Our love of craft, according to David Pye, owes much to the risky processes of their making, producing that much-admired quality in an object: diversity.1 The works in Alison Britton’s exhibition clearly possess this attribute, to the extent that three different orders of risk can be identified.

First, in her new work the renowned potter uses red earthenware, after learning about the material at a workshop in Shigaraki, Japan, in 2010. Overlaid with yellow slip and a transparent manganese glaze (a reference to traditions in stained glass), the combination demonstrates the merits of material experimentation. Then there is the risk of directly pouring glazes and slips on to the earthenware bodies – vases with erect spouts and tubes, and low horizontal dishes, too large to be defined as domestic. The risk here is less about primal danger, more a consideration of the tension between control and ‘letting go’ communicated through tool-use. However, the most significant risk was not in the material processes, but in placing the new work alongside objects from Britton’s own study collection. It’s risky because this strategy can be tantamount to celebrating an artist’s biography, subjectivity, and celebrity. Here, Britton’s contextual milieu is reflected in works by Richard See, Carol McNicol, and Jacqueline Poncélet, but these share the space with seemingly mundane, everyday objects. The line of cutlery, the high-fired white porcelain collected from trips abroad, the dishes, too large to be defined as domestic, but these share the space with seemingly mundane, everyday objects. The rhythm, pattern, and pause – in clay form. are stanzas made material, a disclosure of the shape of poetry – with its profound response. Here, the quietness is redolent of history, of technique, of the careful study needed to master any craft – be it poetry or pottery, and it is as suggestive of sound, texture, and sensation as it is silent. Out of the Marvellous features the work of five pairings of Ireland’s craftsmen and poets: some are long-established friends; others provide the starting point for new work. Yet in each, there is a sense of equivalence. The outcomes of these collaborations are exhibited together, poems, presented as large text panels, and objects sit side by side, seamlessly meshed together. There is the option to engage more directly with the material, discreetly placed headphones reveal the poets’ own voices, or hidden triggers reward the curious with snippets of poetry that are activated by touch.

For Dutch artist Sonja Landweer, Seamus Heaney ‘is simply inspiring to be with’. Her dense black vessels are exacting, and yet they ping with liveliness when read alongside Heaney’s poems. ‘Grey-blue, dull-shining, scentless, touchable – Like the earth’s old ointment box, sticky and cool.’ Similarly, Gerard Smyth’s poem, ‘A Decorative Art’, skilfully articulates the fluency and scope of Angela O’Kelly’s work. Like the collections of a discerning magpie, her jewellery – made from printed text, paper, felt, and yarn – ‘coil and stretch, flex and clench’ in lyrical fashion.

Yet it is Frances Lambe’s ceramic sculptures that, for me, provide the most meaningful connection. Formed from a variety of different clays from terracotta to white stoneware, her Sequence (6 Parts) evokes a gently evolving narrative, each piece becoming worn, smooth, and small. Juxtaposed with Derek Mahon’s beautifully detailed ‘Sand and Stars’, her Structure #1 and #2 are stanzas made material, a disclosure of the shape of poetry – with its rhythm, pattern, and pause – in clay form. Out of the Marvellous quietly asserts the eloquence of craft in both artforms. Just as a poem can provide texture, there is some essential quality in material that speaks to us, be it the curvature of woven basket forms, the lull of copper, or the warmth of sculpted clay.

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1 Seamus Heaney, ‘To a Dutch Potter in Ireland: For Sonja Landweer’

2 Gerard Smyth, ‘A Decorative Art: for Angela O’Kelly’