

Light Becomes Art

Award-winning Irish light sculptor Niamh Barry talks to us about her abstract bronze and LED lighting.

'ARTIST'S HAND' UNIQUE 2020



Aclaimed light sculptor Niamh Barry was born in Dublin, Ireland, where she still works and lives. She graduated from the National College of Art and Design with a major in ceramics but quickly moved towards working with metal and glass. In 1991, upon her graduation Niamh opened her own studio where she has mainly focused on light art; sinuous bronze forms illuminated by delicate LED lighting behind cut glass. Her work makes physical the juxtaposition between the purity of a drawn line and the suggestion of movement in a weighty yet delicate 3D form, and uses state-of-the-art engineering supporting traditional craft metal and glasswork techniques.

YOU HAVE A BACKGROUND IN CERAMICS – WHAT DREW YOU TO METAL AND LIGHT?

My degree is in ceramics though I also studied metal and glass. I don't know why I chose ceramics as my major but the moment I finished my degree it was all about metal, I never worked in clay again! It's the right material for me – it's so 'there', so tangible and direct, what you see is what you get. Ceramics involves so many stages, unknowns and time delays, and I like to work quickly and intuitively. In every step of the process with metal I know what's in front of me. It's very satisfying; labour-intensive but satisfying.

WHAT INSPIRES AND EXCITES YOU ABOUT LIGHTING?

Light rather than lighting is what inspires me and the ability to use modern lighting technology to 'draw' with light and bronze excites me. I think my first introduction to light was fire. I love an open flame of any kind and can not live without it. My art is intuitive, inspired by cloud formations, bare branches,

and even the low winter sun. I add light to my bronze sculptures because light brings a piece to life. I've always been a person in love with fire. Light is the same way, it draws people.

WHAT IS YOUR CREATIVE WORK PROCESS?

My process involves rapid sketching then moving on to modelling it in 3D in the form of a bronze maquette which is where I finalise the finished form. Sketches are about catching the essence and 'feel' but my maquettes are a true composition in the round. I am completely 3D in my approach to my work so it's from the maquette that I realise the finished piece. Therefore I might spend days and days on it – I'll make a small change, walk away, come back, tweak it again. It's a process that I relish, truly creative and free.

IS YOUR WORK MORE SCULPTURE OR LIGHTING?

Good question! I see it as both. It straddles both disciplines and I believe it is exactly for those reasons that it works.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT WHO BUYS YOUR WORK?

Almost everything I make is for private collectors. The approach is always the same. The purity of dialogue between the piece and the space it will exist within. I am just now working on the largest commission of my career and this is a very involved and close working relationship with the client.

WHAT ARE YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE?

Well of course the Lit award which I am sure you are aware of. A 16 month solo exhibition of my work in the National Museum of Ireland. My children, my marriage.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR TEAM AND WORK PLACE

There's a lifetime's experience that goes into my work, in that I have honed my craft over the 30 years that I've been designing and creating my art, and I work with a fantastic team of incredibly committed and talented craftspeople and admin. I actually think that the dynamic that has grown and been fostered over the last decade in my studio has to be another one of my/our successes... now that I think if it. To walk into my studio any day and engage with any one of the team about the work and see the level of craftsmanship and pride that they have is incredibly rewarding and I couldn't do any of it without them.

IS THERE A PARTICULAR AVENUE THAT YOU WANT TO EXPLORE?

I am interested to explore the avenue of colour.

LIT Lighting Design Awards

Niamh Barry won the LT 2020 Lighting Product Design of the Year with 'Artist's Hand' Unique 2020 (shown opposite), a series based on the concept of drawing with bronze in mid air. niamhbarry.com

