



Nuala Creed

The Heart in the Matter

Article by
Stephanie Bowman

*A thing you promised and is impossible,
You would give me gloves of the skin of fishes,
You would give me shoes of the skin of birds,
And a suit of the dearest silk in Ireland.*

from Donall Og.

Babes in Arms series. 2005.

STEPPING FROM THE GREEN WONDER OF IRELAND IS the heart and soul of a woman, Nuala Creed, who plays with and reshapes the roots of matter to make art that reminds me to pay attention to my life especially the part when I was a child. Creed is a ceramic sculptor but her artistic reach extends to the beach, the kitchen or the butcher shop and beyond. Rich with traces of their pungent and original purpose Creed wraps gut and fish skin around invisible space to form objects that are beautiful to look at while begging to be touched.

But dare I finger what dehydrated intestines feels like to lift a shoe that is delicate and translucent enough to remind me of the one Cinderella wore to the ball. I've never been to Ireland but it is a county I consider to have depth and soul steeped in ancient truth, triumph and tragedy. The soulful and mythical ethos I associate with Ireland is found also in Creed and her art forms. However, the rain I always imagine when I think of Ireland stopped after meeting Creed. In fact, ladybugs, butterflies, the first robin in Spring, red licorice and most things yellow, like daisies and the sun, remind me of Nuala Creed because they are gentle and sweet, or innocent and hopeful and so is she. Now I consider Ireland to be many more things besides green.

Creed's *Fledglings* stand as gentle wisdom reminding me the world I watched as a child – the clouds passing lazily over head, or the bugs scurrying under my shadow, are memories to be trusted and acknowledged. My childhood way of witnessing the world can tell me a lot about who I am today. Creed writes, "As the butterfly nourishes itself on its disintegrated body we are nurtured and nourished by our childhood." Paramahansa Yogananda writes, "In childhood a person's senses and life force, and the development of the body, are governed more or less automatically by the soul's intelligent powers." Creed's life and work has been directed by her ability to retain what she learned from witnessing her childhood's "soul's intelligent powers" while she interacted with her imagination, siblings and playmates.

From an early age Creed adopted a watchful and vigilant gaze over the events in her sibling's lives by recording them in her mental notebook. She was aware that the time of childhood was precious, profound and passing quickly. Her mental notebook became the safe house where she made notes about the delight of discovery, the joy of friendship and the triumph of new accomplishments. She was also aware that the secret hours of childhood were being swallowed into something less profound, one adult at a time.

I was familiar with Douglas Harding's philosophy called the *Headless Way* when I first saw Creed's *Fledglings*, and because Harding's theory had been trying to convince me that I didn't have a head I wasn't upset that Creed's children didn't have heads. In fact I was thrilled to find someone making art about what Harding was saying. Creed's ceramic *Fledgling* children with big buttoned coats, baggy pants, and oversized shoes standing as open body shells with no heads are not frightening comments about something that is lost or missing. Instead her headless, featureless children are the lucky ones being protected from being misjudged because of their appearance, parental ignorance, or ill-fitting societal constructions. Harding says, "You were born wide-open to the world – one with the world. Yet day by day we became educated to see ourselves from outside. Parents, teachers, friends reflected back to us our appearance – including our faces." And if those parents, teachers and friends get it wrong and make their judgments by what they see on the outside, and this doesn't match the 'I' I know and feel on the inside it can be difficult to experience my life honestly. The people making these judgments are probably also the ones who have just recently taught me to speak and to walk, so it is almost impossible to defy the declarations they make about who I am. When they call me quiet or loud, obnoxious or precocious, stupid or sinful these are the word pictures I put in the place where I keep my head. If I don't 'have a head' for people to misunderstand it is easier to protect the interior truth of how I experience myself in the world.

Nuala introduces each *Fledgling* to space and matter through their shoes. She makes the shoes first and they come to symbolise the vehicles her *Fledglings* will need for their journey. However, they serve a dual purpose because while they are the foundation and structure for the form, they also come to suggest qualities and characteristics about each one. At the same time each *Fledgling* does not appear as a predetermined structure but comes into view the same meandering way I experience my life. Through the combination of mind, body, culture and environment the unique interactions of these components distil into the moments I call my life, however I have little control over what impacts my day. In fact, my sense of self was something I discovered, not necessarily anything I've created. In the same way Creed finds the shoes and then guides the clay into folds of quiet colour, reticent gestures and details about buttons and collars, sweaters and skirts and then looks to see who is going to appear.

Each *Fledgling* conveys a fragile nature and seems vulnerable not because they're made from clay, but because the sepia muted hues are faded like our fragile memories. The timid, tentative stance of a young *Fledgling*, toes pointed slightly in, hands held behind



Top: *Girl with High Heels*. 82.5 x 50 x 30 cm.

Above: *Boy*. 80 x 35 x 30 cm.



Tricycle. 65 x 62.5 x 50 cm.

his back, is quiet and expectant. Dressed like a miniature adult the young boy prepares to leave childhood. However, Creed's guardianship of the reservoir of childhood will not allow the innocent boy to be entirely mauled by adult expectations. The knee high slipping down the young child's leg is a reminder that a quality of play needs to accompany the journey to adulthood. The four-year old boy straddling the tricycle, whose feet are growing faster than his body will soon learn how to ride a two wheeler, but in the meantime the sturdy structure under him is the bridge between steadiness and speed. The little girl that is playing 'grown up' in the oversize high heels totters along while Creed slings the trappings of adulthood over her shoulder as the purse becomes a symbol of the financial independence we are expected to acquire as adults. However, the soft flowing blouse and schoolgirl's skirt suggest the young girl may have more carefree interests than what society is preparing for her. Creed's fledglings embody the paradox that although the child strives to meet the expectations thrust upon him or her as a result of being born in a modern society, there is often little chance of meeting all the expectations pressed upon us. At the same time while we can appreciate the beauty of the cocoon we look expectantly to see the butterfly that emerges from it. A *fledgling* is a young bird ready to fly. Creed nudges me to remember that childhood was for flying and it is something I still know how to do. My identity is not something I try to discover – it is something I'm trying to remember.

Nuala Creed invites me to use my imagination like I did when I was a child, but not so I can relive my childhood. Rather she intends to remind me about the tools of childhood so I will use them to search the world I live in now. Ironically, I don't remember working when I was child but work is usually what I'm doing when I use tools. What I do remember is playing in the backyard with my friend Carol. We'd get dirty making mud pies in the empty lot behind our houses and while we were having fun we were also learning about what the world was made of. Our curiosity and carefree sensory exploration created the perfect circumstances for introspection and an active investigation into the environment we had been born into. Creed's art practice weaves between the symbols of childhood and the psychology of childhood to create art that points to the heart of what matters about being human.

The *Fledglings* express Creed's respect for childhood. They point to the similarity she finds between the cocoon that surrounds the butterfly, and the way that childhood protects an important core of human experience. Her most recent work *Babes in Arms*, present important questions about how seemingly innocent social customs play into the dire political circumstances of our time. Creed's *Babes* clutching guns and waving toys of mass destruction are disturbing. They trample across a sacred boundary that normally protects the baby from being made into a symbol of violence. And more disturbing still is how she has made the babies look so cute, cuddly and inviting. Her perfect baby forms squirm and wriggle beneath the vitreous clay surface, and their roly-poly bodies with chubby cheeks and cute smiles draw me in for a closer look. The brilliant glazes shine and sparkle like the ones on my favourite coffee cup so I step closer to pick the baby up. Claude Anshin Thomas tells the story in *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey* how a baby was used as bomb decoy in Vietnam. Thomas didn't die because he wasn't the one to pick up the baby the crowd left behind when it scattered although he witnessed the explosion when another man did. I am, however, less fortunate and it's too late. Creed's baby explodes in my psyche and sends shivers down my emotional core. The bomb was triggered when my notice of the angelic smiles and round cheeks moved down into the barrel of a rocket launcher or on to a cute knitted cap that reminds me more of medieval mail than soft wool. My numb and sleeping adult psyche is jolted awake. Creed's *Babes in Arms* ask me to take responsibility for letting the children of my society have access to the false assumption that power will make them happy and war will make them free.

And even though I feel helpless before the machinations of the government insanity that causes war I'm not blind. I've seen the aisle of war toys running



Boy in Car. 55 x 50 x 37.5 cm. and 50 x 45 x 35 cm.

through some part of 'Any Store' in my little town, but I've never organised a protest to raise awareness about how these war toys contribute to young children believing war is a game. I don't organise protests for the same reason well meaning and good parents let their children play with guns and GI Joes; neither of us want to be considered reactionary and fanatical. Besides who wants to believe, or bear the burden of knowing something and then do nothing about the possible correlation between war and war toys. However, I believe Creed is suggesting we at least consider the possibility that the connection exists.

Creed courageously marches into the studio prepared to work the ancient ageless material of clay into an adversary capable of challenging any war machine. The silica surface blasts pure colour straight back into the dark mouth of any muzzle and demands attention. Ken Wilber writes in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* that, "It is often said that in today's modern and postmodern world, the forces of darkness are upon us. But I think not; in the Dark and the Deep there are truths that can always heal. It is not the forces of darkness but of shallowness that everywhere threaten the true, and the good, and the beautiful, and that ironically announce themselves as true and profound. It is an exuberant and fearless shallowness that everywhere is the modern danger."

Creed's ceramic sculptures do not play it safe and she asks me to discard my shallow and sheltered viewpoints as well. Creed captures my attention through the lyrical forms of brightly coloured babies made from the equally non-threatening and innocuous material clay. She transforms the lumpy and docile earth into soft smooth surfaces with active animated shiny glazes. But benign as these materials are in their elemental form when they are turned into objects that depict guttural, bombastic and shocking subject matter the final creations re-awaken my slumbering imagination. After seeing *Babes in Arms* it is difficult for me to remain psychically numb to the ailing conditions in our social and political circumstances. Creed does not mean to be mean when she causes me to feel like a hypocrite, but she's concerned about the future and feels that our culture needs to find a way to heal rather than destroy itself. Technology's legacy should not be the ease with which we damned the planet, nor should our governments be offices that promote common differences instead of common goals.

Creed's earnest heart is ultimately a call to the celebration of life. She is not ground in sorrow, but in joy. her forms have the ability to divert my attention from war to peace because the colour and beauty she folds into the forms reveal her true nature as a healer.



Babes in Arms Series. 2005.

Creed's innate sensitivity and gentle heart are the forces behind the fingers bending, folding, forming and coaxing the clay into objects that honour the spirit of existence. And despite the dire circumstances *Babes in Arms* are also a careful study in the joy of making things. The beauty of Creed's ceramic surfaces – sock textures and frills – with the brilliant colours and the smiling faces are all finding ways to smuggle ease past unease. Frank Wilson in his book, *The Hand: How Its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture*, makes the interesting proposition that although science has traditionally understood that the brain shapes who we become and in what we will excel in, there is another way of thinking about the relationship between the hand and the brain. His idea proposes that our hands move in certain ways that are as individual as we are and the qualities of these movements interact with the brain and create the character, quality and essence of a human being. He wrote his book to explore "how the dynamic interactions of hand and brain are developed and refined, and how the process relates to the unique character of human thought, growth and creativity."

Creed strengthens the case for the power of art, and the magical quality of making things by the way her final forms exist in space. The decals of praying hands, planes and other symbols on the clothing

become a playground of design and delight. Her baby feet and hands flail in that wonderful clumsy baby way and the forms as a whole become an endless labyrinth of layered meanings and special stories.

Creed's capable hands are midwife to the beauty of the child that is contained in the shell of her *Fledglings*, and bodies of her babies. Despite the gravity of her subject matter her soothing demeanour emerges in the gentle surfaces of how her clay forms touch the contours of space. No matter how calamitous or challenging her subject matter she makes objects that emerge in a way that nurtures and protects the child in us all. And although she may not save the planet by herself I would declare she is busy creating new ones, two hands, ten fingers and one imagination at a time. Nuala Creed's creative core tweaks and pulls, tugs and stretches, joins and connects the arduous and respectable, pride and shame, or power and pain all the while reminding me that everything will be okay if I don't forget the imaginative place from which my life began.

Stephanie Bowman is Assistant Professor of Art and Gallery Director at Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS. *ImPact*: an exhibit exploring the pact between nature and soul to create infinite individuals: Jeffrey Ventrella and Nuala Creed, will be exhibited at the Koehnline Gallery, Des Plaines, IL in September 2005. www.pittstate.edu/art/sbowman/ImPact.