

AN INTERIOR PERSPECTIVE: A WINDOW INTO LIGHT

ISOBEL EGAN

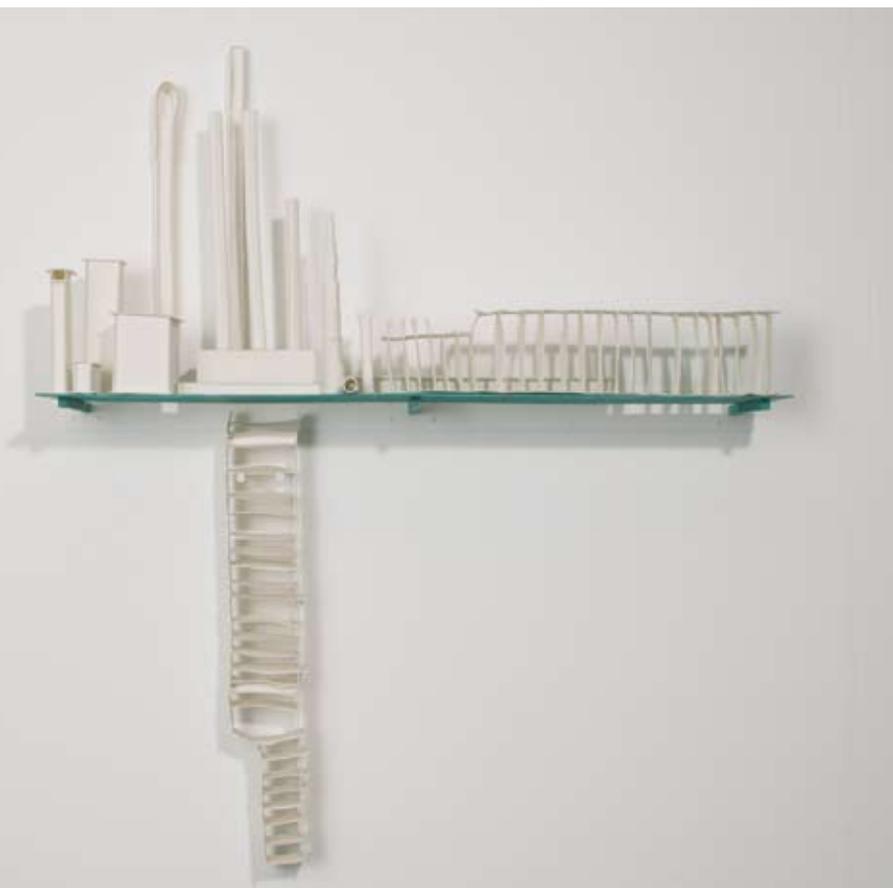
MUIREANN CHARLETON



'Introspection', 15 x 15 x 16 cm, 2013

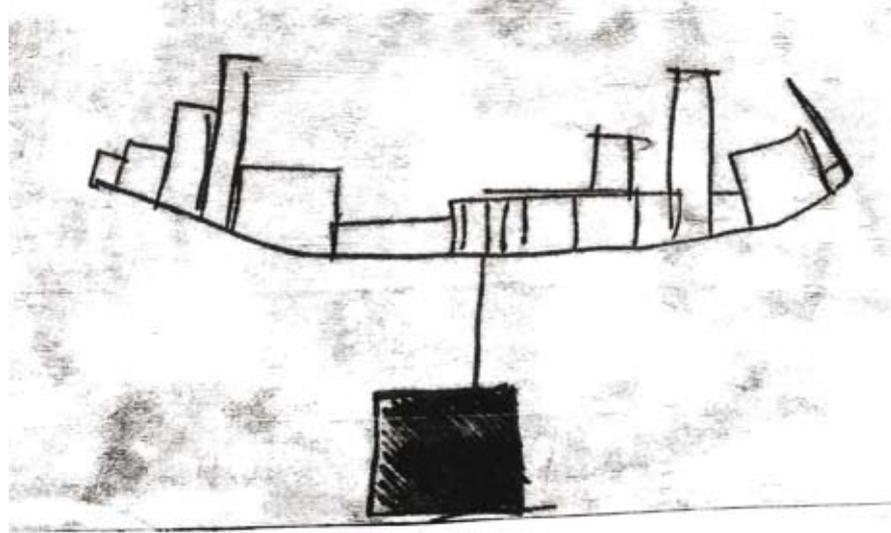
Outside the Kildare studio of ceramic sculptor Isobel Egan is a Japanese cherry blossom tree flowering with pink, graceful blossoms. The brief yet beautiful flowering of the florets has come to symbolize delicacy, transience and a quietly powerful expression of elegant acceptance. A meeting on a still and sunny March day with ceramic artist Egan, finds her gently imbuing these qualities in her work.

'Intimate Spaces', 80w x 82h cm, Porcelain and patinated copper, 2005



Isobel Egan is a ceramic sculptor who has always been fascinated with porcelain as a material. The whiteness and fineness of this substance proving captivating while the technicalities involved challenge and intrigue her. Egan graduated in 2005 with a Masters Degree in ceramics from the National College of Art and Design (NCAD), and in the same year her work was collected by the National Museum of Ireland, Decorative Arts & History. She previously completed a BA in ceramics at the NCAD finishing in 1999, where her inquiries led her to French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's 1958 book, *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard's theories on how our perceptions of houses and other shelters shape our thoughts, memories and dreams, influenced Egan's journey into ideas of space and our relationship with it. Egan admits she is 'fascinated with architecture'. She wants her work to investigate the 'interrelations between us and the buildings we inhabit'. In her practice she is immersed in exploring how buildings contain us physically, and also 'shape us emotionally'. In turn, she explains 'we attribute emotion to the structures we inhabit', giving a context to our experience. In her sculptural pieces she is 'connecting these ideas', and in doing so is observing aspects of the human condition.

The central themes in Egan's work are fragility, memory and a sense of personal space. The very delicate and complex nature of porcelain ideally echoes these concepts within its materiality, and the fine paper-like structures of the pieces. It is also in the process of working, and the resulting horizontal and vertical forms she achieves, that ultimately connects the physical craft with the metaphysical meanings. Egan draws first, working on line drawings with black pen. Her initial aim is to achieve a 'quality of line' and 'sensitivity to line' that will carry through to the porcelain work. She works with white paper, folding and manoeuvring it into prototype shapes – testing out the construction possibilities that will link her ideas to realized forms. These paper maquettes offer a freedom for the teasing out of ideas, and therefore is a significant



Monoprint

'Tree House - House Folly', 10 x 10 x 10 cm, ladder 50 cm, 2006



part of the creative process. While in the experimental phase she utilizes monoprint and these drawings serve to work out the configuration of lines, outlining the structure yet to be made by hand. The monoprint drawings echo architectural forms reminiscent of Japanese architect, Tado Ando's buildings. In her current body of work there is a whisper of Ando's Japanese aesthetic articulated in his 'Church of Light' building in Ibaraki, Osaka. Egan's 2013 sculpture entitled '*Introspection*' is a miniature cavernous structure, which draws us into a slit of light. The effect of the light coming through into this sculptural interior is dazzling. In this piece, the viewer can delve into the work in a way that reveals the space within. This is a metaphor for the human condition – where according to Egan, we 'habitually project a façade of contentment while internally carrying transitory sadness'. She finds inspiration in a combination of different facets including architecture, space and emotion. Her aim through the architectural-like structures is 'to pique the curiosity of the viewer and invite them to explore initially hidden aspects'. Yet, like Tado Ando's walls, Egan's porcelain partitions and self-contained boxes are unsentimental while minimalist. In another comparison to Ando's buildings, Egan's sculptural work reduces the viewers engagement to the essential, and hence spiritual. Deprived of any apparent decorative elements (even colour), the work stimulates the attentiveness of those who see them.

In her porcelain slip and nylon fibre wall-mounted piece '*Tree House - House Folly*', there are ladder like steps leading up to a safe box-shape house – a perfect shape to contain our daydreams, memories, feelings. In Egan's 2012 piece '*Lacuna*' the architectural porcelain structure is quivering with life yet demonstrates a sheltering place for ones inner emotions. The individual elements rise like sails on a ship radiating light and wind from its centre. She achieves a miniature sculptural house - one so dynamic that it 'allows the poet to inhabit the universe' (Bachelard, 1958). It would be appropriate to refer again to Bachelard, when he asserts that 'to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house' (1958). Egan explains that 'the box structures are like micro works of architecture. They represent environments for the nurturing of imagination. The walls in these pieces, although somewhat malleable, represent the essential boundaries that define personal integrity'.

In her 2005 '*Intimate Spaces*' monoprint drawings, the inanimate yet powerful linear elements are constructed like architectural building lattices, forming micro linear structures. For Egan, 'the linear structure of the pieces represents the exploration and contemplation on our journey through life'. Even in miniature scale the viewer can interpret this, assisted by the exquisitely crafted nature of her porcelain work. In the '*Intimate Spaces*' series, the hand-built, wall mounted sculptures



'Intimate Spaces', 62w x 29h cm, Porcelain and patinated copper, 2005

are miniature spaces that communicate an aesthetic of absence. Yet, they hint to the universal and therefore provide a comfort and knowingness within the inner courtyards of the structures. The fragile feature of porcelain enables Egan to reflect the easily broken and often changing nature of life's own structures. She clarifies by suggesting that we often recognize aspects of our life that we consider robust and sturdy, that offer us safety; but 'security and balance are in fact delicate and fragile'.

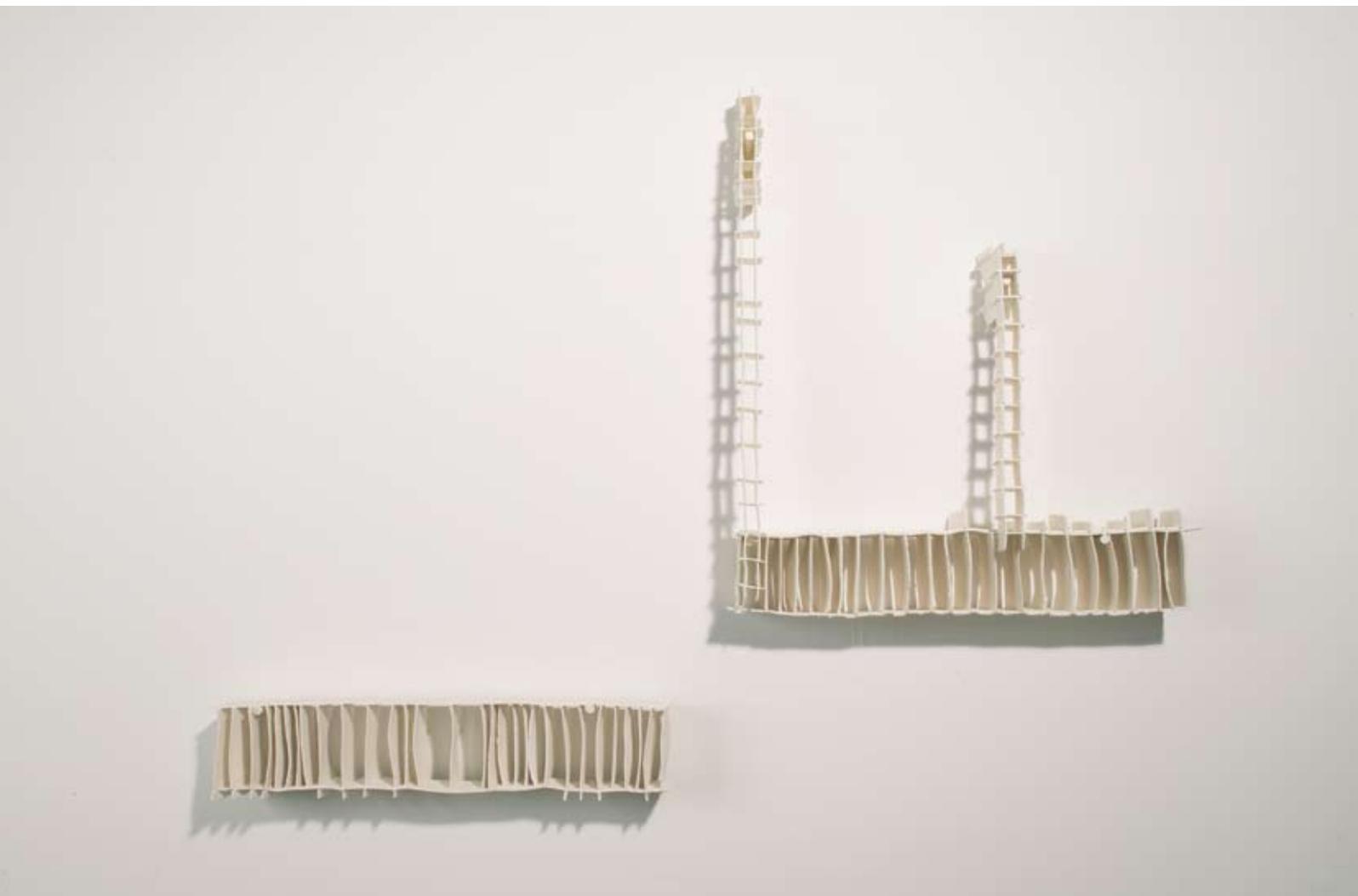
Egan spent a number of years researching porcelain. She was drawn to making three-dimensional work and pursued her research into mixing ceramic fibres into porcelain slip. Working with this material to make fine sculptural forms poses significant technical challenges and therefore involves consistent research. Firmly holding the belief that 'white is a colour', she is drawn to white as a colour that can reflect an aesthetic of a silent,

interior perspective. The whiteness provides the work with a quiet splendour and luminosity. By mixing ceramic fibres into the porcelain slip she creates a durable translucent material and through experimentation she learned how to exploit the warping of the clay when fired to very high temperatures. She continues to be absorbed by the intrinsic characteristics of porcelain, its translucent and delicate qualities.

Egan's porcelain architecture can be described as strong, humble and extremely fragile. The sculptural pieces join the simplicity of form to the complexity of an inner perspective or space. The invisible place that is our memory has been made tangible yet miniature in Egan's representations of space – a window into the interior chambers of our minds. It conveys an image of life proposed by these clear, clean forms. She asserts that she is 'expressing my ideas through porcelain', and that 'your instinct can take you places'. This connectivity between her ideas, her process, materiality and sculptural explorations has led her to creating forms bound up in stored memories. She is attempting to communicate life's important themes at a miniature level and the result is breathtakingly beautiful.

Egan is currently working towards an exhibition where she intends to exhibit six porcelain wall mounted sculptures alongside six one-meter square photographs. For this exhibition, the sculptures will be mounted on vividly coloured bespoke panels. The large photographs (close up details of the work) will be suspended

'Intimate Spaces', 100w x 70h cm, 2005





'Introspection II', 24 x 33 x 10 cm, 2013

from the ceiling. In two of these pieces, the sculpture is comprised of a paper-thin grid of slab built squares. In each of the squares there is a porcelain box. Every box has a small aperture revealing its inner space. For Egan, this piece is 'inspired by observing a child's fascination with minute tactile details'. She explains that this piece represents an evolution in her work by combing several themes already individually explored such as 'geometric structure, space and intimacy'. Producing architectural forms in the miniature 'bring them to a scale our imagination can interact with easily'.

Isobel Egan has received numerous awards for her work including the Taylor Art Award by the Royal Dublin Society in 1999, and the Golden Fleece Award (merit) in 2006. Her work is represented nationally and internationally in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) ceramics collection and in Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taiwan. She is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics and Ceramics Ireland. Egan represented Ireland in the European Ceramics Context Exhibition in Borholm, Denmark in 2006 and she continues to exhibit widely. As part of the 2014 International Academy of Ceramics programme in Dublin, Isobel Egan will exhibit in Centred, a Ceramics Ireland exhibition at Farnleigh House. Egan will also exhibit in the Moving Objects exhibition at Dublin Castle in September 2014.

Muireann Charleton is a former lecturer in design history in the Faculty of Visual Culture at the NCAD. She is currently Education & Innovation Manger at the Design & Crafts Council of Ireland (DCCoI).

Photography: Philip Lauterbach

'Untitled', 40 w x 28 h cm, 2013

