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CERAMIC REVIEW



A self-sustaining universe

This year's Emmanuel Cooper Memorial Lecture was presented by Sara Flynn. *Rosa Binias* was at the lecture and caught up with Sara to learn more about her practice



Sara Flynn's intensely precise and elegant vessels possess a sense of movement and character that mirrors the delicate balance of discipline and play within her creative practice. Each piece is folded and tweaked and restitched until it comes alive. The smooth sheen of her glazes coax light and shadow to fall softly upon the creases and bulges of the forms. Their shifting dance is far from monotonous; the tension across each meticulous join and narrow foot is delightfully precarious, enhanced by the occasional bright or textured glaze.

Flynn explored the intricacies of her journey with clay in her Emmanuel Cooper Memorial Lecture at the Royal College of Art in March 2026, reflecting on her career and the love of making that has shaped it. A month later, I had the opportunity to chat with her, where we talked more about her life and ceramic techniques.

MATERIAL AWARENESS

Underpinning Flynn's practice is a creative way of thinking instilled in childhood, long before she first encountered clay. Her 'incredibly resourceful' mother's passion and ingenuity transformed their house in the Irish countryside, constructing a home from refurbished furniture, reused fabric scraps and plant cuttings. This tenacity and sense of materiality is integral to Flynn's work.

While she enjoyed school, it did not suit her. Attending the Crawford College of Art in Cork was the turning point. Originally intending to paint, she turned to ceramics instead. She read Emmanuel Cooper's *Potter's Book of Glaze Recipes*, 1980, and was captivated: 'the world of glaze was infinite and exciting and torturous and wonderful'. Under the guidance of Roisin Collins, Flynn learnt the vigour and discipline of studio practice, and the patience to see her skills slowly progress.

The allure of London then led her away from clay, but only briefly. Working at Harrods, unable to afford the creative city life she dreamt of, the pull of ceramics soon brought Flynn back to Collins. In 1997, she enrolled for a final year at Crawford and has not stopped making since.

At college, someone asked if a piece Flynn was working on – ugly in its halfway-altered state – was finished. The question made her feel surprisingly vulnerable and she found it impossible to answer. The same feeling permeated her experiences of working in public spaces, such as the small retail space in Kinsale where she started out. She felt exposed: 'I realised I would always need a private studio.'

A subsequent relocation to West Cork triggered a hugely formative period of experimentation as she moved away from functional ware, in part inspired by Hans Coper's sculptural vessels. Flynn's relationship with her materials began to deepen: 'playing and pulling and scratching and shaping and changing' the forms until they came alive.

Talking to Elizabeth Fritsch, who described how the scale of her work aligned to the scale of her body, was a defining moment in Flynn's growing understanding of the physicality of her practice.

PLAY AND PORCELAIN

Although porcelain is her medium, its whiteness and translucency vanish beneath her rich layers of glaze. Flynn is concerned with porcelain's smooth surface and tension when altered, not its historic cultural resonance. The material's notorious volatility and tendency to crack, collapse and warp only make her 'play' more exciting.

Working within porcelain's limitations, and the 'rigidly sacrosanct' isolation of her studio – whether located in West Cork, Belfast, or her current Cork workshop – Flynn constructs the expansive and self-sustaining universe

RIGHT FROM TOP: *Inner-Fold Vessel*, 2025, porcelain, H9cm; *Camber Vessel*, 2016, porcelain, H26cm; *Gesture Vessel*, 2025, porcelain, H12.5cm

of her practice. Pencil lines in her sketchbook translate into cuts and slices through the smooth clay, her fingers coaxing curves and folds into the walls until control veers back to the porcelain and new shapes begin to emerge.

Some collapse or unstitch themselves, some turn into material sketches needing refinement. The best – or most interesting – are dried, slowly, and fired. Anything that cracks in the bisque or lacks the desired 'magic' is glazed in overlapping streaks and smears, turning into experimental but meticulously documented tests that feed back into Flynn's material ecosystem. Latching onto kernels of inspiration, ideas are reformed and refined: 'it starts to be a proper relationship, where the materials are suggesting things to me, if I'm listening properly'.

A rhythm emerges where several sculptures are simultaneously in progress. 'If I only had one that I was working on, I wouldn't play because I would be more precious,' Flynn reveals. With some complete, the pressure on each new piece lessens and intuition can take over, chasing clues and taking risks and embedding the energy and joy of the process into the vessel's form.

SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Despite the intensity of her studio practice, Flynn is a firm believer in letting work go once it leaves the workshop. Each vessel speaks for itself as it enters new contexts. Connections between works are made material in the various private collections that have gradually accumulated. Flynn greatly values these and other relationships – both personal and professional – that she has built through her career.

Isolation, although key to her practice, can feel disorientating, but Flynn is determined 'to have faith that those hours are going to pay off'. They already have; she has had a number of solo exhibitions since her first at Erskine, Hall & Coe in 2012 and she has been involved in projects and exhibitions worldwide. Having work acquired by the V&A was a definite highlight, as is her position on the *Loewe Foundation Craft Prize* expert panel (Flynn was selected as a finalist for the prize in 2017).

As for the future, her focus remains on each piece as she makes it, with forms and glazes evolving and interacting through each iteration. Come what may, Flynn says, her pots are 'always going to be of a family. They are going to talk to each other. They are going to make sense together because they are all made by me. They are made to be my best'. ■

Sara Flynn, solo exhibition, until 18 July, Erskine, Hall & Coe; etc.art. *Rosa Binias* is a final-year BA (Hons) Ceramics and Glass student at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham. The article was commissioned as part of State Ceramics support of the Emmanuel Cooper Memorial Lecture Series, run jointly by the Crafts Study Centre, 318 Ceramics and the Royal College of Art



ANALYSIS

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Images: Stuart Burford, courtesy of Erskine, Hall & Coe