

Shed light on the topic: New exhibition of Niamh Barry's light sculptures

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A design retrospective informed by transatlantic journeys, serendipitous meetings, recession, and a whole host of plot twists launches next week at the National Museum of Ireland, writes **Carol O'Callaghan**.



Propulsion is made with mirrored polished hand forms, solid bronze light sculpture and opal glass and LEDs.

Everything comes to those who wait, a wise person once said. For Jennifer Goff, curator of a new exhibition which opens on Friday, November 30 at the National Museum of Ireland, it took 10 years.

The focus of the exhibition called Light on Earth forms a retrospective on the career to date of Irish artist and designer Niamh Barry, whose work with light sculpture using bronze and LED technology from the earliest days of its development has made her name internationally.



Light artist and designer Niamh Barry with her first piece Fouette.

But it was 10 years ago when Jennifer was lecturing in America that she first came across Niamh who was making her name abroad.

“Everyone was talking about her and how she was using this LED technology in a groundbreaking way,” says Jennifer.

“I saw her initial piece, Fouette, and wanted it for the National Museum of Ireland’s collection, but recession hit and money was tight.”

At the same time Niamh had become a regular on the commercial design exhibition circuit, and the most prestigious and carefully curated ones at that, picking up gallery representation from the likes of Todd Merrill, and later Maison Gerard in New York and Sarah Myerscough in London along the way.

Born in Dublin and, having trained in ceramics at the National College of Art and Design, her career, initially, took off on a very different tangent.

“I worked in film and television and art direction and lighting and learned a huge amount about how to deal with craftspeople, delegating and lighting,” she says. “But a few years of that and I was drawn to sketching and wanted a voice of my own.”



Gesture II is a mirror polished, hand-formed solid bronze light sculpture, with opal glass mosaic and LEDs.

This change produced a range of handmade lamps, followed by an approach by the Merrion Hotel to make bespoke pieces, and from there to working on commercial lighting for top hotels in Ireland and abroad.

But it was in the quiet periods during the recession years which fuelled new ideas, giving Niamh a chance to reflect and focus on sculptural pieces which took her work in a new direction.

By 2016, and with an established commercial and private client list, and a reputation for making bronze LED light sculptures, the quality of which means they take hundreds of hours to produce, Jennifer Goff re- entered the picture. “I was at the Salon Art & Design Fair in New York and saw Niamh’s work there. It was incredible, and to see the reaction of New Yorkers to it.”

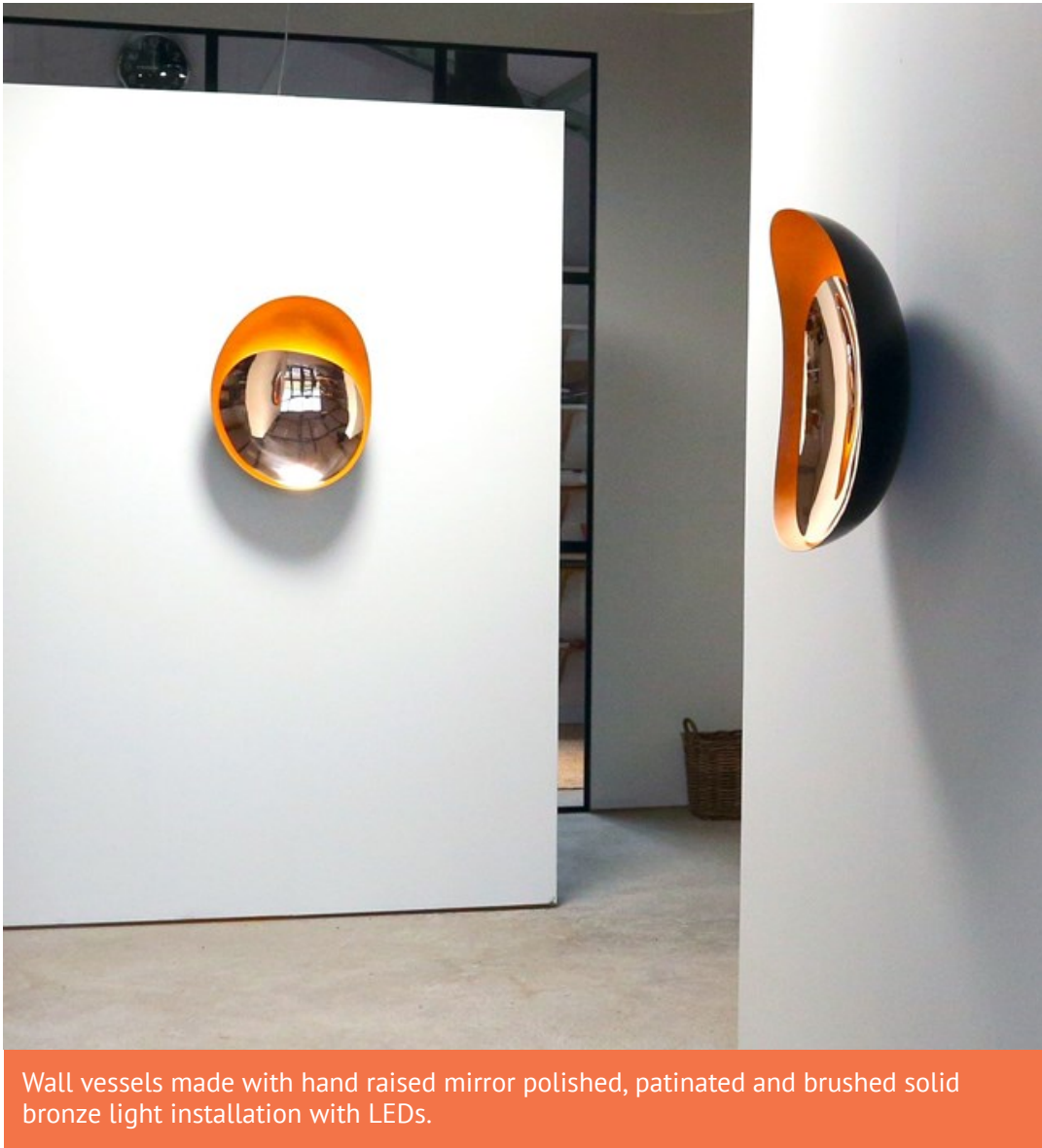
What followed was a series of meetings between the two women at Niamh’s studio in Lusk, Co Dublin.

“I noticed straight away that she still had Fouette,” says Jennifer, “and sketches and models of her work over the years. Designers never see the value in these, they focus on the finished product, but I started to see an exhibition with these evolve.”

Two years on and the exhibition is now a reality, showing eight major pieces, 20 sketch models and two Perspex models, plus a programme of lectures, workshops and a conference on women in design due to take place next year.

Unusual though it is for someone at this stage of their career to have a retrospective as they are, by definition, a look back over the entire career of an artist, it’s an acknowledgement of Niamh’s body of work, her innovation and the reputation she has built in the last decade.

But for Jennifer, there was additional motivation for mooted the exhibition two years ago. “We don’t want the same mistake that we had with Eileen Gray, where she was largely unknown here but celebrated internationally,” says Jennifer.



Wall vessels made with hand raised mirror polished, patinated and brushed solid bronze light installation with LEDs.

Niamh, herself, sees the exhibition as a marker in her career, and one of which she is proud as it's the first time she has shown her work in her home country and a first anywhere in a museum setting.

As for Fouette, the light which Jennifer tried to acquire for the museum all those years ago, she now has the satisfaction of seeing it as part of the exhibition. Fouette will remain at the National Museum of Ireland as part of our national collection, thanks to the considerable generosity of Niamh Barry. You see, everything really does come to those who wait.

- Light on Earth, a retrospective on the work of designer Niamh Barry at the National Museum of Ireland. 30 November 2018 – December 2019. Admission free. www.museum.ie