

## **The Seto Monogatari Project – Chris McHugh Ceramics Ireland**

I first visited Seto in 2015 as an artist in residence participating in the city's ceramic and glass exchange programme. This pottery centre, one of the six ancient kiln sites of Japan, may be compared to Stoke-on-Trent, Britain's ceramics heartland, and is twinned with Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital. Pottery has been produced in Seto since at least the fourteenth century, and the wooded hills surrounding the city conceal hundreds of Muromachi period (1336-1573) kiln sites. However, it was through the ceramic novelty figurine industry that the city managed to reinvent itself after the Second World War. This was supported by Douglas MacArthur's General Headquarters, which governed Japan from the end of the war in 1945 until 1952. A proportion of the products made for export were consequently back-stamped with 'Made in Occupied Japan' during this period.

This is a shared history, for it was largely the West, and particularly the USA, that commissioned and bought the products of Seto's factories and workshops. The huge range and diversity of the items made constitute a material record of changing tastes and design trends in the latter half of the twentieth century. A visit to the sample store of one of the remaining factories reveals serried ranks of novelty figurines of all shapes and sizes, languishing in the dark and dust. Mary Magdalene, Saint Francis of Assisi and the Child of Prague are lined up cheek by jowl with various iterations of Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Dorothy, the Cowardly Lion and the Tin Man from Disney's *The Wizard of Oz* seem to walk down the Yellow Brick Road together, watched over by an eyrie of American bald eagles. One can easily imagine these legions coming alive every night during the witching hour to enact their miniature parts in nonetheless epic stories and titanic struggles, only to resume their ossified waiting in the morning. These samples stare indifferently, or perhaps expectantly, into the abyss of time, silent embodiments of human endeavour, tacit skill and global capitalism.

Although these novelties speak of cuteness, fantasy and nostalgia, the business was pragmatic and unsentimental. Built on the premise of a weak yen, it reached its peak in the early 1980s. Later, during Japan's 'bubble economy', currency appreciation against the dollar made exports more difficult. As most novelty manufacturing in Seto was done under the auspices of foreign retailers, the makers did not develop their own brand identities in the way European companies like Meissen and Wedgwood had done. As a result of this, as well as its comparative recency, the novelty industry occupies a marginal status within the history of Japanese ceramics. Where once there were hundreds of makers in Seto, now only a handful continue to trade, and former factory sites are steadily being demolished.

Through these threatened remains of the novelty industry, we can feel the absent presence of the generations of workers who often toiled through the night to fulfil orders. It is they who shaped the clay, made the moulds, poured the slip, loaded the kilns, and decorated the bisque ware. Without the moulds, it would take an impressive feat of reverse engineering to reproduce these figurines. The number of model and mould makers in Seto is decreasing and those involved in the heyday of the industry are now in their seventies and eighties. Once the tacit skills and lived practice of making dies out, and the remaining moulds crumble, only the figurines themselves will remain, as cherished heirlooms, or as malingerers in the doldrums of

charity shops and internet auction sites. Detached from their historical context and lived experience, these items will eventually become the subject of archaeology.

SetoMonogatari, the title of the series of work I am displaying in Ceramics Ireland this year, is a portmanteau word I formed from setomono, the historical term for pottery made in Seto, and monogatari, meaning story in Japanese. People from Seto are also referred to as setomono. These works aim to raise awareness of the city's novelty heritage, preserving a glimpse of a community and site in flux. They are also autobiographical in that they materialise my encounter with the place and its people in an enduring ceramic form. A process of assemblage and collage is used to suggest a layering of time and material. Plaster moulds, borrowed from former factories, are reanimated and reused. Photographic imagery, applied as digital ceramic decals, records Seto's changing materiality through time. The city's often ramshackle pottery buildings tend to be clad with rusty corrugated zinc sheeting. My most recent pieces have been slipcast from sawn and stacked plaster moulds taken from sections of this material.

Like many of the novelty figurines made there, these pieces have a whimsical and humorous quality, exploring narrative and material storytelling. They take inspiration from the mythical Japanese treasure ship, or Takarabune, itself often reproduced as a novelty, which was piloted through the heavens by the Seven Lucky Gods. Where once factories in Seto made products designed in the West for American and European markets, the remaining ones have started to diversify and cater for Asian or domestic customers, sometimes producing anime merchandise. There has been a shift in soft power and cultural ascendancy. Western cuteness has been replaced by Asian kawaii. My work owes as much to the unconscious influences of the likes of Studio Ghibli as it does to the fantastic village caskets and menagerie teapots of Ian Godfrey.

Seto's novelty culture is not only something of which the Japanese should be proud, it is ceramic heritage of international significance. The role it played in regeneration and the fostering of international understanding after the Second World War is not to be underestimated. Remembering and recognising this culture should not merely be a process of cataloguing loss, it is also about celebrating a pivotal chapter in Japanese history and attempting to maintain, and make relevant, the skills and knowledge which enabled it.