

SPA spring exhibition

BY LEONIE GARRETT

Our destination was the first day of the SPA exhibition at Milton of Crathes near Banchory. We met at Edzell and Fran Marquis drove me over the dramatic Cairn O' Mount road, seeing a soaring red (or black?) kite on route.



The gallery has a great location, just east of the town, on the banks of the Dee. Old mill buildings give character to the place and there is plenty of parking.

Inside, the exhibition room has good natural lighting and a beautiful view over the river and trees. Looking at the display, I was struck by the diverse range of ceramics. Firstly, I was drawn to Kenneth Tonge's wall hangings, with their complex patterns and colours. Then to Adriana Sambrano's exuberant flowers, some with the elusive lustre glazes. Also I was impressed by Brian Wheeler's cool and stylish leaf vessels and Fran Marquis's delicate, textured cups and vase. Alternative firing techniques were well represented by such as Iain Campbell's groups of vessels with personality and Rona Slevin's numbered raku pieces. I admired the large platter and vessel by Val Burns. All of these were to my liking, but with around 30 members exhibited, there would be something to most people's taste.

In general, I thought the ceramics made a good display but as this is a review, I feel obliged to mention some downsides to what I saw, regarding the set up of the exhibition as a whole. Firstly, I had hoped that this would

be a ceramics-only event and I was a little disappointed to see SPA sharing the space with unconnected paintings, sculpture and jewellery. The layout seemed to favour the paintings, with the free-standing pieces on plinths kept at low levels, presumably so as not to obscure the view of the paintings on the main wall. I prefer to see ceramics at hip level or above as I like to get a good look without having to bend down, (unless they are robust and massive piece, intended to be seen from above). Also, I understand the fragile and valuable nature of the stuff! As a consequence of this, some pieces looked crammed in and there was little separation between makers. No doubt that I am biased as a potter, but I think the ceramic work merited it's own space and could have then made more impact displayed alone (and consequently perhaps made more sales), especially as the exhibition only runs for one month.

Further, there was no heating on and we were cold. Again, I was surprised as this was the first day, probably with maximum footfall. Visitors may be more likely to buy if they feel comfortable and are able to take their time



looking. That said, I don't envy the difficult decisions many business have to make in these strange times. Fortunately we were able to cross the courtyard where we had a hearty lunch and warmed up.

Time passed and I found myself asking what is an exhibition for? Is it just sales or a chance for people to view the work as an experience in itself? Last year we visited the York Art Gallery for me to see the pots of Patrick Sargent in the permanent collection and also a temporary exhibition of Lucie Rie. Here the work was beautifully displayed in an amazing building. I had to leave eventually! The ceramics belong to various collectors so this was not about shopping for anyone. My experience was all about looking. But this exhibition was one with a substantial entry fee, which could limit the numbers of people that view it. So it may be a generous private gallery owner who allows the public to have extended viewing without paying, but that generosity shows a real appreciation of the wider social value of art.

Images on this page, from top to bottom: Adriana Sambrano, Kristine Blackbourn, Fran Marquis and Jim Bassett, Michelle Lowe, Kenneth Tonge.