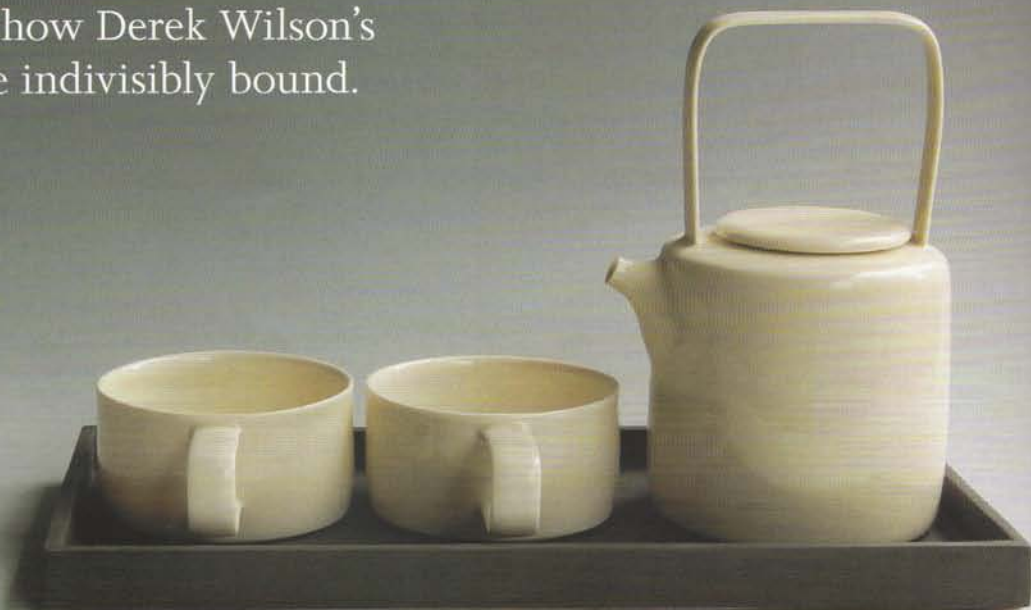


Personality and the Pot

Stephen Farnan reflects on how Derek Wilson's pots and personality are indivisibly bound.



Derek Wilson is starting to be recognised. Look at his pots properly, and I bet you could tell me more than you think you know about this potter, ceramist, sculptor. You probably know what he looks like, his height, posture, gait; you could probably imagine his voice, accent, tone, and the speed with which he communes. It is said that if you show me your friends, I'll tell you who you are. Well, that is the same of Wilson and his work; they are one and the same.

To set the scene I'll throw out a few words that come to mind when I look at and use Wilson's pots – precise, clean, simple, slender, gentle, quiet, honest, methodical. Wilson is one of those ceramists whose work straddles a line between being overtly functional and covertly sculptural. He makes pots: cups, teapots, plates, jars, bowls. And then there are these other pieces, which are, it is fair to say, less than domestic; they are more architecture or sculpture than applied art, and certainly not craft – although without his dedication to developing skill, or 'craft', these pieces probably would not exist so wondrously. Yet these two aspects of Wilson's work are so close you could not put a cigarette paper between them. So immediately it is clear that if we want to define what it is Derek Wilson exactly does, what he makes, then we need to understand where this potter has come from, why he is drawn to making what are essentially metropolitan domestic landscapes that are picture perfect. What has

influenced this journey to becoming an intense potter/ceramist, living a relatively quiet life, purposely hidden in a corner of Belfast?

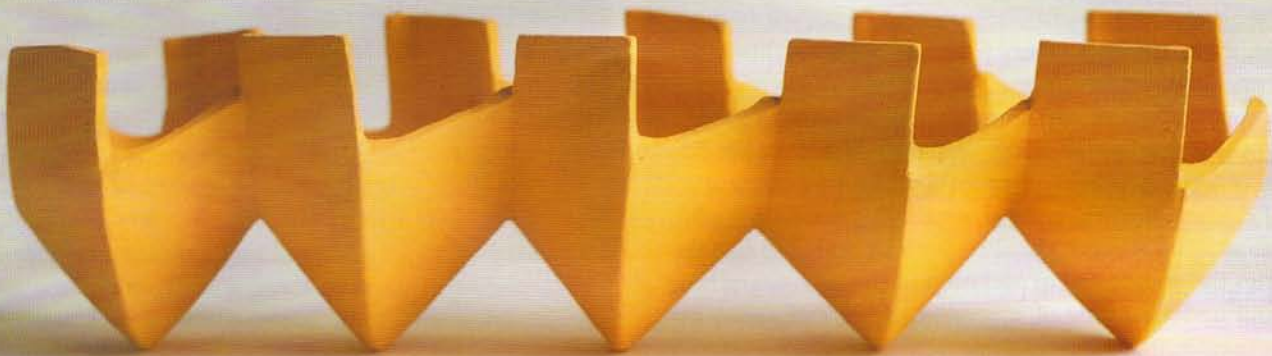
BACKGROUND Wilson's childhood was spent flitting between Germany and Britain, in what were probably none too expressive clinical homesteads, perhaps laying the foundation for the modernist sensibility we can trace in his work. I think we could also assume that this nomadic life bore witness to his wanting to settle somewhere, to create a resident 'home'. For Wilson nearing the end of his schooling, it was a simple toss-up between architecture and graphics – this was the type of thing he was good at. However, in 1995 under the accommodating tutelage of Kathryn Vosper during a Foundation course at Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design, he developed a heady respect for the 'hands on' act of making, and in a drive to be less 'precious', was coaxed into smashing, essentially destroying, what were perceived to be perfect pieces. This allowed him to begin reconstructing, enabling him to do what was natural, to design and build. This early form of development set the seed for how Wilson works today. This aggressive, counter-intuitive learning, balanced by the 'endless possibilities' introduced to him by college visits to 'jewels' such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, gave Wilson an early appreciation of ceramics and a thirst for more knowledge.

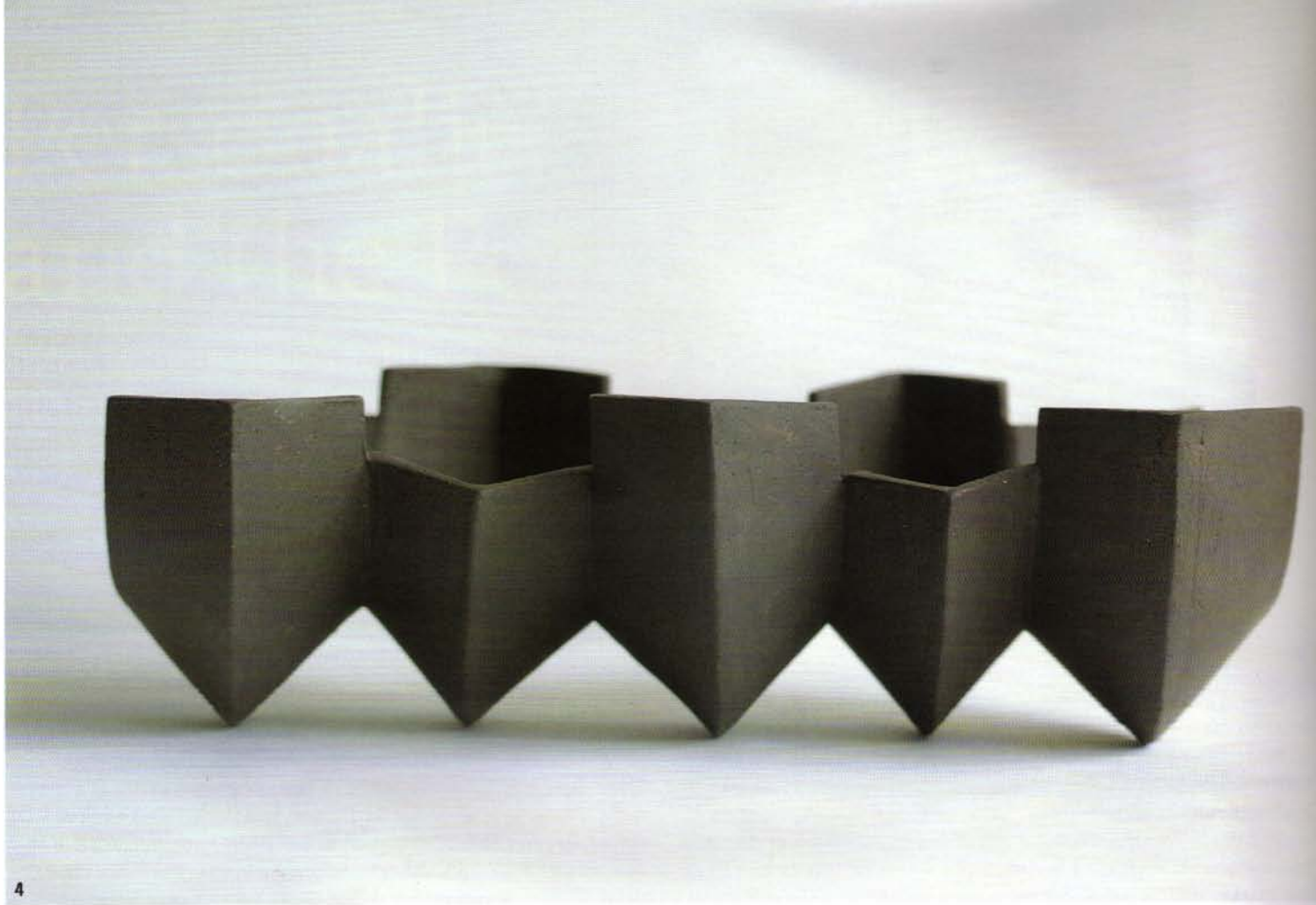
1 Thrown porcelain tea set, transparent glaze, on handbuilt stoneware tray with grey engobe, W35cm 2 Four thrown porcelain cups, pale celadon glaze, on handbuilt stoneware tray with grey engobe, W33cm 3 *Systematisation* series, thrown, cut, and assembled stoneware with orange engobe, 2008, W33cm



Wilson asserts that he was 'never drawn to pots as such', so in order to exercise and balance both aspects of his making, in 1996 he moved to Belfast and the course of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Ulster. There, he was mentored by Clive Fiddis, a leading figure in ceramics in Belfast. Wilson, it seems, responds well to environments where he is cocooned away from prying eyes and influences, such as in Belfast, a city where he was distant from the sparkly whirlwind of contemporary ceramics on the mainland in the 1990s. After completing an impressive degree Wilson worked in a number of Irish potteries, and in 2001 moved to the hidden gem of Thomastown where, under Gus Mablesen, he 'practised'.

This period was to have a huge effect on this controlled potter; Wilson describes it as being 'strict'. Discipline and a focus on skill rather than the 'what and why' were core to the Thomastown ethos. These attributes are exemplified in how Wilson operates as a maker today. Business acumen under his belt and skilled to the hilt in throwing pots, Wilson returned to Belfast in 2005 to complete an MA, setting aside his making of tableware to examine more closely those sculptural pieces that define the other aspect of Wilson's work. Two years of indulgent investigating were to follow. The starting point was the vessel but it quickly evolved into examining space, the environment of these pieces, and the edge. There were





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nods to the Constructivist and Minimalist movements, but this period in reality best served to unshackle Wilson from the ultimately uninspired making of 'Irish' pottery. A residency at the International Ceramic Research Centre, Denmark, brought Wilson to the attention of fellow international makers, but it was in 2007, with his induction to Craft Northern Ireland's *Making It* programme, that the stage was set for Derek Wilson as the maker and businessperson we know today.

TALKING POTS I want to tell you more about this very current maker through the language of one of his pots. There is a user-friendly edge – the basics are simple and they do what they have to do but not aggressively. The body rises straight up with a simple transparent, sallow, skinny glaze hugging the surface, nothing fancy you might think, but within this wafer thin glaze we see every release of gas, every rib mark, every joint; we see everything. You can feel just enough to know that this pot has been thrown; there is no flamboyance or exaggeration. At the shoulder it turns in modestly to a point where it simply rounds off, able to hold a clean flat lid. The spout is something to behold, probably the cutest element and quirk of the pot, thrown, conical, small, the sharp strong lip allowing it to work as a teapot should – without fear. The handle literally carries the weight and expectation of this pot; everything rides on it, our understanding of its mass, balance, and ability to



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function. It is extruded, bent, and patiently waited on. These handles are under huge pressure, the joins so clean that there is little room for movement or forgiveness. The teapot, as I hold it now, works. Proportionally it works; physically, emotionally, it's got it, but it is not finished yet. Typically not content with an exemplarily demonstration of a teapot made with discipline, Wilson makes the ground the teapot sits on. It is a stoneware tray coated in a chalky grey engobe. You can imagine it contrasts exquisitely with the porcelain body and, of course, the adjoining cups; it dare not exist on its own without them. I could be writing about any aspect of Wilson; his pots, his manner, his studio – they are all pretty much one.

4 *Systematisation* series, thrown, cut, and assembled stoneware with black engobe, 2008, W35cm 5 *Systematisation* series, thrown, cut, and assembled stoneware with blue engobe, 2009, H25cm 6 Thrown porcelain tea set, transparent glaze, on

solid walnut tray, W60cm 7 Hand thrown porcelain cups and saucers, 2008, H7cm. Commission for Arts Council Northern Ireland 8 *Systematisation* series, thrown, cut, and assembled stoneware with grey engobe, 2009, H25cm

Photography Felicity Straker Graham, David Pauley, and Derek Wilson
Exhibitions *Funktional*, Leach Pottery Museum and Gallery, St Ives, Cornwall, until 1 September 2010; *Origin*, Old Spitalfields Market, London, 23-29 September 2010; *Great Northern Contemporary Craft Fair*, Manchester, 21-24 October 2010

Stockists Ruthin Craft Centre, Denbighshire; The New Craftsman Gallery, St Ives, Cornwall; The Cold Store, Norwich; The Ulster Museum, Belfast; Space Craft, Belfast; Irish Design Shop, Dublin; Gourmet Pots, Schull, Co. Cork
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It is only when we expect and are offered 'perfection' that we are able to see, and want to see, the imperfect. This is the case with Wilson's pots. They invite critical discourse. But then that is what you expect when you openly celebrate precise, controlled finishing. Yes, Wilson's pots are thrown, some are handbuilt, and elements of pots are both destroyed and reconstructed, albeit in more exotic forms. His material of choice is often the unforgiving – porcelain. As such Wilson creates thoughtful pieces, difficult to make, yet not over-thought. This body of work is insightful, impressive, and cohesive – quite a feat for a maker just at the beginning of his career, an exciting prospect for ceramics and beyond. ☐