

CONVERSATION PECES

Frances Priest's new collection of ceramics was inspired by a year-long sojourn in Thailand, and is strangely liberating, says Ellie Herring. Photography by Shannon Tofts

Given her dexterity with clay, it's perhaps remarkable that Frances Priest didn't touch the stuff once during 2006. And yet that year – spent travelling and teaching in and around Thailand, armed with just a small digital camera – marked a profound change in direction for her. For it was during this time in Asia that she first began to consider herself an artist: 'It felt important to open up the conversation,' she says.

As recent events within the industry testify, the ceramic discussion seems to be shutting rapidly down, as a result, arguably, of its own self-inflicted insularity. Yet Priest has begun to successfully prise things back open. *Objects of Touch and Travel*, at Edinburgh's Scottish Gallery, has many voices in its mix – not just those of artist and potential han-

dler, but those of materials, processes, forms, and even of patterns. Abstract as this may seem, Priest's objects – 'little thought-triggers', as she calls them – have been purposely designed to allow the language of all these different elements to be heard within the final work.

Referring to the show, Priest suggests the objects in question aren't 'very serious. They are quite silly and a bit ridiculous.' It's hard to argue. There are various groups of static objects. One set is redolent of the idiosyncrasies of the human hand: they almost long to be touched. With them is a collection of tall tubes growing out of the floor, and a wall-piece of multiple diamond sections crawling up and across the gallery. Wall and floor thus become the canvas, the ceramic objects

become the marks. In many ways, the exhibition seems unresolved and strangely liberating, allowing the viewer an active role within the interpretation of the work. Narratives can be attached and reattached, opened or closed.

Many of the themes in *Objects* originated during Priest's year-long residency at an international school in Thailand. Here she held weekly art workshops for children, many of them refugees from neighbouring countries. Given their difficult social circumstances, she suggested activities that placed their identities at the centre of the project. As the children drew and made costumes, sometimes in response to music, an underlying formal language began to emerge. 'They were drawing patterns and motifs that





Above: 'Unidentified Gallery Objects (family ii)', ceramic, 23 x 13cm, 2009
Below: 'Gifts & Occupations', ceramic, 90 x 15 cm, 2009

seemed really specific to them, things which you wouldn't necessarily have got from a group of children in Scotland. You would have got something quite different.' This prompted Priest to consider the idea of embedded visual language, conditioned in us from an early age.

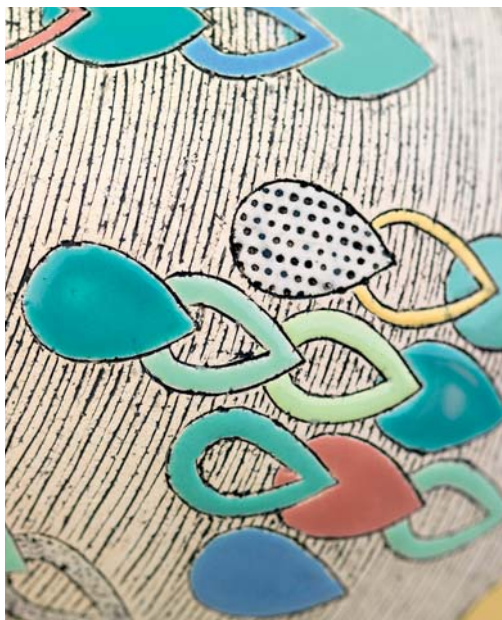
Back in Scotland, Priest had amassed a vast archive of over 4,000 photographs. At first this collection seemed relatively arbitrary, 'quite a random series of images, just patterns and surfaces really.' But on closer inspection she realised that the patterns, textures and colours, experienced on her travels in Thailand, Japan, Cambodia and Laos, showed interesting visual connections between these countries. From this and her workshop experiences, a kind of cultural

language of pattern began gradually to surface.

Despite their comparatively everyday content, many of these photographs are intensely beautiful. As a visual resource, the wealth of material here is incredible. It's easy to find oneself overwhelmed just looking at her *Pattern* banners – the profusion of arrangements of tiles on a temple roof, or of embroidered silks on a market stall, even the packaging of jars stacked against each other. To allow these ideas to become tangible required a process of distillation. Intuitive and emotional choices whittled 4,000 photographs down to a key 15. As Priest explains, 'I'm isolating individual motifs and using them as a form that can carry patterns of my own making... so I'm appropriating motifs and representing those motifs as patterns I've made



CREDITS



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COURTESY THE ARTIST

myself.' Pattern is interesting, as the photographic record of her trip illustrates, not only because it covers objects, but also because it's been constructed – meaning that, in a sense, it lives in a hybrid space between the second and third dimension. The boundaries between these states may be hard to visualise, but trying to do so offers a different way of understanding the transitions inherent in the creative process.

Many of the three-dimensional objects on display have an implicit relationship with drawing. As Priest explains, she is not someone who 'makes with materials. I often make drawings and play with the process of drawing as a starting point.' But since her long visual study of her Asian photographs, the marks they contained have begun to

surface as marks on a page. According to Priest, 'that language of mark-making is really driving the work,' with clay an ideal material for picking up and holding marks. In *Objects of Touch and Travel*, both hand and mechanised processes of mark-making pattern the surfaces created, exploiting flaws in the process, to create varieties of repetitive traces. For Priest, clay appears to operate at a liminal point between drawing and object; and you get a sense that it's a two-way thing for her, so that the processes of mark making in clay also feeds back into the works on paper. So it's wrong just to assume that the photographs lead directly into works on paper, which in turn become ceramic pieces. Priest's methods are far more organic: the voice of the material, the inclination of the hand

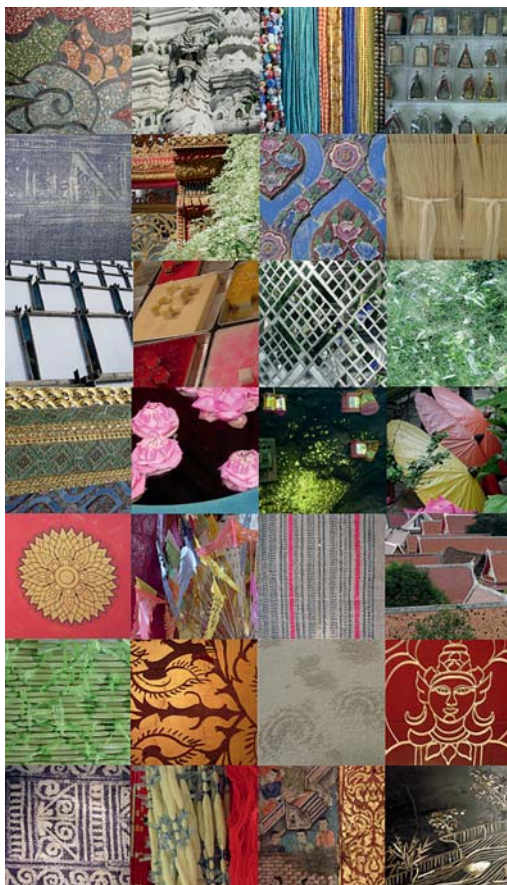
Opposite page, top and far left: Frances Priest, work in progress

Opposite page, near left: 'Unidentified Gallery Objects (family i)' (detail), ceramic, incised, oxide inlay, diamond polished, glaze

Above: Dominique Le Gendre, fellow resident at Cove Park 2009; playing with an element from 'Gifts & Occupations'

Far Above: 'Unidentified Gallery Objects (family i)', ceramic, 24 x 19 cm, 2009
Right: 'Decoration Box', ceramic, 6 x 6 cm, 2008





and the quality of surface are collectively allowed to influence the final work, a process that won't reduce to a formula. Indeed, it's this fluidity that inspires much of her work.

It's partly this moving backwards and forwards between dimensions and processes, from drawing to object and back, that's left Priest so keen to explore the possibilities of 'handle-able' pattern: 'You have these images which are on 3D objects; then you flatten them by taking photographs. The photography automatically evens things out, and I guess what I'm trying to do is bring them back out into objects which try to encapsulate the patterns. So the pattern becomes a thing in its own right rather than a decorative object.' The patterns these photographs have archived are a useful way into

understanding the rich sense of cultural identity that Priest encountered. Nevertheless, she is keen to stress that the objects on display were not necessarily made to tell 'the stories of particular places. It's more about this idea of ornament that operates at an emotional level.'

This concept, of handle-able pattern, is not easy to grasp, and Priest wonders if it's a 'really strange way of talking about things.' Yet clearly central to her work is the idea of the craft object being used as a tool for thinking, thanks to its direct relationship with process. Much of this is already filtering through into her next project, a travelling ceramic cabinet of curiosities, like the *wunderkammers* found in Europe from 16th-18th centuries, which allowed the wealthy to show off their collections of

the strange. Similarly, Priest's 'handling collection' will allow others to handle the work in non-gallery spaces: 'I really like the idea of carry-cases of objects that travel, coming out with me as an object travelling around places as well.'

Sadly the Scottish Gallery has been unable to facilitate the direct experience of handling, apart from a one-off event. But the life of these objects will go beyond the studio and the gallery space, demanding a physical interaction with the viewer and the object. This is a development Priest is keen to continue; indeed, it's the only way the ceramic conversation will remain open.

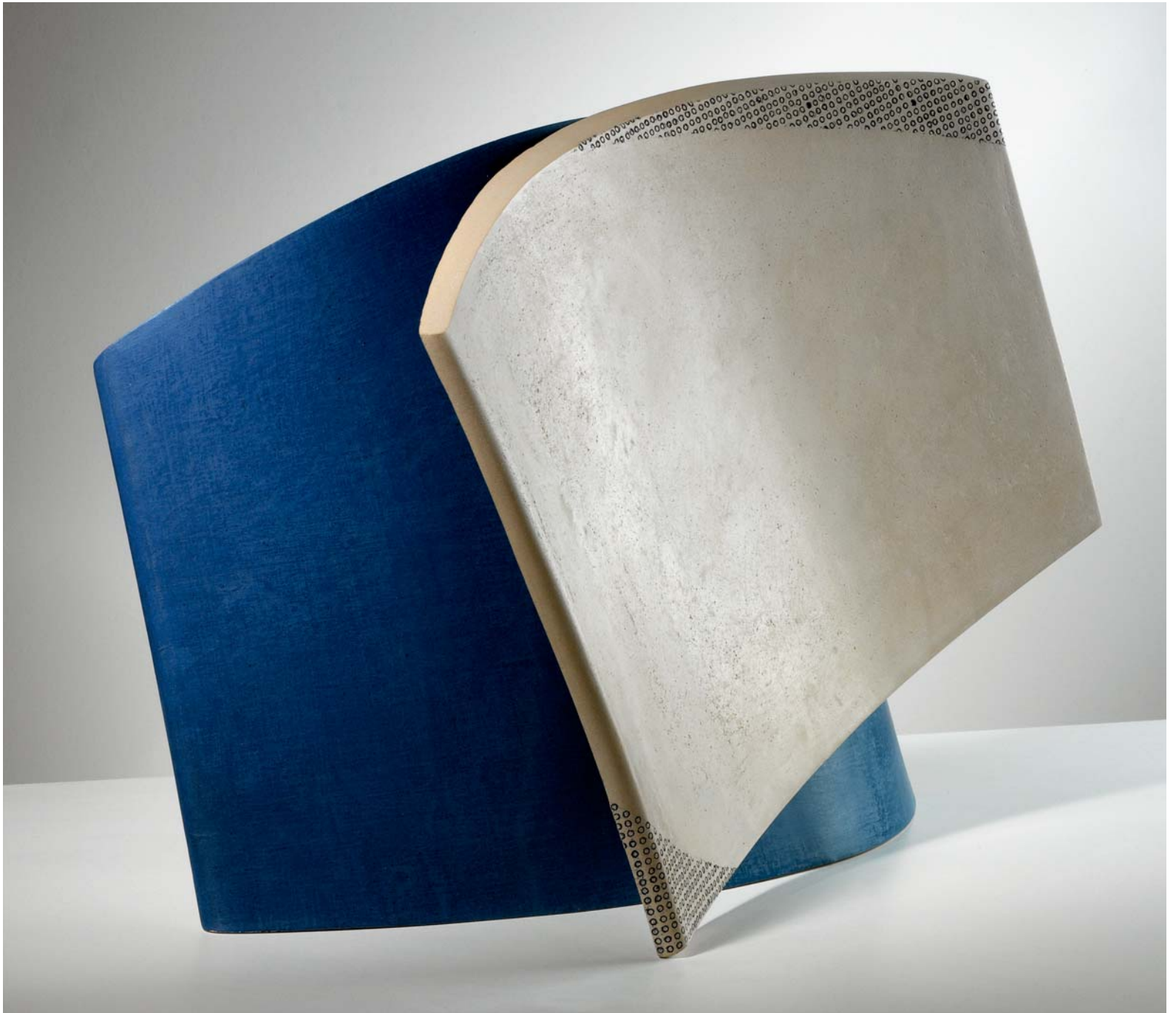
'Objects of Touch and Travel' is at the Scottish Gallery, from 6-30 May 2009. For details see Crafts Guide.

The Scottish Gallery will be showing at Collect



Clockwise from top left: Detail from 'Thailand Pattern' banner; detail from 'Japan Pattern' banner, both made for 'Making Spaces' exhibition curated by Diana Sykes (Fyfe Contemporary Art & Craft), 2005-06; 'Balanced Blue', ceramic, 49 x 37 cm, 2005; 'Shift',

private commission for an exterior terrace space, fixtures and installation by Steve Dale, Jesmonite, lacquered aluminium, 1.2 x 1.6 m, 2007; 'Pattern' field drawings produced during residency at Regents International School, Thailand 2005-06; ink, pencil, pastel, pen on paper, 38 x 38 cm, 2006



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