

All fired up

A new festival aims to lift the fortunes of the ceramics industry. Emma Crichton-Miller reports

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Stoke-on-Trent, a small town in the English Midlands, became the crucible of a revolution in taste, manufacture and marketing. Master potter Josiah Wedgwood helped transform a crude local trade into a wealth-spinning industry, manufacturing luxurious ceramic wares for sale across the world. From the kernel of Wedgwood's own business, an urban landscape and an entire community grew up dominated by "ovens and chimneys", as the novelist Arnold Bennett had it in his 1908 work *The Old Wives' Tale*.

Wedgwood was not the only inspired entrepreneur – Josiah Spode and Thomas Minton were among several others – but his creative energy also encompassed art patronage, social reform, philosophy and scientific inquiry, making Stoke as much a hotbed of new ideas as the engine room of a commercial empire.

For the past half-century, however, Stoke has epitomised post-industrial despondency. The seemingly terminal decline of the potteries, their products out of fashion and their skilled workforces globally uncompetitive, has accelerated in parallel with the demise of local coal mining, tyre production and steel manufacture. The collapse this year of Waterford/Wedgwood, in the latter's 250th year (and despite the mitigating Art Fund prize to the Wedgwood Museum) seemed the final blow to a city that was already reeling.

From October 3, however, Stoke is hosting a new venture. The British Ceramics Biennial is a 10-week festival of contemporary ceramics, kick-starting a five-year programme of fellowships, commissions, education and new ceramics business start-ups. This unexpectedly ambitious series of events, exhibitions and long-term investment has grown out of a much more modest ceramics festival, held annually between 2005 and 2008 to boost the tourist profile of the city. The creative directors, Barney Hare Duke and Jeremy Theophilus, plan a bold mix of initiatives, aiming to break down barriers – barriers between artists and industry; between an older generation of skilled artisans, whose whole lives were intertwined with the fortunes of the potteries, and a younger generation growing up without that sense of purpose and identity.

Theophilus and Hare Duke have enlisted some of today's most thoughtful ceramic artists and designers. Neil Brownsword, Philip Eglin, Stephen



Innovation
Intricate work by CJ O'Neill (above) and 'Prometheus' by Stephen Dixon (below)

Dixon, Robert Dawson and CJ O'Neill, all artists whose work is inspired by the history of pottery and the ceramics industry in Britain, have been commissioned to work on substantial projects. Brownsword's family have worked at Wedgwood since the early 19th century, and he himself started there as an apprentice at 16. He has invited three international ceramic artists to join him at the largest brick clay quarry in Europe, at Ibstock Brick Ltd.

"We are going to work with a shovel and a bucket. We are making a sculpture – I've no idea how it will turn out," he says. "People have been coming here since well before the industrial era for its seams of red clay. I just want to engage people with this wonderful stuff. My first experiences growing up were of digging my hands into Etruria Marl behind my parents' house in Newcastle under Lyme."

As part of a series called "Guerilla Ceramics", O'Neill has worked with young people and a graffiti artist to create a ceramic wall and a range of tableware. In contrast, there will be a display of 300 water pots and ceremonial dishes made by four Indian pottery families from Gujarat and an installation of ceramic work by leading Spanish designer Jaime Hayón.

The future is not entirely bleak: as Theophilus says, "there are more ceramics companies operating in Stoke today than there have ever been – it's just they are all small

and medium-sized enterprises." Clare Twomey, an artist shortlisted for the One-Off Ceramics award, says some of her large-scale installations – of birds modelled from Wedgwood blue jasper or of broken Royal Crown Derby fine bone china – depended on a collaboration with the ceramics industry. "These projects made me realise what a factory is about," she says, "it is a skills base."

Such dialogues have been happening on an informal basis for almost 10 years. Artists such as Charlotte Hodes at Spode, Julian Stair at Baggeridge Bricks or Peter Ting at Royal Crown Derby have seized the opportunities afforded by vast kilns, prodigious archives and technical expertise. And where at first these projects perhaps only benefited the artist, some companies, too, have begun to recognise a new opportunity: this year Royal Crown Derby has introduced two new lines designed by Ken Eastman and Peter Ting. As managing director Hugh Gibson says, "I have always been interested in projects like this – like Eric Ravilious's work with Wedgwood. You get a bit of kudos for helping artists, and then occasionally you hit on something magic you can put in your production line." While it is unlikely that these encounters can turn around an entire industry, it is undeniable that Josiah Wedgwood's original success was rooted in a similar creative daring.

www.britishceramicsbiennial.com

Sale of the week

Blue sky thinking

Sale: Salt II – photographs by Murray Fredericks

photographer Gustave Le Gray.

Location: Hamiltons Gallery, 13 Carlos Place, London W1, tel: +44 (0)20-7499 9493

Date: Until September 11. Images and opening times at www.hamiltonsgallery.com

Need to know: Fredericks, a landscape photographer, likes to be alone. Three times a year, he cycles with a heavily laden trailer into the desolate, salt-covered wastes of Australia's 9,700 sq km Lake Eyre in search of the ultimate in empty spaces. He pitches camp approximately 200km from the nearest farm and 1,000km from Adelaide, the nearest city, before settling in for up to five weeks to photograph the endless, featureless vistas. Fredericks says he aims to take photos that "represent nothing, that simply explore the mind's relationship with space".

Using both a traditional plate camera and the latest digital equipment, he confines the horizon and the landscape to a small portion of the image, devoting the rest to the sky in order to convey a sense of vastness. It is a technique that works brilliantly, resulting in images reminiscent of the haunting seascapes of pioneer French

Highlights: Fredericks returns from each expedition with only a handful of images that meet his exacting standards. Of the 21 trips he has made to Lake Eyre in the past seven years for his "Salt" projects, he claims to have produced just 20 photos with which he is happy. This partly accounts for the fact that the exhibition at Hamiltons contains just six images, another reason being that the two stars of the show each measure close to 13ft in length. Entitled "Salt 304" (detail, below) and "Salt 305", they are each made up from a dozen or more digital photographs that have been seamlessly stitched together to create a perfect panorama.

At £30,000 apiece, the price tags reflect the size. The four other works, each measuring 47in by 58in, are offered at £6,500-£7,500 each. This year, Fredericks and producer Michael Angus made a film, *Salt*, about the photographer's time at Lake Eyre. It won the best documentary short award at the Atlanta Film Festival and can be ordered from the website, www.saltdoco.com.

Simon de Burton

