



# International Ceramics Studio Kecskemét, Hungary

*Craig Underhill describes a life changing experience*

FOR MANY CERAMICS ARTISTS ONE OF THE BIGGEST MOTIVATIONS IN THE CONTINUOUS production of ceramic work is the ability to explore ideas, materials and processes to achieve creative fulfilment. Yet this important aspect of making can get lost with the demands that deadlines to produce work for exhibitions, galleries and fairs can bring. Deadlines to produce work can bring out the best in artists; they can help focus and can allow the makers to bring together all the best aspects of their working practices and ideas to culminate in bodies of work that are progressive and push the boundaries. On the other hand continuous deadlines can result in the over reliance of tried and tested ideas and work that is, at worst, a pastiche of its former self. Trying to create new work that fulfils the artist's need to be creative and explore can be difficult with the expectations of some galleries and customers to produce work that is familiar and expected.

It is important that all creative people have time occasionally to simply be creative, without outside pressure and obligations to others. This way work can be more artistically challenging and can be kept fresh, exciting and stimulating to the maker and of more artistic relevance to the collector.

Earlier this year I received an email from Steve Mattison, inviting me to take part in the Landscape in Ceramics Symposium at the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemet, Hungary. It looked like a fantastic opportunity to have time to simply make work that would be free from any outside influence. Instead I could develop my work and explore new ideas and techniques for the sake of it. There would be no pressure to have finished pieces for deadlines, there would be complete freedom to make work and develop artistically.

I was unaware of the International Ceramics Studio in Hungary (ICSHU) before my invitation. It was established in 1978 and the number and breadth of ceramics artists who have worked there is impressive and truly international.

*Above: Three slab built porcelain vessels. Surface produced by transferring engobe and slip from a newspaper surface, brushed engobe, printed images from photocopies, glaze and oxides. 16, 18 and 18 cm.*

*Below: Slab built vessel. Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced by transferring engobe from a newspaper surface, brushed engobe, red earthenware slip, glaze, oxides and underglaze pastels. 25 cm.*





Top left: **Slab built vessel.** Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced by transferring engobe from a newspaper surface, brushed engobe, glaze and oxides. 26 cm.



Top centre: **Slab built vessel.** Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced by transferring engobe from a newspaper surface, brushed engobe, glaze, oxides and underglaze pastels. 27 cm.



Top right: **Slab built vessel.** Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced with layers of engobe, glaze, oxides and printed images from photocopies. 30 cm.

Below: **Slab built vessel.** Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced with layers of engobe, glaze, oxides and printed images from photocopies. 32 cm.



Of course I accepted his invitation and arrived in Hungary in early September for a three week period. On arrival at ICSHU I could feel the history of the place; pieces by established and less familiar ceramists are displayed in every nook and cranny. While these pieces are fascinating and in some ways comforting objects they also remind you of the quality of the work produced here and of high expectations. The range of facilities is impressive and there is ample space to work. The goal of the ICS is to give artists an opportunity to concentrate on their work in a creative and mutually supportive environment where new and imaginative ideas can be explored and realised.

People such as Paul Soldner, Michael Flynn, Vladimir Tsvin and Gustav Perez have worked here and in the air you can feel the presence of legends such as these. The immense collection consists of work made by invited artists and it is stored in the cellars of the studio building. A catalogue that accompanied a recent exhibition of pieces from the collection at the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts was left in the lounge, it served as a gentle reminder of the history and depth of work contained in the collection.

Working in a studio with materials and equipment that are unfamiliar can help to broaden possibilities. Ceramics is an art form that relies heavily on materials and processes so when the familiar and favoured materials are removed then you are forced to work with the variations that new clay and glaze materials offer and this helps to move the work in a new direction.

I came here with a broad outline of what I wanted to do, I did not want to over plan what I could achieve if on my arrival my plans were unrealistic. The surface and the possibilities of mark making are my main interests and concerns and I wanted to use my time here to develop techniques I had dabbled with in my own studio without investigating their full potential. Specifically I wanted to explore the possibilities of applying engobe to the surface of my work using something other than a brush. I did this by brushing engobes onto newspaper and then transferring them to the clay surface, sometimes repeating this several times to create layers and depth to the surface. This method, combined with the more traditional brushing technique created some unfamiliar surfaces and certainly has the potential to be used back in my studio.

I also explored the possibilities of printing on a clay surface using photocopies. Black photocopy ink is naturally water resistant and this



characteristic can be exploited when ceramic materials are applied. When applied to the photocopy, water based ceramic materials will stick to the white areas of the photocopy but will be resisted by the black ink areas. The ceramic material can then be transferred to a clay surface. This process helped to broaden the range of image making techniques that are available to me and is something I will use again in the future.

I also wanted to make pieces that broke down the distinction between the processes of constructing a ceramic form and the surface application. I wanted to explore the possibilities of mark making becoming part of the constructing process; so that the form and the surface become more closely linked and less distinct from one another. It is all too easy to think of the making of a pot as two separate and distinct processes; constructed and then decorated or in my case painted. So I build a series of forms and apply layers of engobe and drawn marks to the surface I then cut sections from the pieces and then reconstructed the forms by swapping a section from one form into another.

Making these pieces and exploring and combining these techniques was not only a new learning experience it was like playing and was great fun. It was a stimulating environment to be within the atmosphere of the International Ceramics Studio and to work alongside other highly focused ceramics artists who were also developing their work. I would wake in the morning eager to get to my studio or open a kiln. Meals could easily be forgotten and working from dawn to midnight was not unusual. I found myself in a position where I was exploring the unfamiliar and not knowing what I was going to produce and that made me feel both excited and slightly nervous. I knew my artistic practice was being challenged and that my work was being pushed to another level and this was invigorating.

I was able to be less precious about my work and I could afford to take risks and make mistakes and this freedom has allowed me to push the boundaries of what I can do. Although some pieces, or aspects of some pieces, failed others have a freshness and expressive feel that I would not have been able to achieve without this freedom to explore. Now that these new methods and techniques have been learned I can exploit them in the work I will make in my own studio.

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Craig Underhill was born in Glasgow, Scotland. He earned a BA (Hons) at Portsmouth Polytechnic and now teaches part-time at Dudley College.

*Top left: Slab built vessel. Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced with layers of engobe, glaze, oxides and underglaze pencils. 29 cm.*

*Top centre: Slab built vessel. Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced using layers of engobes, fired porcelain grog, glaze and oxides. 22 cm.*

*Top right: Slab built vessel. Cut and reassembled during construction. Surface produced by transferring engobe from a newspaper surface, brushed engobe, glaze, oxides and underglaze pencils. 56 cm.*

*Below: Slab built vessel. Surface produced by transferring engobe from a newspaper surface, brushed engobe, glaze and printed images from photocopies. 28 x 32 cm.*

