

Exhibition review by Jenny Williamson**‘Ceramic Celebration – Fifty Years of South Wales Potters’**

Llantarnam Grange Arts Centre, Cwmbran
31 May 2014 – 12 July 2014 and touring

The exhibition was created to celebrate fifty years of South Wales Potters. This leading ceramic group, formed in 1964 ‘to share skills, experience, technical knowledge and indefatigable enthusiasm’ (Walter Keeler) is one of the largest groups of professional and hobby potters and ceramicists with over 100 members.

A variety of technique and forms engage the viewer immediately. There are the elemental, ancient forms of Ali Lohead’s ceramic sculpture; pale turquoise slender forms by Trevor Lillistone; abstracted components and metallic glazes create the precise modernist teapots by Ian Rylatt; playful, humorous salt glazed “extruded jug with crabstock branches” by Walter Keeler; perfect functional wood fired salt glazed vessels by Micki Schloessingk; geometric monochromatic clean lines in the work of Liz Lawrence, glossy slip decorated green and cream earthenware platters by Patia Davis; the colourful, compelling presence of the birds of Janet Hamer and the majestic salt-glazed jugs by Joe Finch.

Recent work from nineteen of SWP’s current members is shown, alongside pieces dating back to the earlier years of the group from the Ceramic Collection of Aberystwyth University. The earliest pieces shown are an exquisite small, spherical lidded pot and a bowl (pre 1975) by Mary White. Pieces from the 1980s include a globular lidded jar (1982) by Phil Rogers, vessels by Mick and Sheila Casson and Frank Vining. The inclusion of this work gives the opportunity to reflect on changes and developments that have occurred in the styles and techniques in the work of the group. There are more similarities than differences between the older and the recent work on show. A high proportion of the contemporary work does use traditional techniques, is vessel based and is rooted in the Leach tradition. The differences are that the contemporary work has a much bigger range of colours and surface textures; less of the work is functional and there is some experimental sculptural work although no conceptual work.

It does beg the question – is there any visible evidence that the exhibitors belong to a group? The pots are all high quality and well crafted – the exhibitors are experts at their chosen technique and excel in its execution, but there is no unifying ‘style’. The group contribution to each piece is described in the original statement – shared skills, experience, technical knowledge and enthusiasm encourage the individual to pursue the development of their work. The exhibition demonstrates that the group provides support, encouragement and an environment for studio potters to flourish.

The fiftieth anniversary of SWP is a cause for great celebration. The ceramic world would be much the poorer without them. Long may they continue.

Jenny Williamson is a freelance painting conservator, lecturer and ceramicist. The catalogue is dedicated to Janet Hamer who died earlier in 2014 and can be purchased online from <http://www.lgac.org.uk/cats>