

Exhibition Review by David Cushway

Marking the Line: Ceramics and Architecture

Curated by Joanna Bird

Sir John Soanes Museum
London WC2A 3BP
March 8th- April 27th 2013

To enter the Sir John Soanes Museum is to step inside the mind of an obsessive, a stroll through one man's psyche, and all the kaleidoscopic, fragmented reality that it implies. There is too much to look at, take in, digest; this is visual and textural overload. Stone, wood, plaster, metal, paint, leather, glass, mirrors, windows, ornate gold frames, flagstones, floorboards and worn carpets underfoot, acidic coloured walls, wallpaper and garish textiles all compete against one another.

This visual negotiation becomes physical as you try to move around the house through gloomy corridors and rooms, up and down sets of stairs, some seemingly leading nowhere, occasionally stopping, politely waiting for other visitors to move to gain access. All the while you are engaged in this process you are catching glimpses of *things*, your eyes are constantly attracted to some object of interest or quirky eccentricity.

Into this wonderfully chaotic atmosphere has been placed the work of four contemporary makers, who have responded to, or negotiated with, the Soanes house and collection. Christie Brown, Carina Ciscato, Nick Rena and Clare Twomey have each contributed a body of work to this exhibition; their works on initial encounter offering a slight relief, a quiet moment of engagement and contemplation against the constantly intrusive environment.

Carina Ciscato's beautifully made and thoroughly modern example of a *Wunderkammer*, filled with pots, glaze tests and assorted architectural details, can be read as an extended metaphor for the house and its collection as a whole: a microcosmic cabinet of curiosities, container of oddities and other assorted objects. Her thrown, cut and

reassembled pots, vessels created from fragments, with their rich glazes shining out from the recesses and the surfaces on which they are placed, underline this relationship further.

Whilst Nick Rena's strong forms carry an architectural authority, some displayed on uncompromising coloured plinths, their overall density and weight anchor the work within the house. The clarity and perfection of line brings a formal and textural addition to their surroundings; with their luscious painted and waxed surfaces and the deep rich hues of colour, they provide an overt contrast to the other ceramics exhibited and the permanent collection house within the museum.

Christie Brown's busts of Soanes and members of his close family, including his dog Fanny, are almost absorbed into the house as they blend seamlessly with their surroundings. Positioned on a table in the basement with other such artefacts they could be easy to miss and are all the more interesting for that reason, as it suddenly dawns on you that you are looking at something contemporary not archaic. Her analysis of the Soanes' problematic family relationships through the intimate manipulation of clay provides an emotional and material contrast to the austere and reserved plaster originals.

An emotive response continues through Clare Twomey's *Everyman's Dream*. One thousand porcelain bowls engraved with the words of men, their dreams and aspirations for their legacies immortalised in gold, are positioned in a niche which Soanes dedicated to a man of words, William Shakespeare. Precariously stacked, much of the text that defines the purpose of the work is obscured by the seemingly temporal nature of display, however the permanence of ceramics reminds us that words, artefacts and, in this case, collections will long outlive their authors and makers.

The exhibition continues at:
Port Elliot
Cornwall
PL12 5ND
22nd May- 15th July 2013

Pitzhanger Manor
Ealing
W5 5EQ

26th July-8 September 2013