

The Future of Ceramic Design

Students' Response

Ceramics (Full-time) Student Representative

February 2008

1). The lack of consultation.

The recommendation states “for the past five years the undergraduate pathway of BA (Hons) Design in Ceramics and Ceramic Design has been under scrutiny.” What form did this scrutiny take?

A review was announced in September (2007), but did not seem to actually materialize. A review meeting had been scheduled with the ceramics staff on Monday 4th (February), but was cancelled, and the next day the recommendation was announced to the staff. It came as a shock, both to staff and students.

Compared to the First Year and H&C reviews, which were discussed in Wednesday's Board of Studies meeting, the lack of contact and consultation with the Ceramics department in the supposed Ceramics review, is in stark contrast.

The review has also not, as far as I am aware, looked at any of the underlying *causes* for the low application numbers into ceramics.

As I understand it, a few years ago the majority of students entering the course were school-leavers from Western Scotland. This is no longer the case today, with the majority of the students being from wider a-field in the UK, other countries, and students not enrolling straight from school/mature students.

The main reason, however, seems to be lack of marketing of both the full-time and part-time courses.

2). The lack of marketing/advertising of the courses

The reason given for the phasing out of the ceramics degree is the low number of applications to the course. This cannot be disputed. We are, however, not satisfied that the School has done what it can to promote the course.

The recommendation states, (my italics): “...despite the *continuing best efforts of the academic staff and the School's marketing team*, the application dropped...”

We cannot believe that the promotion of the Ceramics courses are the *best efforts* of a marketing team with 13 employees, and we can only commend the efforts of our extremely hard-working and committed academic staff.

We asked to meet with the marketing team, to find what had actually been done, but this was refused. They promised to write a report for us, but they have not.

Therefore, the only evidence I can give is the experiences of current students, (who, after all, have gone through the whole searching/application process). There are many examples; I will cite just a few.

~In the five years since the start of the part-time distance learning course, only *one* advert has been placed in a ceramic journal/magazine (the Ceramic Review). This is where many of the current students found out about the course; the rest through word of mouth.

~When one does a Google search for 'part-time ceramics degree UK', GSA's course doesn't even come up! The same is true for 'ceramics course/degree UK'. This is the first thing many people do when searching for a course; the fact that the course doesn't come up means many potential applicants are being missed.

~A current 3rd-year student, was taken to every other department except Ceramics on an open day. It was only when she asked specifically to see Ceramics, that she was shown around. I am sure this is not a unique incident.

~Students at the Newcastle College ceramics course were told not to apply to the GSA ceramics degree unless it was their first choice, since it was so difficult to get in. Therefore, for example, out of a class of 24 (the biggest class in a long time) it was only the top two students in the Newcastle College ceramics class who applied to Glasgow, i.e. 2 of only 4 direct entry students, (one of whom won the college prize for most consistent excellence and the other the prize for most improvement in ceramics 2003/04). This example also counteracts the fear that the low application numbers automatically equate with lower standards, and put GSA's academic reputation at risk - if only the top students are applying it can hardly harm the reputation.

~Archie McCall went himself to Aberystwyth last year to promote the course. It seems rather odd to me, that when the school has a marketing team, the Course Leader has to take this upon himself, and out of his own initiative. The part-time course is unique, not only in the UK, but in Europe! It fills a need, as many of the students have testified to in writing, and if people only knew about it, I am *convinced* that there would be applicants.

~The part-time course has only been running for 5 years. For a course that takes 8 years to complete, it could be argued that this is not enough time for it to gain a reputation and become established.

~A member of the 2007 graduating class recounts that several people said, at both the Degree show and New Designers, that they either had heard Ceramics in Glasgow was closing down, or didn't even know it existed - whilst the management may not deal in rumours, other people listen to them and with no rebuttal from the GSA, these rumours will obviously have an impact on applications.

~In 2006, when the Ceramics Degree Show was still held in the Haldane Building, a request was made, through SSCC and BofS, for better signage to direct people to the show, as it was the only part of the Show that was outside the main campus. The result was a hand written piece of A4 paper tied to the railings of St Aloysius. "Best efforts"?

3) The bigger picture

As everyone is well aware, GSA is the only place in Scotland that offers a degree in Ceramics. This position presents both responsibility and opportunity.

~Denying students, both Scottish and otherwise, the opportunity to study Ceramics at degree level, is not only an injustice towards the individuals, but to the whole field of Ceramics in Scotland. As Alex Leckie and Alexander Moffat say in the Sunday Herald, (17th February, 2008):

“If ceramics are removed from the school, as they have been in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee, it will be the death knell of the craft in Scotland, according to Leckie. "No child in Scotland will be able to get a ceramics degree here, so it will have knock-on effects," he said. "Galleries will have fewer exhibitions of ceramics, there will be no ceramics to add to national collections and, generally speaking, the ordinarily public won't be educated to take any interest in ceramics. It is incredibly sad."

One of Scotland's most renowned artists and former head of painting at GSA, Alexander Moffat, said the threat to the ceramics degree is part of a bigger malaise within all art schools. "Ceramics has always been a Cinderella subject," he said. "In any university if a subject, even an important subject, doesn't attract students, it doesn't make good business sense. This is the problem. We really should be approaching this from a completely different point of view. Should we have a ceramics department in Scotland? Obviously we should. We should be fighting for it instead of shutting it down to save money."

~This recommendation comes at a time when many feel Ceramics –both within the School and in general – is at the start of a (for want of a better word) revival. In the Department, there is a vibrancy and enthusiasm that was somewhat lacking when I started the course in 2004. This is due to the hard work and commitment of the staff. To quote an excerpt from an email for Emilka Radlinski, who is a transfer student, doing a Masters at Australian National University:

“...the solution is to put more money into ceramics education rather than the opposite, and to encourage makers to write about their work and about what they see happening in ceramics, i.e. the development of the medium and its conceptual use, and to make more active links between departments - something Bill is doing with the claymation and glass slumping classes, as well as the printing. Welcoming students from other departments into ceramics is also a very positive step, as is ceramics students working with mixed media, on community projects (like the roundel commission) or running open art classes. If you look at the quality of the exciting contemporary work coming from Korea, Japan and China, Korea in particular, you can see they are countries where ceramics is a deeply ingrained part of the culture and is supported accordingly.” (16th February, 2008).

~One reason for the decline in applicants is the discontinuation of exposing young people to ceramics in Schools and Foundation Courses. Ceramics is a subject which most only apply to study after already having tried it previously. There are now places which are investing in ceramics, for example Kenton High (Newcastle) and Newcastle

College, where several of our current students come from, and a South Lanarkshire Council arts development project (see separate sheet).

Ken Eastman, among others, testifies that there are more opportunities and possibilities within Ceramics than for years.

“Museums are opening and the work of ceramic artists is finding its way into fine art galleries- prices are for some, hitting uncharted heights. Makers are finding new and diverse ways to exist and flourish- through commissioning, collaborations, installations, research, exchanges, residencies, etc.”

A recent Observer article (*Hands that do dishes*, Sunday January 20, 2008) writes the following:

“Craft pieces by leading makers are far from cheap (you won't get much for under £1,000), but as this is an expanding market, prices have still not peaked and so there's a lot of potential for investment.

'Nothing is ever guaranteed,' says Marijke Jones, head of Contemporary Ceramics at Bonhams, 'but prices seem to be generally increasing - a rare vase by Magdalene Odundo fetched a record £28,405 in 2006 and last year a Hans Coper piece sold for more than £14,000. It all depends on buying the right pieces.’”

Instead of viewing being the only Ceramics course in Scotland as a burden, (which currently seems to be the case), the GSA should seize the opportunity presenting itself.

4). Further Questions

~Why is the recommendation being made at this time, to come into effect straight away? There will be people who are planning on applying for the course starting next academic year. Last week, the staff in Ceramics had to show 3 people around who were interested in studying here, knowing that it might be impossible. It is not fair to these applicants to suddenly cease recruiting for the course without good notice. It is also very bad timing for us, the current students; the 4th years are busy working towards the degree show, and the 3rd years have to hand in their Critical Review of Sources on Tuesday 19th. Also, the recommendation was announced to us the day before a School holiday and Reading Week, making it much more difficult for us to get organized.

~The department, as has been discussed, is not a problem to the school financially – in fact, it ‘makes’ more money than it uses. What is then the damage to the School in giving it a chance to raise the profile of the courses on offer? It is felt that we have not been given the opportunity to try to do something about this, not knowing that it was a problem.