

'Corona Formation' (detail), 2010, slip-trailed and fused bone china, with stg silver supports, terrazzo base, approximate 26 x 22 x 8 cm



'Organic Modular Construction', 2010, slipcast and hand-carved bone china, with stg silver supports, terrazzo base, 20 x 21 x 8 cm

Translucent Permutations

BONE CHINA CONSTRUCTIONS BY CHRIS WIGHT

Chris Wight's work not only attracts collectors, but also the interest of architects and interior designers who envision diverse applications in other fields, such as lighting, furniture, screens and partitions. Text by Ian Wilson.



'Curvilinear Construction 1', 2010, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china, terrazzo base, approximate 30 x 45 x 28 cm



'Curvilinear Construction 2', 2010, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china, terrazzo base, approximate 19 x 22 x 15 cm

THE passion which compelled Chris Wight to spend many of his childhood hours lying on the ground scrutinising ants and other insects and lying in his bed observing the changing shadows which the street-lights projected on his bedroom curtains, today still finds expression in his bone china, where those early enthusiasms are revealed in a preoccupation with magnifying the minute and an enduring fascination with light and shade and translucency.

As an undergraduate student of Surface Pattern at the then Staffordshire Polytechnic, Wight was making the thinnest possible paper within which he trapped opaque and semi-opaque elements. Later, while studying for an MA in Ceramics at the same institution and working with reduction-fired porcelain, he became so enthralled with the "white purity" of bone china, he wanted to make hugely ambitious pieces for which he still lacked the technical ability. That shortcoming has been confronted during years of meticulous and innovative devotion to the beautiful, recalcitrant material which is able to reward beyond expectation and to confound even the most conscientious dedication.

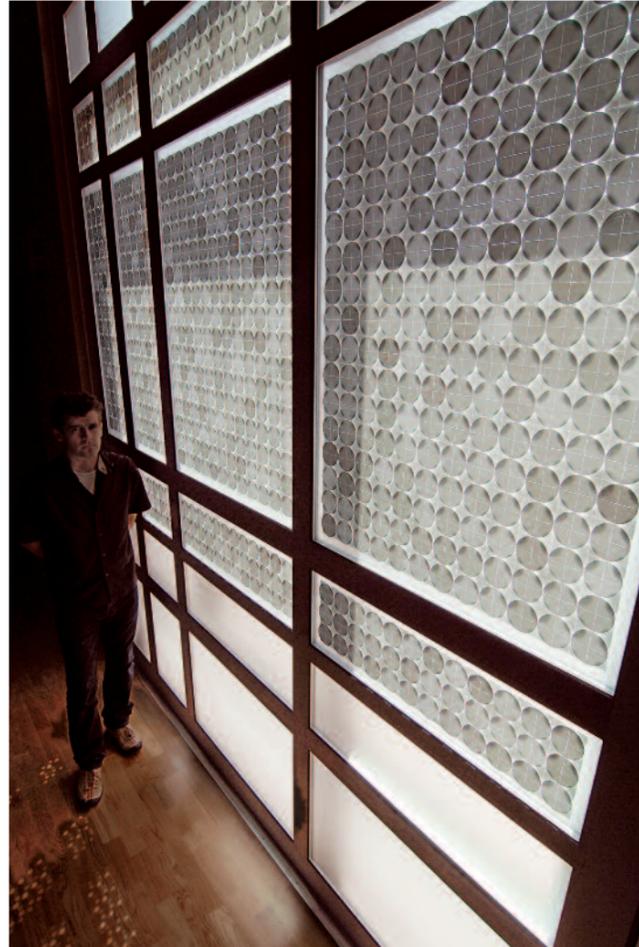
Wight's pair of chapel doors for the New Minster School in Southwell, Nottinghamshire, which measure four metres in height, six metres in length and weigh several tonnes, stands as proof that youthful aspirations – the seed that started growing in his student-mind of making 'something really big, like a bone china wall' – can be accomplished. This major commission also evidences an attention to detail which borders on the heroic and is seen in the care attendant on the production of the 3,500 bone china tiles which are held between sheets of tempered glass. To secure the luminosity he desired, these little circular tiles had to be wafer-thin and this is affected by their position in the kiln, and, despite the

'Curvilinear Construction 2' (detail)





'Cross-hair Screen', 2010, slipcast bone china discs encased in toughened glass, acrylic and stainless steel, each panel 198 x 60 cm



'Chapel Doors' for the New Minster School, Southwell, Nottinghamshire, UK, bone china, toughened glass, aluminium framework, each 4 x 3 m



'Tetrapod Forms', 2010, slipcast, hand-carved bone china, terrazzo base, approximate 16 x 22 x 15 cm

numerous precautions, such as checking the kiln-shelves with a spirit level, no fewer than a thousand were lost during firing. Any attempted patching-up of tiny splits is not possible with bone china, as this is a clay with a remarkably high memory which re-affirms itself in the kiln, thus the four points of the delicately incised "hairline cross" which each tile bears, had to be "secured" with a downward prick to prevent the cuts running to the edge.

The Oriental aesthetic ethos is one to which Wight feels a particular response and his work has been successfully shown in Japan, thus it is in no way surprising that, like the "shoji" – the traditional rice-paper screens found in Japanese interiors – the sliding chapel doors filter the light and, visually, have a strong feeling of the sections being framed by gunmetal-grey aluminium-profile transoms and mullions. Seeing them being opened and shut, and watching the shifting patterns of transmitted light and shade, evoke a powerful sensation of disclosure, of their fulfilling a function of concealing or revealing a sacred space, a role confirmed by their having been blessed by the Archbishop of York.

The much smaller "Curvilinear Forms" are built with slab-rolled, bone china, and these "impossible structures", assembled without the aid of supporting frameworks and armatures, can only be achieved with waterjet-cutting, an industrial process which Wight is committed to using creatively. In his "Artist's Statement" Wight mentions a strand within his oeuvre that focuses on "iconic" objects from his childhood, and it would seem that these have materialised in several of the "Curvilinear Constructions". The shapes making up this series, with their seemingly intricate inter-linkings, might remind the viewer of interpretations of molecular arrangements, but are also unexpectedly and light-heartedly humorous, evoking images of a toy slotted together by means of the little notches present in the various components, recalling memories of aircraft kits fashioned from balsa-wood. These notches allow Wight to present flat ceramic elements in numerous configurations and at a vast range of angles, multiplying the possibilities for the play of light and shadows.

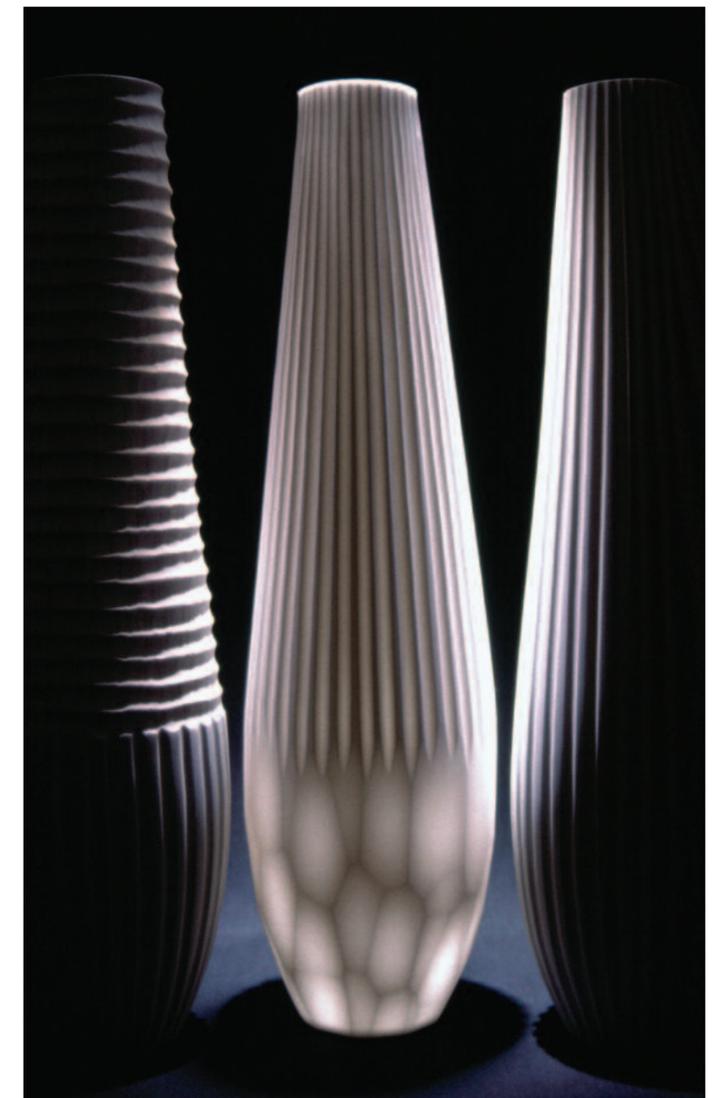
Careful contemplation reveals that some of the little slits remain empty, implying the potential for joining the elements in all manner of different fashions, and this points to a complexity that counterbalances – without impugning – the "straightforwardness" of the associations with juvenile playthings. However, it must be recognised that this is a knowing, sophisticated and adult homage, one which relocates the childhood object within the sphere of modern abstract sculpture.

The *Corona Formations*, named after the "Crown Halo" which is the harbinger of the many-coloured, flashing luminosity known as the Aurora Borealis or "northern lights", and *Ring Form* are both fashioned from thousands of small slip-trailed forms which are assembled in layered circles around a template, and then glaze-bonded. The sheen of the glaze is later removed by acid-etching gel and the completed forms are held aloft by slender silver supports that rise from polished concrete bases within which Wight has trapped tiny shards of bone china. The plinths are immensely satisfying objects in themselves, and their surfaces recall the effects which ceramic artists like David Binns and Felicity Aylieff have achieved with the use of aggregates. *Ring Form* appears to be holding in stasis the potential movement inherent in the myriad little shapes, reminiscent of sprouting seeds or spermatozoa, and it is as if the light passing through them is about to awake the motionless, ice-white clay into the squirming, wriggling activity of a shoal of elvers.

Wight's slipcast, handcarved *Biolith* forms, which stand



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'Organic Modular Construction' (detail)



'Curvilinear Construction', 2010, slab-rolled, waterjet-cut bone china, terrazzo base, black bodystain, approximate 30 x 45 x 28 cm

on similar cast concrete bases, recall, by the elegant precision of their execution, the marine-inspired *Systema Naturae* by the Australian glass artist Kevin Gordon. However, Wight is adamant that although much of his opus might remind the viewer of natural objects, there is indisputably no sense of "copying" from nature; he is wholly without interest in this type of duplication, nor does he feel that the character of his medium will "allow" it. He is a maker attuned not only to the temperament of his chosen clay, wanting the lines and shapes which he creates to reflect its fluid qualities, but he also responds to the fact that 50 percent of a recipe for this china is made up biological material – bone ash.

Wight is currently engaged in creating a series of forms entitled "Colonies", in which he has extended the themes from the "Curvilinear Constructions" but with the focus now on groups of organisms living and growing together. There is an excitement – a visual frisson – in seeing how his newer work introduces black porcelain and black bodystain mixed with bone china slip into his more usual all-white palette. These pieces are to be presented on black glass to enhance the play of shadows and reflections.

Chris Wight is an artist profoundly alert to the great networks of inter-relatedness within the universe we occupy and cites as an example the visual similarities which are shared between the whorls on our finger-prints, the markings on water-washed, wind-blown sand and clouds in a mackerel sky. He has chosen as his medium of expression a material whose stubborn, testing characteristics set it apart from other clays, for it has a tendency to crumble, is almost never thrown on the wheel and, when in the kiln, displays a penchant for buckling, a proclivity towards distortion. It is for reasons such as the above that it is one of the materials least used by ceramic artists. However, to quote the artist himself: 'Through time I have come to understand the nature of the clay and I now relish the constant challenges it presents. Still, a tension exists between the clay's constraints and my intent as an artist to counter or exploit them in order to reveal its inherent beauty and demonstrate its perhaps unexpected versatility.' It is precisely in this arena where the uncompromising vision of this maker is seeking resolutions which both defy and accommodate the strictures of his material, that Chris Wight's oeuvre declares its unique and impressive stature.

Ian Wilson

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'Ring Form', 2010, slip-trailed and fused bone china, 26 x 20 x 8 cm