

Nuala Creed Nuala Creed Nuala Creed

Ceramic Archivist

Article by Susannah Israel

A SILENT ASSEMBLY STANDS IN THE GREAT ROOM OF THE Internet Archive in San Francisco. The former Christian Scientist church, a majestic, pure white building near Golden Gate Park, now houses a congregation in clay. Arrayed in rows of three between the wooden benches that are a legacy of the building's history, more than 80 ceramic figures stand alertly, their attention trained on the single figure on the stage. The visual rhythm of these standing figures is enhanced by the unusual setting. Ranked in rows along the benches, facing the stage, they look like spectators at an event. They are also references to the schoolroom, the democratic assembly in ancient Athens, or the massing of any diverse group gathered with a common purpose.

The single figure is *Brewster Kahle*, the founder of the Internet Archive, which is committed to archiving books for digital accessibility, preserving important print culture and providing free access to these resources on the Internet. Kahle's inspiration for the *Ceramic Archivists* came during his visit to China, where he saw the legendary terracotta figures from the tomb of Qin, the first Chinese emperor. He was deeply impressed with the figures and became interested in creating such a sculptural portrait of the workers at the Internet Archive. He subsequently commissioned Nuala Creed to create the

Ceramic Archivist project. Each sculpture represents an individual who has dedicated at least three years of service to the Archive. Creed has made 80 to date and plans to complete the project this year.

Like the sculptors who fashioned the Qin tomb figures, Creed is creating a lasting record of our times at the Internet Archive. While many other artists would be daunted by the invitation to create 100 ceramic portraits, the idea came as an intriguing challenge to Creed, who says, "I love this commission, it allows me to do what I love, to create figures in clay. The *Ceramic Archivists* are handbuilt and each figure is unique."

Concern with the unique individual has deep roots for Creed. She was born in Dublin, Ireland and moved to the US as a young adult. Creed says "I grew up in a small town in rural Ireland, one of seven kids." She did not have any clay instruction, but "spent my childhood making dolls and playing with mud."

Irish culture is an abiding foundation for Creed, who spent her teen years in a Catholic boarding school run by nuns in Dublin: "typical for middle-class kids at that time, in the 1960s. By the early 1970s 'counter-culture' had arrived in Ireland. It was an exciting time and it had a big influence on my life. It was a time of political awareness and exposure to (the) world other than Ireland. I spent my summers in London and ended up dropping out of college." In London, Creed faced anti-Irish discrimination and political fallout from 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland.

In the summer of 1979, Creed moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Unlike Europe, 'older' students attended college and she relished the freedom to determine her own course work.

Creed encountered ceramic sculpture when she took her first clay class in her late 30s and was immediately "seduced by it". She avidly pursued this new passion, choosing to study at the California College of the Arts, where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with high distinction in 1999. Creed now works independently and exhibits her ceramic figures widely.

When the Qin tomb figures were first unearthed in China in 1974, the substantial shock of the discovery was felt around the world. The faithful depiction of so many everyday individuals, engaged in their traditional and daily work, was a rich treasure for anthropologists, art historians, ceramists and cultural workers.



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It is interesting to note that Creed's project is also a genuine record of culture and place: San Francisco in the first two decades of the 21st century, showing what was typically worn, eaten and cherished, just as the tomb figures from China specifically inform our sense of history. But at the Internet Archive, the figures lining the benches in the great hall are intended not for entombment but for public access.

Portraits in clay have a long history and like most artwork based on patronage, they tend to favour, praise, exalt or somehow distinguish the patron. These clay portraits, however, are distinguished by their common condition as workers at the Internet Archive. Creed brings into focus the diverse range of humanity and the wide-ranging codes of dress and social relationships in the contemporary workplace.

Once Creed agreed to take on the *Ceramic Archivist* project, she developed new methods of working with each subject, using photographs and incorporating personal talismans such as favourite objects carried, significant details of clothing, hair and features. Creed works directly in clay, colouring the surfaces with oxides, underglazes and stains. Her technical rendering with the clay is straightforward, using slab and coil methods to construct sturdy replicas of each person, approximately half life size. The pieces are made in sections, fired to cone three (approximately 2100°F) and permanently attached after the firing. As each one is completed, the assembly in the great room increases.

Creed is adept at the gestural language of the figure. In a previous figurative series entitled *Fledglings*, she used clothing as a stand-in for the child figure. Open and headless, these child figures invite viewers to place themselves in the context that the costume creates, riding a wagon, playing with a pet and other familiar scenes. *Fledglings* demonstrated Creed's special skill at rendering clay in so lively a manner as to successfully suggest living persons.

The artist says "As I build the figure it is almost as though I am getting to know the person. Many of the figures are holding something, a coffee cup, book, cell phone, plate of cookies, knitting and so forth, which personalises them. Though I have made 80 of them to date, each piece still presents a challenge to convey the individual."

In Ireland, craft was a part of life for Creed. As a young child she learned to knit, mend clothing, bake, make simple baskets and sew. I find it remarkable that this makes a strong conceptual link to the current *Ceramic Archivist* project. The tactile quality of the objects personalising each figure makes a direct and familiar

connection among viewer, artist and clay portrait. The hot cardboard cup of coffee, the weight and shape of a laptop computer, the cushion and balance of a sports shoe sole on the concrete floor, are inherently physical experiences we all share. The connections made are both subtle and effective. In working with workers, she has engaged the essential humanity of the workplace, a faithful and insightful image. The empirical sense of understanding the feeling of this piece has everything to do with its making. We meet it and learn it, person by person.

Harnessing the medium of clay, with its millennia of human history, to the era of post-print high-technology, Nuala Creed has imbued these portraits of 100 contemporary workers with individuality and created a telling snapshot of our times, along with an excellent view of the dedicated skill of the artist. The *Ceramic Archivists* stand ready to tell their stories to future generations.

Susannah Israel's work appears in private and public collections around the world, including the American Ceramics Collection, Mint Museum, the Archie Bray Foundation, Mission Clay and the Toki collection. Israel received a Virginia A Groot Foundation grant, an NCECA Resident Scholarship to Archie Bray and a Distinguished Faculty Service Award for curriculum, among many honours. Recent work with theatrical costumes can be seen in the Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taiwan. She is the only artist from the US ever to win the Fletcher Challenge Premier Award for her piece, *Lobo California*, now in the permanent collection in New Zealand.

