

To mark the BCB's milestone year, the programme will expand across multiple sites in Stoke-on-Trent, with site-specific commissions at Spode Works, Middleport Pottery, World of Wedgwood and The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery. CR's Annie Le Santo discovers more



## The home of ceramic heritage

At the heart of the *British Ceramics Biennial* (BCB) is the festival hub. Situated in the China Hall of the original Spode factory and extending to Airspace Gallery, the hub hosts an array of exhibitions, workshops, residencies and events, including Peter Jones' Culture Vessel commission *Growing Cultures*, graduate show *Fresh* and new work by Tana West and Eusebio Sanchez.

Group show *AWARD* brings together ten ceramic artists, each competing for £10,000, a sum that has been increased from previous years to mark the BCB's tenth anniversary. Opportunities for guests to engage with ceramics will fill the former factory hall, along with the chance to purchase work and join in informal dialogues and debate. For those inspired to get hands-on, there's open access to tools and materials at the 'Clay Quarter' alongside 'Production Line', a workshop area for demonstration and participation. The interactive elements of the festival hub invite visitors to go beyond the usual level of observation and directly experience the extraordinary material that is clay.

### BRINGING THE INSIDE OUT

Also at Spode Works (in association with *Spode Museum Trust and ACAVA*), will be *Externalising the Archive*, a multimedia project led by Stoke-on-Trent based artist and Professor of Ceramics at Staffordshire University, Neil Brownsword. The site is home to a vast collection of historic plaster moulds, the negative voids of which have facilitated the mass production of

ceramics for centuries. Brownsword aims to shed light on the archive by bringing the 'inside out', and putting the objects back into contemporary consciousness. 'Since 2008 the site has undergone many transitions – the most recent has seen several buildings adapted and demolished, leaving their "skeletal" structure exposed,' explains Brownsword. 'Their internal and external "presence" has several connotations with the moulds in their deconstructed form.'

*'This archive is a unique collection of design history'*

With these ideas in mind, Brownsword will lead the construction of a site-specific intervention created using the old moulds and new castings, along with film, sound and performance. 'I'm not interested in the design data of the moulds but their mechanics, which elucidate the ingenuity and knowledge embedded within their creation,' says Brownsword. Raising awareness of the archives is vital to the project: 'This archive is a unique collection of design history – and as objects associated with labour have received little critical attention. It's important to recognise the phenomenal dexterity within these objects, which remain at risk as the former site undergoes redevelopment.' Ultimately, *Externalising the Archive* connects the material objects back to the knowledge linked to their creation, reinstating the importance of the collection.

spode



## Commemorating companionship

In 2018, Middleport Pottery displayed the World War One commemorative work *Blood Swept Lands: Weeping Window*, a public art installation consisting of thousands of red ceramic poppies, created by artist Paul Cummins and stage designer Tom Piper. For the BCB this year, ceramists Helen Felcey, Joe Hartley and Guillaume Dujat, a multidisciplinary team of artists are building further on these ideas of commemoration during their residency project *Resonating Spaces*.

*‘The conversation between the artists, ceramists and the community is perhaps the most crucial sound to be heard’*

Central to the programme is the collaboration with the Burslem Jubilee Project, a local community based project providing a safe, welcoming and non-judgmental environment for asylum seekers and refugees. ‘We are seeking resonance and what we really want to commemorate,’ Felcey says, explaining how they aspire to ‘encourage a space where people, place and materials come together to form new relationships and meaning.’ The team are working with a filmmaker and sound artist to respond to the site through the artwork and activities.

To do this, the use of sound felt integral to the project – after all, ‘resonance’ refers to the quality of

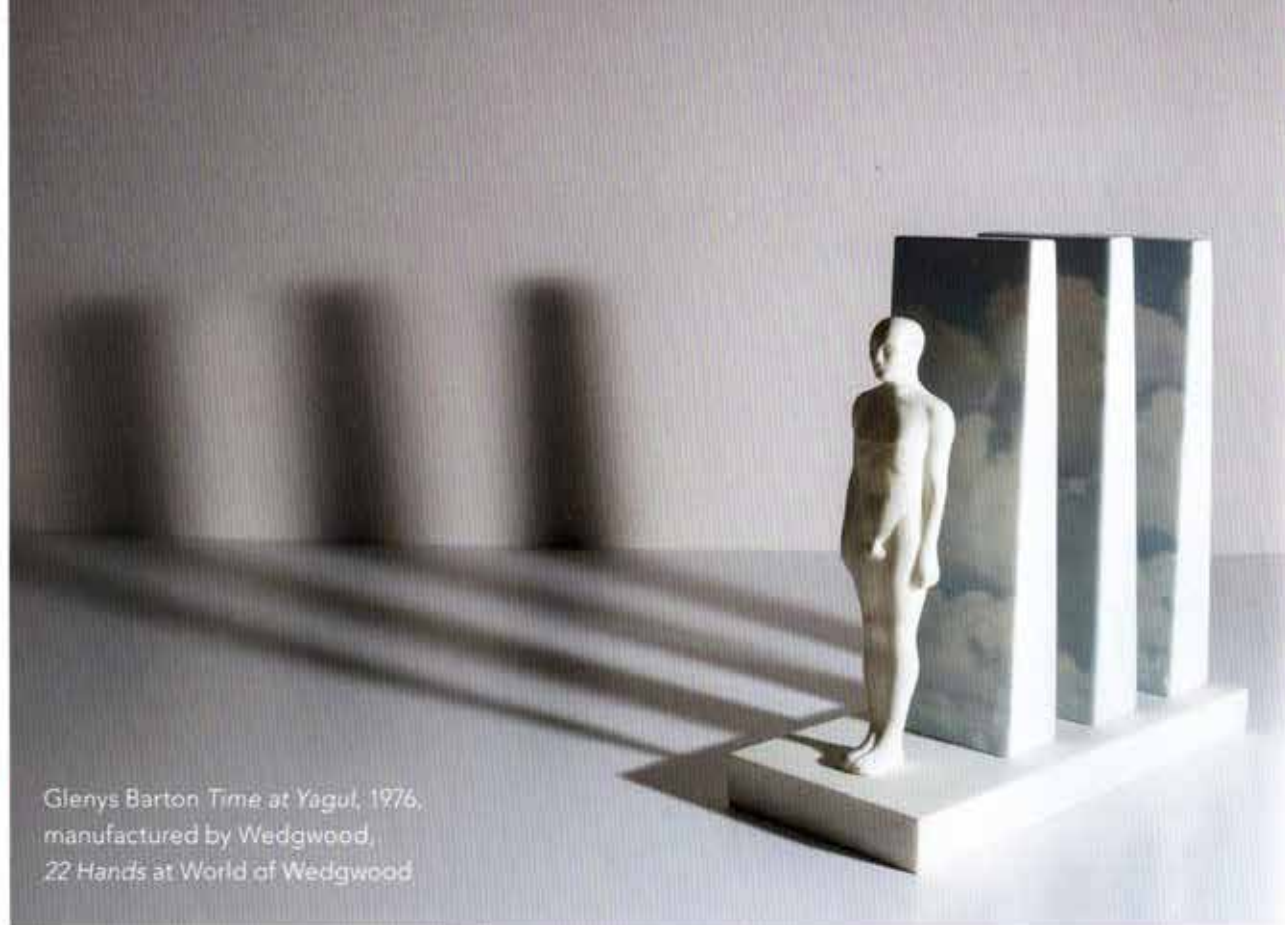
a sound being deep, full and reverberating. A series of structural and sonic works are being constructed on site, made up of both ceramics, (cylindrical joints made by members of the Burslem Jubilee Project) and other materials, such as coppice poles, influenced by photographs of the pottery crate makers found in the archives. ‘We are also considering further ceramic elements that explore resonance in different ways, through form and movement. Initial sound tests have proved to be exciting,’ Felcey reveals.

### COLLECTIVE EXPRESSION

The team have identified a number of hidden spaces on the site – ones that visitors may not usually be encouraged to see – which they are seeking to expose and reveal from a new perspective. *Resonating Spaces* will ‘reactivate’ these locations with creative installations, rediscovering their past and present and most critically – inviting people in.

It seems that a key thread running through the experimental and collaborative programme of events is the importance of togetherness. The conversation between artists, ceramists and the community is perhaps the most crucial sound to be heard, fundamental to every activity. ‘Middleport has a great heritage of workmanship and companionship,’ says Felcey, ‘If you can get to know each other and build genuine trust, there is a point where you suddenly realise your creative potential. This is the real aim – to realise collective potential across people and places. Perhaps this is when you find real resonance.’

Middleport



Glenys Barton *Time at Yagul*, 1976,  
manufactured by Wedgwood,  
*22 Hands* at World of Wedgwood

## Factory as theatre

The number of hands said to handle a single pot during its factory production process at Wedgwood is 22. Using this and the famous factory floor's slip-casting production as a starting point, ceramic artist Duncan Hooson and performance artist Stephanie Buttle are creating work together for the *BCB*'s extended anniversary programme. The site-specific commission *22 Hands* is set to reference, highlight and animate the V&A's Wedgwood collection of the sculptor Glenys Barton. It will take the form of a large-scale intervention with installations and interactive performance work on site at World of Wedgwood.

### STRONG CONNECTIONS

In 1976, Barton designed a number of cast sculptures and plates as a limited edition production range for Wedgwood. She has a keen interest in dance, which she translated into this body of ceramic work, making the figure a reoccurring feature. Both the figurative sculptures and the connections with human relationships inform Hooson and Buttle's concept and creative focus. 'This enquiry, within our interpretation, will be realised through the use of art-directed sets and props that chime with Barton's forms,' Hooson told us, 'and the articulation of the skills of manufacturing ceramics within the community of the factory worker.'

'When I was approached by Barney Hare Duke from the *BCB*, he knew that I was born and raised in Stoke and that I often use the narrative of the city

in my work,' explains Hooson, who was also involved with the *BCB* in 2013 and 2015. 'Both Steph and I will be creating individual and collaborative responses to the site in the run up to the performance. Throughout the residency I will be playing homage to Josiah Wedgwood by wheel-throwing several 2.5 metre 'Guardian' figures, which will echo the quiet pose and enigmatic disposition of Barton's figures.'

As with many of the projects at the *BCB*, the work will be purposefully left unfinished, to be completed by the public who are invited to collectively contribute to the artwork. Visitors are encouraged to 'leave their mark' through the making of sprig-moulded stamps and forms to decorate the surfaces.

*'Throughout the residency I will be paying homage to Josiah Wedgwood by wheel-throwing several 2.5 metre 'Guardian' figures'*

Ideas of subtle links and crossing threads between people's lives, themes that emerge across the festival, resonate back to the single pot being passed through 22 hands on the Wedgwood factory floor. In spirit of this, the performative project aims to honour the skill and people of the manufacturing world, create a unique conversation across the community and celebrate the immense history of Wedgwood.