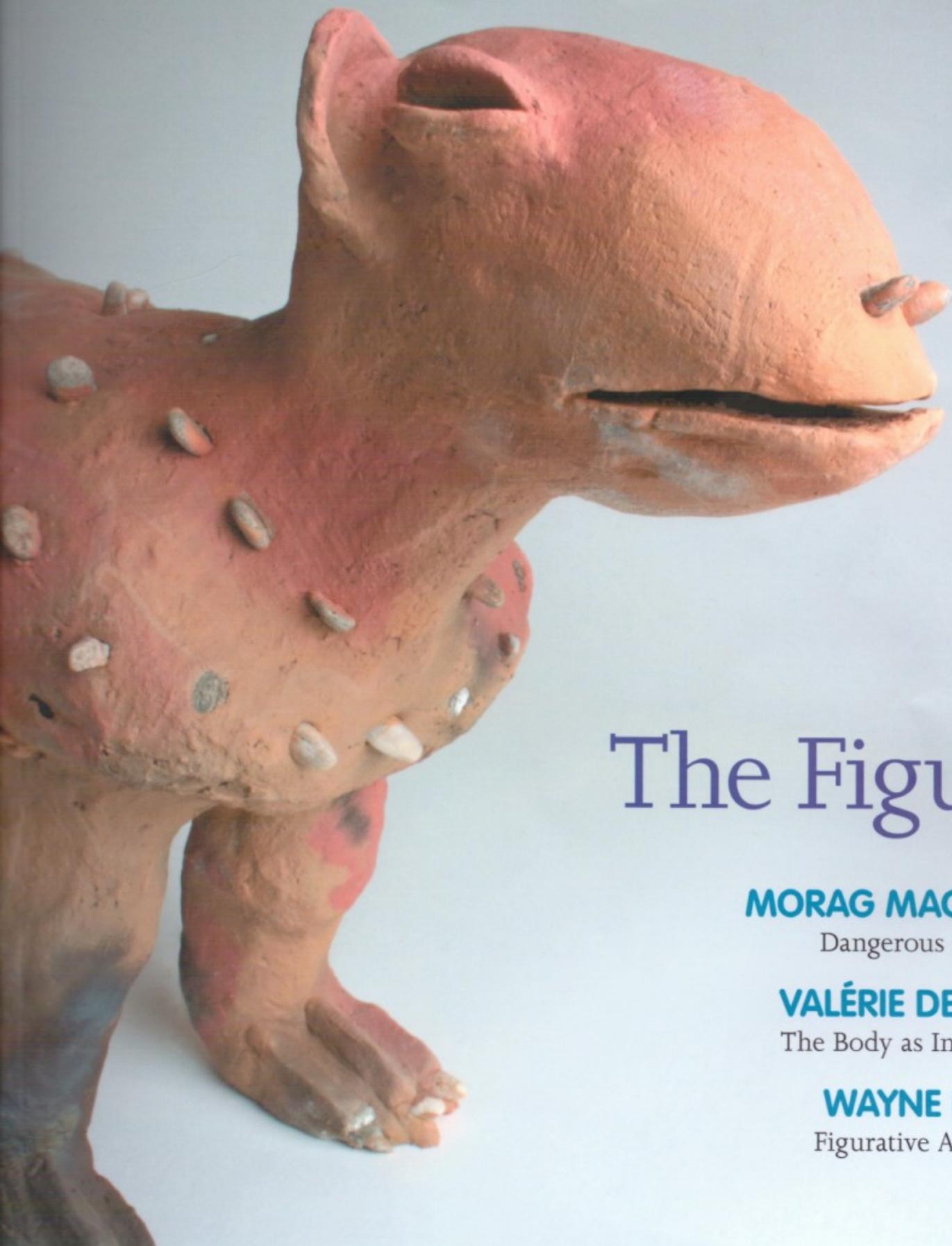


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The Figure

MORAG MACINNES

Dangerous Creatures

VALÉRIE DELARUE

The Body as Instrument

WAYNE FISHER

Figurative Ambiguity

Dogs that bark in the night

Simon Olding approaches the work of
Morag MacInnes...cautiously.



There is something of a present mood in the crafts for animals and birds. This affects areas of work such as metal, paper, knitwear, as well as ceramics. Some of this work is finely modelled (Guy Bird's birds); some of it is votive (Maxime Greer's paper birds); some of it is whimsical; and some of it, like Libby Edmondson's ceramic farmyard animals, crosses between realism and stylisation.

A WIDE REPERTOIRE Morag MacInnes has recently been making a series of animals that bear a passing appearance to dogs. They howl rather than bark. They are creatures for whom the Dangerous Dogs Act might have been invented. They sit in the narrative of her collected ceramics at one extreme from her domestic tableware. These are painted with tightly controlled, precise images drawn from contemporary life or the mythologies of the sea.

That tells us something about the artist's range as well as her

ambitions. She sees clay as a plastic tool to help extract the inner characteristic of her work. A dinner plate or flower brick (echoing a style made popular by eighteenth-century tin-glazed earthenware) must grace a table with panache. A pit bull terrier or a creature with its head anarchically upturned needs to speak of power and latent energy, so its rough modelling is a cipher for this same power.

Morag MacInnes says that she 'fell in love with clay' when she was asked to teach pottery as part of her duties as a schoolteacher. And what she loved most was 'the magical transformation' of the material. This helps explain, perhaps, why she gets clay to do such oppositional things: the witty placing of the table and the nightmare creatures of a troubled land. They are products of her long-standing interest in the visual arts (her degree at Sussex University was in the history of art) and happenstance. Her career as a ceramic artist was embedded with the notion of contrast.

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2 *His Master's Voice*, Dobles clay, slipped and burnished, pit-fired, 2010, H26cm
 3 *Howling Dog*, Dobles clay, slipped with stones, pit-fired, 2011, H47cm
 4 *Mermaid on her Mobile*, terracotta clay, slipped and painted with under-glazes and oxides, 2011, Ø26cm



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MERMAIDS Her figures and domestic works draw together her particular interests in areas such as African ceramics and graphic art. She developed a special interest in the figure of the mermaid (and her skill in drawing is also applied to her favourite image of the nude female figure, handled with poise and humanity). The first mermaid figures, unglazed and even ungainly, can be seen in the same light as her aggressively modelled dog-creatures. They are symbolic figures, dry rather than slippery, and if they had a siren note, the song would, one feels, be melancholic rather than lyrical.

The mermaids of her tableware are, however, perky and set to sing melodious tunes. They sometimes cover the centre of plates and they sometimes appear in a smaller format, for example in the grid spaces of the series of plates on the theme of lottery tickets. These works enable MacInnes to give free rein to her observational talent. She has a facility with line and a feel for humour. Greek goddesses may hover with a sense of aplomb and a disregard for history; her nudes hang out the washing as well as lounge in classical mode.

Underpinning much of MacInnes's view of ceramics lies the idea

of the extended series. She will make one hundred plates rather than a one-off. (One series is called *90 ways to Hoover*). Her dogs and her dog-like beasts roam in pairs or packs. Her mermaids look most at ease when they are in a harmonious group. She makes careful repeat patterns, but it is clear that each piece is individually hand-painted. She works quickly and intuitively.

TEACHING AND TRAVEL This speed may be helped by MacInnes's decision to take up ceramics full time following on from her teaching career. The facility with glaze painting builds on long practice and the backdrop of making work 'informally' over many years. The transition to professional practice was built on experience. Travel and collaboration are also important to her. The lottery ticket series owes much to a recent trip to Mexico, and allowed her to relate an informal bank of everyday images to a symbolic purpose, the 'lottery of life' – all done with a graceful and light touch of humour. The plates give free rein to her talent for precise drawing and the sense of order and containment. They owe something, perhaps, to



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the work of Eric Ravilious for Wedgwood in the 1930s. There is often a female bias to her themes and images, from handbags to beauty products, but there are boys' toys too, treated with her quick irony and wit. These themes play against each other over time too. The early smoky mermaids reappear in her latest plates as finely drawn images. The rough modelling of the mermaids is seen in the monstrous dogs that presently occupy her, with their massive musculature and snarling jaws. The visceral handling of the clay in these sculptures is in direct contrast to the Mediterranean glaze palette of the tableware.

The contrast of the work is matched by the contrast of her personal living arrangements. MacInnes spends several months of the year in a remote corner of southern Spain. In this wild environment she has progressed her study of the ferocious dog-creatures. They are fitting animals for the landscape and featured in a recent successful exhibition *Raw Dogs* at the Neilson Gallery in Grazaema, Spain, even though the market for contemporary craft in Spain is not yet fully developed. It is a far cry from the elegant

urban home in the centre of Bristol, where she maintains a small studio, placing her work in a select number of craft galleries in and around the city, as well as participating in the artist studio events that have become such an integral part of selling and presenting craft in recent years.

NEW WORK In her studio there are a small number of very recent pieces. These sealed chests or caskets represent a new departure in her work. They are (like her dogs) roughly constructed. Even though they have a functional appearance, they are symbolic pieces: they may be pinpricked with holes or cut with wider openings, but these clay boxes seem to tell more of a story about keeping secrets and hoarding myths or spirits. They have an African sense about them, a metaphorical exploration of the idea of containment. These ceramic reliquaries may point to a new direction in the work of Morag MacInnes, and emphasise the seriousness of her ambitions for ceramic art as well as her ability to work with clay in its lighter moods and useful responsibilities. Her work is stretched at opposite poles: from the doleful to the joyful, from the sculptural to the useful. She is a resourceful experimenter as well as an advocate for the multiple possibilities of ceramic art. **CR**



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5 *Fish Lottery*, terracotta clay, slipped and painted with under-glazes and oxides, 2010, Ø32cm **6** *Smiler*, Dobles clay, slipped and burnished with stones, smoke-fired, 2010, H43cm **7** *Sealed Chests*, Dobles clay, slipped and pit-fired, 2011, H23cm **8** *Big Dog*, Dobles clay, slipped with stones, pit-fired, 2010, H30cm

Exhibitions Eastertide Group Show, Yew Tree Gallery, Cornwall, April 2012; 9-11 November 2012, Share Farm, Wiltshire
Stockists Aurea and Nails Gallery, both in Bristol; and Yew Tree Gallery, Cornwall
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