

Michael Flynn

MICHAEL FLYNN CERAMICS

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MESSUMS WILTSHIRE
Place Farm, Court Street
Tisbury, Salisbury
Wiltshire SP3 6LW

01747 445042
www.messumswiltshire.com

MESSUMS LONDON
28 Cork Street
Mayfair, London
W1S 3NG

020 7437 5545
www.messumslondon.com



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Michael Flynn is one of the principal forces in a new movement of figurative sculpture made of clay that is flowering throughout Europe. From the 29,000-year-old Czech Venus of Dolni Vestonice to Renaissance Italy or 19th century France, the clay figure is one of the most enduring expressions of our common humanity even though, as we have moved through the age of metals, plastics and resins, it has often seemed threatened with extinction.

Although well known in other countries apart from Britain, with pieces in over 40 major collections and several awards under his belt, Flynn is not well known in the UK. This is because he is a traveller who has lived for long periods in Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, America and most recently, China, Taiwan and Korea returning only intermittently to what he regards as his main home – an old carpet warehouse in Cardiff.

Born with a twin brother in Germany in 1947 to Irish parents Flynn spent many holidays on the family farm in County Cork. He left school at 15 and hitchhiked back to Germany but returned to Birmingham art school a year later to study painting. During his time there he took a year out to work as a zookeeper and it is the interaction between human beings and animals and also their common features that has always been a key feature in Flynn's works. Leering pigs, dancing goats and spirited bulls simultaneously express human failings but also their innocence and joie de vivre. He says:

'Although much of my initial inspiration comes from literature or oral traditions, I try to develop my thinking in purely visual form, to avoid and the strictures imposed by words. I am interested in the relationship between humanity and the world that surrounds it; between men and women, between humans and animals and the resultant belief systems that have developed throughout the centuries and in the links that might exist between these systems and ways in which they are manifested today.'

Dance and drama play an important part in his works and early on he often attended rehearsals at the Royal Ballet as well as circuses and contemporary dance performances, sketching to capture the wide variety of subtly observed poses and gestures that make his work so enchanting.

'I always carry a sketchbook on me and I also draw back home the memory of what I saw in my mind,' he says.
'Dance for me is the ultimate expression of life, love and death. You have the dance of the living... the dance of the dead.'

His works subvert paintings by Tiepolo or Titian or later, the tiny porcelain figurines of the 18th century produced in Germany, France, Poland and Scandinavia, making them dance, collide, wrestle, even stand on their heads in flows of unceasing motion; odes to Rococo and Mannerist painting in their sinuous lines and gaiety but edged all the while with a sense of the absurd – even tragedy – when the dances go wrong.

In this show are works from his earliest experimentations with pigmented glazes and raku figures to his later works in wood fired kilns, celadon glazes, salt glazed porcelain and Parian ware. Flynn is a relentless innovator – constantly experimental and curious, he is less interested in finessing one particular technique than making the best use of the resources he finds.

'I never have a strict plan of action – I wait to see what happens,' he says. 'I like to make stuff where I am; to develop a relationship with the clay and glazes that I find there. That is where the dynamic element of my work comes from. I never make anything according to a strict plan; I go with the flow.'

Over the last thirty years Flynn has continually developed his vocabulary focusing on a number of themes and ideas through works that almost always remain table-top in scale. The Mask and Humanity, for instance, refer to the Dionysian rites and the unfettered energy of bacchanial feasts; a subject that Flynn has returned to time and again in his work. The forest is another theme that he regularly returns to.

'The whole of Europe was originally covered in dense forest and although much of it has been cleared over the centuries, the forest remains at the core of many of the religious and social rituals which underpin modern European sensibilities' says Flynn. *'The forest is alive within us despite so many attempts to expunge it.'*

The three Parian ware pieces in this show are mini arcadias inhabited by the kinds of shadowy figures and children you see in Claude or Poussin paintings or read about in the stories of the Brothers Grimm or Morte D'Arthur.

During the 1990s Flynn lived in Germany and was invited by the oldest porcelain factory there, Meissen, to make some sculptures using their special clay made from a secret recipe dating back 300 years. Meissen was the first factory in Europe to produce hard-paste porcelain and the factory delivered their unique material to Flynn's studio, then in Germany. Finding it unsuitable for his technique, however, Flynn added tissue paper to it to make it more malleable. Examples of work formed from this unusual recipe feature in the Cockcrow series in this exhibition, demonstrating the wonderful aesthetic that Flynn forges from throwing caution to the wind with a material normally hallowed for its fragility and taking chances.

Colour is used sparingly in his works, appearing in tiny dabs and streaks on nipples, lips, limbs or in crystalline flows over the surface.

'When I started to practice ceramics, the black and white interplay of raku appealed to me' he said. *'My interest in Baroque theatre and the commedia dell'arte led me to discover the efficiency of colour as an expressive tool. I use it as a means to lead the spectator's eye over the surface of the sculpture, or for its symbolic value. Red for instance, invokes life and passion but also betrayal, danger, wounds or blood.'* He adds: *'The great difficulty in figurative ceramics is to achieve a balance between decorative, aesthetic concerns and intellectual depth, intention and content. That is what I am seeking. I would like my works to resonate with the spectator's own history, to stir their imagination and spark questions, to spur them to construct their own narrative.'*

His mix of tragedy and comedy, expressed through the imaginative interplay of his characters so sensitively modelled they seem almost alive, makes Flynn one of the greatest sculptors in clay working today.

Catherine Milner, Senior Curator, Messums Wiltshire





1
Chorus, 2018
 Wood-fired ceramic
 38.8 x 16.8 x 17.2cm



2

Laughing Rats, 2018

Wood-fired ceramic

22.9 x 27.4 x 12.6cm



3

Hare Woman, 2006

Porcelain

43 x 26 x 26.5cm



4

Dog Dance, 2010

Porcelain

36.7 x 23.8 x 15.8cm



5
The Queen, 2006
Porcelain
33 x 18.5 x 25cm



6
Dancer on the Waves, 2014
 Porcelain
 23.3 x 31 x 16.5cm



7
Fisher Queen 1, 2005
 Stoneware
 48.4 x 24.4 x 16cm



8
**Potato Boy and the
Three Mothers, 2013**
Porcelain
58.5 x 47 x 16cm

Virtually all of the great art of the past five centuries has been eclectic. This goes for all forms of artistic practice, from paintings, sculptures, and buildings to pottery, dresses, and cutlery design. The best things refer to, nod at, make comment on, and steal from the things that came before them. It isn't really possible to do otherwise. Whether honouring or caricaturing the past, artists can't really escape it. But some do eclecticism more than others, and with such majestic flair that they make the history of art their own, re-forming it after their own image. August Rodin, Pablo Picasso, and Francis Bacon were such artists. Michael Flynn is another.

Most of Flynn's career has been based on human and animal forms, which he has interpreted through the ageless idiom of the ceramic figurine. Immediately, this implies a period other than our own. He outlined his eclectic outlook in a discussion I had with him some years ago, making it clear that

'the basis to all my work is to look at the way ideas have been expressed historically'.

And unlike so many ceramic artists who came to full maturity in the Postmodern decades, Flynn has never seen the point in using historical styles to poke fun at the past. He has always been interested in the Meissen factory, for example, especially in the seminal first decades of production in the early 18th century. For him, this interest is intense and serious:

'I am not making fun of Meissen. I am not working ironically. I take images and ideas which have one meaning, one iconography, then I change the context by putting them into the 21st century'.

It is as though the aim of his work is to eliminate the barriers between past and present, in order to say something universal about existence.

The artist came to national attention in the 1980s with his large figures, birds and animals, which broke new ground technically and aesthetically. The Rembrandesque surfaces of these works, muddled and painterly, were made possible by his radical use of the raku process. Invented in Japan, raku typically gives a crackled and grizzled surface, achieved through the rapid firing and cooling of clay objects. It trades on immediacy, and Flynn was the master of this elegant speediness. Into the 1990s, he somewhat bravely moved away from raku, which by now he was internationally celebrated for, and controversially migrated to porcelain. He has remained with this most enigmatic of materials ever since.

In some respects porcelain implies history before the artist does anything with it. Flynn acknowledges this, and that his idiom implies a certain vision of life:

'[my works] can be very slow pieces, slow to reveal themselves. This is not really in fashion. It seems to me now that the world is into immediacy. Quite a lot of art at the minute can be spoken, as it were. This is quite interesting, but I am into art as object, art that needs to be confronted, art as physical manifestation.'

He is right. He never really has been in fashion, and since 1750 neither has porcelain. His work is about the timelessness of human relations, as expressed through the interaction of bodies. This was also the central concern of artists through the Baroque and Rococo, and it was usually expressed through dramatic movement. It was about the dance of life, and it is this that is at the heart of Flynn's output.

In some respects Flynn's art is about the delicacy and wit of the Rococo modelers. He admires Johann Joachim Kaendler of Meissen, and Franz Anton Bustelli of the Nymphenburg factory, for example. Like them, he has a very particular and quite limited repertoire of characters in his work, most of whom are derived from Meissen. He told me that

'The subject matter interests me in Meissen – the Harlequin, the commedia dell'arte, in a way it has a low kind of humour, monkeys, parrots, Harlequins looking up women's dresses and the like; I like the way it has been elevated to something high. Superficially you have this beautiful porcelain object, beautifully glazed and so on, but after that you can see it can be a strange, often jokey subject matter – you have one possibility, and it is subverted by another.'

But there is a far darker side to Michael Flynn. He has captured the human spirit by fusing this very fragile, witty elegance with a harsh cruelty. Bustelli and Kaendler might provide the movement and energy, but this is tempered by a darker iconography that owes more to Titian and Goya. More than anyone working with the figure at this time – and I include all media here – he captures the fundamental contrariness of life.

Swiss writer and museum professional Isabelle Naet Galuba recently summed up Flynn's character and outlook in a book which accompanied an exhibition in France:

'He is a cultivated man full of humour, passionate about literature and a polyglot. These aren't his only qualities. His oeuvre exudes a sensuous richness, the possibilities of narrative, and countless philosophical threads. Interestingly, he himself delights in multiple interpretations of his work.'

A perfect summing-up of one of the most important figurative artists of our times, in any idiom.

Paul Greenhalgh, Director of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

(1) Isabelle Naet Galuba, *Michael Flynn: Le spectacle de la vie*, 2017, Geneva, Galerie de l'ancienne poste, p.3, translated by the author.



9

Potato Boy and the Three Mothers 2, 2013

Porcelain

43.5 x 49 x 25cm



10
Ship of Fools, 1998
 Raku
 49 x 36 x 25cm





11
Grinding Coffee, 2006
 Stoneware
 42.5 x 19 x 12cm



12
Two Throttled Cocks, 2012
 Porcelain
 49.8 x 17.5 x 16.5cm



13
Fisher Queen 2, 2006
 Stoneware
 56.5 x 20.5 x 14cm





14
Fisher Folk, 2007
 Porcelain
 43.8 x 22.3 x 18cm



15
Leda, 2014
 Porcelain
 23.6 x 24.8 x 16cm



16
Awakening, 2008
Porcelain
36 x 24 x 17.5cm



17
The Maak, 2010
Raku
28.8 x 27.5 x 22cm



18
Humanity, 2018
 Porcelain
 32.5 x 31 x 17.5cm



19
Song of the Griffon, 2017
 Wood-fired ceramic
 57.5 x 38 x 22cm





21
Cockcrow, 2002
Porcelain
57.9 x 14 x 27.5cm



22
Cockcrow, 1990
Raku
32.7 x 24.2 x 18.5cm



23
Cockcrow, 1992
Raku
42.3 x 13 x 14cm



24

The Child and his Mother, 2009

Stoneware

32.5 x 34 x 24.5cm





25
Shopping, 2007
Stoneware
32.5 x 18 x 85cm



26
Joined at the Hips, 2007
Stoneware
34.5 x 21.5 x 17.5cm



27
Two Dogs and a Cat, 2016
 Stoneware
 49 x 42.5 x 27cm



28
Out of the Ocean, 2019
 Stoneware
 53.5 x 29 x 30cm



29

To Be (a Carrot, a Snake), 2015

Porcelain

53 x 29 x 19.5cm



30

To Be (A Potato), 2015

Porcelain

39.2 x 21.2 x 15.8cm



31
At the Forest's Edge 4, 2012
 Parian
 43 x 25 x 24.5cm



32
At the Forest's Edge 5, 2012
 Parian
 53 x 27 x 16cm



33
At the Forest's Edge 6, 2012
 Parian
 47 x 24 x 16cm



34
From Forest Series, 2010
 Stoneware
 47.5 x 18.5 x 19cm

Michael Flynn

Born in 1947

Member of the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC/AIC)

SELECTED MAJOR COLLECTIONS

National Museum of Korea, Seoul

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Crafts Council of Great Britain, London

Ariana Museum, Geneva

Nordfjeldsk Museum of Art and Industry, Trondheim

Westerwald Ceramics Museum Hoehr-Grenzhausen

Nievergelt Collection, Zurich

Ceramic Museum, Posio

Mimar Sinan Fine Art Museum, Istanbul

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond

Museum of Porcelain, Meissen Manufactory, Meissen

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art, Norwich

Grassi Museum, Leipzig

Museum of Art and Design (MAD), New York

Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Miami

Taoxichuan International Art Centre, Jingdezhen

Yingge Ceramics Museum, New Taipei

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1999 Ceramic Focus, Contemporary Applied Arts, London

2000 Recent Ceramic Sculpture, Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York

Animal Sculpture, Galerie fuer Zeitgenössische Ceramics, Vienna

2001-2 Michael Flynn, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

2003 Michael Flynn, Kunsthalle Wil

2004 Narrative Figures, Ceramic Focus, Contemporary Applied Arts, London

Michael Flynn Les Parours de Ceramique, Carouge

2006-7 Michael Flynn, Craft Series, Glyn Vivian Museum, Swansea

2007 Michael Flynn, Orpheus Gallery, Limassol

2008 Michael Flynn, Marianne Eggimann, Nathalie Schnider-Lang, Silvia Siems, gallery Frederik Boll Horst, Freiburg

2009 “Forest” Contemporary Applied Arts, London

2010 “Bez Powrotu / No Return”, Galeria Szkla into Ceramiki, Wroclaw

2011 “Faces in the Forest” National Museum in Wroclaw

2012 “Forest as Theatre”, Westerwald Museum, Hoehr-Grenzhausen
“Spor Porcelain & Magic”, Michael Flynn Monika Patuszynska, Gallery Brant Bjerg, Nakke

2014 “Transition & Resonance”, Aberystwyth Art Centre, Wales
“Michael Flynn & Monika Patuszyńska”, Puls Gallery, Brussels

2015 “A Fine Figure”, Michael Flynn, Lucy Meagher, Anne marie Robinson, Slomon Gallery, Dublin

2017 Michael Flynn, “Le Spectacle de la Vie”, Galerie L’Ancienne Post, Toucy

2019 Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale Korea, on-site exhibition, Icheon
“Michael Flynn, Themes and Focuses”, Makers Guild in Wales, Cardiff

2020 Michael Flynn, Messums Wiltshire, Tisbury

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1999 Human Figure, Art Forum Kirchberg
European Pottery, Westerwald price, Höhr-Grenzhausen
50 Years of Welsh Art, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff
British Ceramics, Bandol

2000 Contemporary decorative Arts, Sotheby’s, London
Born of Earth, Garth Clark Gallery, New York
Porcelain of Meissen, Grassi Museum, Leipzig
Porcelain Another Way, Walbrzych Museum
European Sculpture Today, Kunstreff, Kunglberg, Vienna

New Quingi (celadon), Hap Gallery, Beijing, China
International Raku, Rufford Craft Centre, Nottingham (& touring)

2001 Heiteres figuren, Galerie Marianne Heller, Heidelberg
Ceramic Figures, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
The Unexpected, Contemporary Decorative Arts, Sotheby’s, New York

2002 Salt Glaze Pottery, Handwerkkammer, Koblenz
Form u glaze, Westerwald Ceramics Museum Höhr-Grenzhausen
British Crafts Council at Sofa Chicago
The Cutting Edge, Sotheby’s, London
Visiting Artists at the Clay Studio, Philadelphia

2012 Nina Hole Friends & Fire Mates, Danish Ceramics Museum, Grimmerhus
Porcelain Another Way

2011 Galeria Szkla i Ceramiki BWA Wroclaw

2013 Porcelain Another Way

2012 Galeria Szkla i Ceramiki BWA, Wroclaw
New Art, VZKF, Moosburg
Figure, Millennium Arts Centre, Portadown
Figurative, KeramkmuseumWesterwald

2014 Centred, Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin

2015 Show Case, Contemporary Applied Arts, London
Figuratives, Terra, Delft
Fragile, National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

2016 Terre,Terre, Biennale de la Ceramique
Contemperain, Brussels

2016-17 Cats vs Dogs., Keramion, Frechen

2017 Are You Interested in Bodies? Sentinel Gallery, Wivenhoe, Essex
Touchstone, Farmleigh Gallery, Dublin and touring

2018 New Orientalia, Yingge Ceramic Museum, New Taipei

2019 Kunstkamer, Galerie Terra, Delft
All that’s Gold does Glitter, 2019 Art Macau, Macau



35

Fish, 2000

Porcelain

16.5 x 14 x 28.7cm