the outsized hands that Curneen chooses to give her figures. Each crease and fingernail is exquisitely modelled, and the articulation of each elongated finger is carefully considered, bringing to mind the gestures so often seen in icon painting. Yet it is the restraint in figuration that Curneen has so perfected – the subtle tilt of the head here, the slight stoop of a shoulder there, the concave indentation just below the clavicle like an in-breath – that means they also cast long shadows in the memory. These enigmatic images stayed close to mind through the following days.

If the intended purpose of Mission Gallery is to change perceptions, then they certainly have a new convert in me. I may not have been the easiest of visitors to win over, but the keen observation and sensitivity of Curneen's work did just that. This is a stunning body of work, made by a true master of her art. (For details of tour, see *Crafts Guide*) Mella Shaw is an artist, freelance writer and former head of exhibitions at Dulwich Picture Gallery, London