

High spirits in spite of downpours



Rachel Woods reports on *Art in Clay*, held at Hatfield House in August 2008.

Hands on hips, glasses perched on end of hunched up nose, and then 'Ay up, luv! Ow are yer? Where are yer pitched?' This was the customary welcome from 'The Mad Wolf' of the North', aka, Mr Andy McInnes.

You knew you had found your destination. It was the beginning of *Art in Clay*. The fourteenth. Hatfield House. 2008.

Setting up was clammy and humid, a sample of climes yet to come over the next few days? I'm afraid not. After many years of (almost expected) stifling heat in the marquees, this year's blustery and showery downfalls tested the ingenuity of exhibitors in maximising display without the risk of breakage. The cacophony of tinkling ceramic against ceramic, rattling canvas and clinking steel posts was unnerving to say the least, especially for the organisers, but thankfully there were few breakages.

Over 180 exhibitors took part this year with such an amazing variety it was hard to take it all in. The strong continental flavour always adds a fascinating dimension and welcomed artists such as Peter Fulop and Emmanuel Peccatte with his stunning sculptures, one of a few makers who used the natural surroundings of trees and landscape to display their work. Against the familiar sedate rhythm of English tones, our ears are pricked by the linguistic undulations of Spanish, Dutch, French, German, Scandinavian and Japanese – another element which transports you to this

special world for the next three days.

And then, only moments later, our ears were pricked again... by those unmistakable dulcet tones proclaiming '...and what's more, there's free biscuits!' Curious and ready for a cuppa anyway, I had to take a look outside and saw the inimitable Steve Harrison about to perform... I wonder what! Surely, he's not doing tarot readings, I thought. Of course not. The announcement marked the start of the Tea Ceremony, which would take place in Steve's purpose built Tea House. A compelling warm glow emanated from within the special Tea House, which was built with yellow fibre-glass and adorned with sunflowers. Each day, Steve gave away twenty teabowls that he'd made especially for the show to twenty delighted customers. A romping success. (Maybe he'll read my tea leaves next year).

What struck me this year was the strong sense of education, learning and generous sharing of information, whether it is in the form of potter to customer, tutor to graduate/student, potter to potter – a free flowing exchange of energy which gives this event its dynamism, character and warmth.

An admirable project in particular is Lisa Hammond's commendable *Adopt A Potter* scheme, her mission to support and train the next generation of potters through apprenticeships, living testament to which are Yo Thom and Adam Frew. The increasing pressures placed on today's art colleges have led to limited opportunities for students to learn to throw functional studio pots. This scheme aims to give them that opportunity. Over the weekend potters donated pots for the tombola, contributions to which raised



Opposite page: Steve Harrison's Tea House
 Top left: The Tea Ceremony!
 Top right: Children relish clay
 Below left: Emmanuel Peccatte – Form
 Below: Megan Collins – winner of the Student Award



an amazing £2500. Applaud for Lisa, please.

Students' work was particularly strong and innovative this year I thought, including Nathalie Roset's meaty and bold earthenware chimney pots (University College for the Creative Arts at Farnham); Damaris Booth's witty but spookily realistic unwashed tableware – I thought students didn't eat well! (Bath Spa University). Conversations with students revealed delight at taking part at Hatfield. On the other hand, they were aware of the important steps – issues looming on the horizon as to how and where to set up a workshop; how to manage without their valued peer support; where to exhibit and how to make any money. Daunting, yet exciting for them. This year's student award went to Megan Collins from Loughborough University of Art and Design, workshop set up and well on the way.

This year's winner for the Valentine Clays Peers Award went to Toon Thijs, such a larger than life character, even more so this year as he celebrated his 60th year. The Studio Pottery award went to Chris Lewis for his handsome wheel-thrown and sculptural wood fired pots. Geoff and Chris Cox, organisers of the Potfest shows, won the bi-annual Mick Casson award in recognition of their vision and innovation in leading the way with ceramic fairs in the UK over fifteen years ago, without which, events such as Hatfield

may not have taken place.

An unexpected gift went to Linda Heaton-Harris who had been involved in a serious car accident en route to exhibit at Hatfield. The generosity of fellow potters raised £350 that went towards several pieces of work bought for her.

The "Throw a Pot" marquee and handbuilding activities had their army of helpers and potters. Always such a popular and important area to carry the thread from curiosity to actually completing pot. Noticeably this year was the high number of adults wanting to have a go, as well as children. However, the rain particularly on Sunday, left them slightly isolated on their islands in the middle of the site.

Despite the damper weather conditions, spirits throughout the weekend were certainly more resilient. Overall trade was buoyant and optimistic despite the overhanging doom and gloom mood of the current economic climate. The amazing team of helpers were hardworking, helpful and committed right through to the end, even in the downpour at pack up time on Sunday. And next year's Helpers Award goes to...?

Adopt a Potter For more info, please look at www.mazehill-pottery.com or contact Lisa Hammond on 020 8293 0048