

CoCA at York Art Gallery, Exhibition Square, York, YO1 7EW

Clare Twomey: Manifest: 10,000 Hours

CoCA at York Art Gallery, York

Showing until 2017

Review by Zara Worth

Commissioned to mark the reopening of York Art Gallery and launch of CoCA (Centre of Ceramic Art), Clare Twomey's monumental installation, 'Manifest: 10,000 Hours', aids the establishment of York Art Gallery as a world leading centre of ceramics, and asks questions about how art and art institutions might serve differing, and emergent communities.

After passing through reception, a swift glance upwards in the Gallery's recently opened up atrium offers a glimpse of Clare Twomey's installation. A series of platforms - on which perch piles of pale, neat slipcast bowls - reach towards the recently exposed white vaulted timber roof, which arches over a mezzanine, now home to CoCA. The teetering arrangement of bowls is reminiscent of the manner in which art collections grow and evolve: an obsession which literally fills space. Whilst its volume mirrors the equally overflowing cabinets and displays which finally showcase over 6,000 ceramic works from York Art Gallery's collection, in stark contrast to the measly 200 works on show prior to the gallery's refurbishment. The bowls which make up Twomey's artwork were made by volunteers, staff from the gallery, students, and members of local groups, who were offered the opportunity to learn to slipcast in exchange for the bowl they produced being used in the installation. Each bowl was produced in an hour-long workshop; now on display in the gallery, each bowl represents an hour: the sum of stacked crockery physicalising the 10,000 hours it is reputed to require to fully Master a craft.

Coincidentally unveiling her commission in tandem with the gallery's reopening and subsequent unwelcome decision to introduce a £7.50 entrance fee, Twomey's sculpture accidentally became the cover image accompanying various articles discussing nationwide gallery entrance fees resulting from government cuts. Twomey had been clear that the slipcasting workshops should target particularly people who may never have touched clay before. The intentional inclusion of volunteers and local groups in the commission's production alludes to wider issues of access to art and culture resulting from reduced government funding. Participation allowed individuals access to learning and resources, as well as a rare opportunity to work directly with an artist, forming a temporary community through craft.

On inspection, the significance of the production of the commission perhaps surpasses the undoubtably impressive 'final product'. Neoliberal values are bound up in the making of the work: the artist creates a temporary community by crowdsourcing labour, and enterprising participants (or collaborators) gain skills and a stake in the artwork, and potentially the gallery itself. The personal enterprise of the artist becomes the personal enterprise of the volunteers who improve their value through new skills and cultural capital.

The participatory aspects and democratic processes of 'Manifest: 10,000' are consistent with 'craftivism' - a burgeoning movement with roots in feminism, in which creative practices such as pottery or quilt making, (traditionally undermined as 'low culture' due to their domestic origins), engage with political and social causes often on a personal scale. In this manner Twomey's work not only successfully responded to the practical challenges of the gallery, but engages with the politics of a space, whilst considering a much wider context, offering alternate ways in which galleries might serve and engage future communities.