# a place in the world

contemporary vessels by jack doherty

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*For our house is our corner of the world.*
*As has often been said it is our first experience of the universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.*

**Gaston Bachelard**; The Poetics of Space

# introduction

A Place In The World is a solo exhibition of contemporary ceramic vessels by Jack Doherty. A house, which is also our home, provides an architectural framework and domestic context for a collaboration between artist and curator.

From the first time we encountered Garden House we knew we had discovered a special place. A fine Georgian property hidden within a high walled garden looking out to sea and once home to a Naval Captain who kept his family safe here. Garden House is indeed an ordinary home where everyday events occur but it is also an extraordinary, inspiring and creative place to live and work.

Jack Doherty has made a substantial body of new work in response to Garden House. Whilst retaining a truth to materials and simplicity of form integral to Doherty's work, this exhibition also reflects a significant shift in the artists work from the domestic scale and traditional values of studio pottery to the more conceptual by examining the relationship of ceramics in a contemporary context.

Beyond conventional use, the vessel forms have been made to articulate the architectural features and site-specific spaces within the rooms of the house. They create a dialogue with the viewer and the people who live here. The interaction with the physical spaces in the building record, inform and transform the work whilst reflecting a wider abstract understanding of function and use in daily living.

Born in Co Derry, Northern Ireland, Doherty trained in Ceramics at the Ulster College of Art and Design in Belfast. Passionately involved with ceramics for many years he has exhibited widely in the UK and abroad. His experience as an internationally renowned maker has led to his involvement in many areas such as lecturing, writing and organising events including Ceramic Art London. As Chair of the Craft Potters Association, he has been at the forefront of promoting contemporary ceramics. Doherty is currently Lead Potter and Creative Director of the Leach Pottery in St Ives, Cornwall.

My special thanks go to Professor Simon Olding and Dr Eleanor Flegg for their insightful and generous contributions to the catalogue and to photographer Rebecca Peters for her visual documentation of the project.

Extended thanks go to all the staff at University College Falmouth and Partnership Organisations; Tate St Ives, Newlyn Art Gallery & The Exchange and Projectbase. In particular to Dr Virginia Button and Kate Southworth for sharing their knowledge and experience in the professional field of curatorial practice and my MA Curatorial Practice cohort for their support throughout the year.

Finally I wish to thank my creative collaborator and partner in this adventure, Jack Doherty. Thank you for bringing pots into my life and for sharing and shaping the intimacy and immensity of this project with me.

**Sarah Frangleton**
Curator

# foreword

Jack Doherty's Cornish studio is situated in one of the most symbolic locations that a ceramic artist could find. It's a light, airy room in the attic of The Leach Pottery in St Ives. The room is unpretentious, clearly put to hard work and highly charged with the history of modern ceramics. It is the room where Bernard Leach once worked.
The studio is domestic in scale even as it is weighted with history. There is a palpable sense of Leach here; and, more pertinent to Doherty's own consummate control of clay, slip and firing, of internationally celebrated pots being considered, pre drawn, manipulated and made in this hallowed ceramic space. It is both an ordinary and extraordinary room.

**Home-Harbour**
The project to exhibit Jack Doherty's pots with specific curatorial care in Garden House in Mousehole also marks a move from ordinary to extraordinary. Doherty maintains a studio here as well, so the new work has a very direct connection to place. It shifts a change of gear from the domestic to the galleried: by weight of numbers; by the elegant poise of Doherty's ceramic forms and the liquidity of their finishes. The series builds on Doherty's deft abstract slip-layering and his facility with soda firing as a means of coating the fine porcelain body of his vessels with the inexhaustible variety of the marks of the sea. These pots carry with them the trace of the harbour waters and sand of St Ives and Mousehole, from one sea-edge of Cornwall to the other.

This domestic installation touches on a number of strands in contemporary ceramic practice: from the seemingly prosaic to the metaphorical. The dense spread of these 'pots-at-home' has a heritage back- story. Many contemporary makers, most notably Edmund de Waal, have taken their work into the by- ways, or onto the ledges and library shelves of once domestic spaces: High Cross House in Devon or Blackwell in Cumbria. These clay settlements tell us something about the clarity of Modernism or the adaptability of an Arts and Crafts interior. They are staged installations that help to turn the once private home into the public museum.

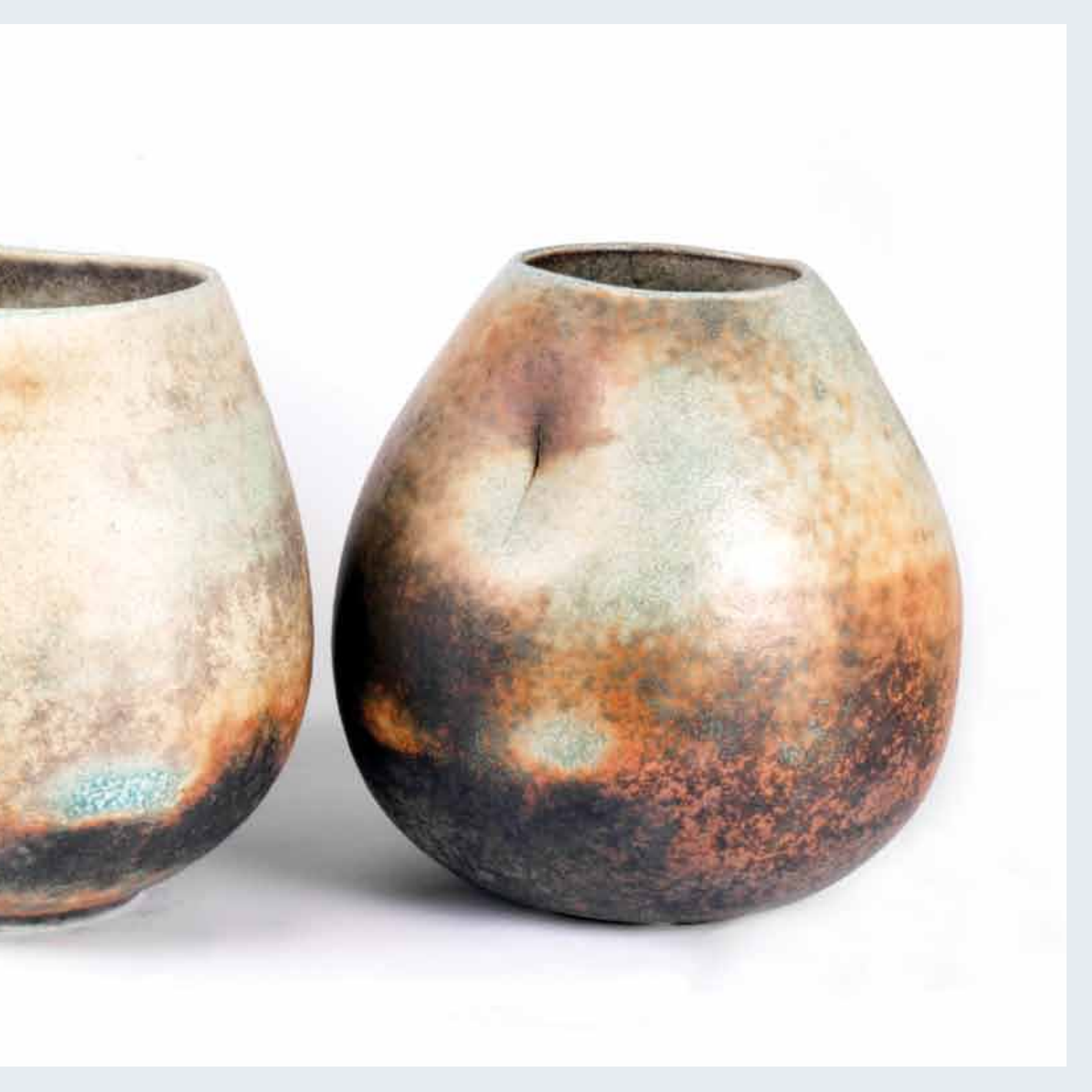
We can read these works as interlopers or commentators. They can disrupt the narrative of a visit as much as inform it. A pot will sit where a library book ought to be; or it may sit where a pot would hardly ever expect to be.
At the other end of this scale is the inexorable rise (for the good, I should say) of the Artist's Open Studio and Open House. These spaces are far less mannered, often jumbled and sometimes discordant. People come for reasons of high ceramic probity and sometimes for low cultural snooping.

Jack Doherty has found his own course between these extremes in what has been called ceramic's 'Expanded Field'. We can deduce from this phrase that the place of the clay object no longer needs to be bound to the home, gallery or museum. Professionalised clay can turn up anywhere: mostly fired, sometimes not. There are multiple sites for display and intervention: off the plinth, in amidst heritage; larking about in the garden; seriously symbolic; sometimes deliberately broken. Tamed or wild. Domesticated or feral.

**Garden House**
Here in Doherty's home, his pots command the rooms. These poised, elegant, articulate vessels bring the sea of Cornwall into the harbour-home. They call out for the sea. The massing of pillars and the sweep of his refined and surely-thrown vessels float on the trim bases marked with a mariner-potter's impress. They are pots for contemplation as much as use. They may find a final resting place on a sideboard or in a special place for reflection.

They are of the sea and the land and the travels and imaginings that take place there.

**Simon Olding**
Director, Crafts Study Centre, Farnham




the camaraderie
of objects

The exhibition at Garden House explores ideas around home and function but not necessarily utility. The site-sensitive ceramic vessels and installations have been made in direct response to a home environment actively engaging in the architectural spaces where the work is to be encountered. No longer purely utilitarian, these abstract vessels do not conform to conventional use. Doherty questions the vernacular of domesticity and functionality. He describes himself as being; *Interested in the usefulness of things. Archetypal forms from history are touchstones in my practice. Vessels made for a contemporary context can be solitary and contemplative or ceremonial; for everyday or a special occasion. I question their place in the world.*

Doherty challenges the rules of refinement and containment through the fluidity and energy of his work. Exploring both porcelain and the opposing qualities of stoneware, the vessels and sculptural forms he makes are thrown on the potters wheel then carved and shaped; reflecting the physicality of making and the process of firing. Doherty calls these abstract functional pots *belligerent and rebellious*. These subversive vessels do not conform, but challenge our fundamental knowledge and intuitive connection with the universal. We are familiar with the forms and understand the shapes instinctively. Doherty comments; *My pots are extraordinarily simple. Bowls, cylinders and lidded things. These are known objects and through their shapes and forms tell a familiar story. When we can truly see them in clear light or shadow, taken unaware by a flash of blue, the swell of a rounded form or the roughness of an edge, they can connect us emotionally to a stream of deeper knowing.*

Since the beginnings of civilisation mankind has created clay vessels for practical application. As society evolves we no longer need pots out of 'necessity' and survival. Doherty envisages a community of objects embedded with ancient stories and contemporary narratives; the passage of life from birth to death. These essential objects for living in a contemporary world are layered with aesthetic, visceral and spiritual meaning within the shared and negotiated terrain of home.

The presence of these vessels is secure and bold. The imposing cradle forms of the guardian bowls stand in place of family portraits on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. Expansive in their capacity to hold and protect, their quiet authority over the space is commanding. The sensual sentinel pod forms keep a watchful eye but they also contain a vulnerability and fragility within their void. A reminder that home is not always comfortable and nurturing, it can also be a place in which to confront our fears.

Within the intimate space of the bedroom a line of porcelain cups and bowls are delicately poised, floating at horizon level. They are balanced between states of sleep and waking at risk of falling. Their purpose to hold dreams, desires and aspirations. The enclosed lidded keeper jars, gentle melancholic reliquaries, recognise our need to remember and store memories. Both bitter and sweet, these are for keeping secrets safe and hiding precious thoughts.

A family of cylindrical vessels creates a fractured intervention within the shared experiences of inhabited space. *Skelf*, an Irish word meaning splinter, suggests something disruptive which gets under your skin. There is a companionship and camaraderie between these objects of mutual understanding, trust and kinship. They share a language of common ground and belonging. They have found a place in the world.

**Sarah Frangleton**
Curator

# the fragility of home

*Life goes on grinding up*
*glass, wearing out clothes*
*making fragments*
*breaking down*
*forms*
*and what lasts through time*
*is like an island on a ship in the sea,*
*perishable*
*surrounded by dangerous fragility*
*by merciless waters and threats.*

**from Pablo Neruda,**
**Ode to Broken Things**

Sophisticated as we are, we are never far away from the concept of the cave. The warm, dry, defensible space is deep in our remembering. Here, there is a cave, and fire within the cave, and the simple vessels that were once part of the fabric of human survival. Clay was dug, and shaped, and fired into simple forms, and these forms became embedded in the human mind. Even now, with the same instinct that we fear dark corners and high places, the pot – or the memory of the pot – remains a place of safety in a dangerous world. The pot was once the protector of the people for whom it was made. Without the storage capacity of the jar, high-walled and lidded, the tribe is thrown back into the teeth of winter. Their food is prepared in a cooking pot and shared from an open-hearted bowl. And because of the water jar, round-bellied and curved at base, those that cannot make it to the river can drink. When we carry water for others in the tribe we become something beyond ourselves, the pot is an expression of humanity, possibly even love. In these ways, the pot carried life. But it also contained death: a receptacle for bones and the ashes of bones, a vessel to carry the spirit between the worlds. For thousands of years, the pot has been a cradle of dreams.

So what place in the contemporary world for the potter and the pot? But they are doing what they always did. The making of things is hard-wired into the human soul. It emerges through the generations like an aberrant gene, the ancestral urge to make vessels out of clay. The pots are no more or no less than they always were – this one can pour and that one can store, the other can keep things safe from harm – but they no longer stand between us and danger. Their meaning has changed. The Neolithic pot had meaning because it contained something that was needed, but once pots were no longer essential for our survival, pottery became a philosophical quest. Ancient pots were decorated (the desire

to embellish is as old as the hills) but it was the inside that mattered more. Now the order of their importance has been reversed and exterior surfaces take precedence over interior volumes. The maker, and the maker's expressive intent, is considered more important than the needs of the user. But this, Akiko Busch writes, is how objects acquire meaning: 'they begin by signifying one thing, then start to represent the very opposite. They are filled with contradictions, at which point they become embedded in one's psyche.' [I]

The place of the pot within the home has also been disrupted. Stillness, the quiet time in which the valued substance rests in safekeeping, has gone from the life of pots. Storage in the home has become invisible. Information accumulates, poetically, in clouds and money changes hands by electronic impulse. We trust so deeply in the public supply of grain that we do not store it in the home. Food is refrigerated, plastically sealed and ceramic jars are used for aesthetic or nostalgic reasons. There are more efficient places to keep things now. The kinetic life of pots too, the pouring of liquid from one vessel into another, has been replaced by automation. Pouring is everywhere within the house. Water circulates the grumbling pipes, is hidden in machinery, gushes from taps and swirls away through sewer and plug. It is not so many generations since every drop was carried by hand. Automation has changed the sounds with which the building speaks to its occupants. The home has a language of its own: 'not only the slight sounds, hums, and vibrations of all the electrical appliances that keep it going, but a host of other interior systems, a network of social and cultural currents, those habits, beliefs and values that also make it function.' [II] By listening to these systems, Busch argues, we might arrive at a genuine understanding of what it is that gives power to the places that we live.[III]

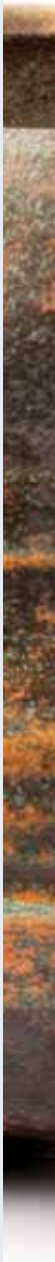
What we look for in a building, Alain de Botton writes, 'is not in the end so very far from what we search for in a friend' and the objects we describe as beautiful are versions of the people that we love.[IV] A building, once lived in, is the physical aspect of home. This is a more complex and fragile construct altogether, a delicate and precarious balance of building materials, financial arrangements, and personal agreements. In this way a house, for all its apparent stability, communicates an illusory sense of permanence. But it is the impermanence of the human relationships within it, even of the people themselves, that give it emotional poignancy. It takes, de Botton argues, a certain amount of life experience to appreciate this: 'We may need to have made an indelible mark on our lives, to have married the wrong person, pursued an unfulfilling career into middle age or lost a loved one before architecture can begin to have an perceptible impact on us, for when we speak of being 'moved' by a building, we allude to a bitter-sweet feeling of contrast between the noble qualities written into a structure and the sadder wider reality within which we know them to exist.' [V] But there may be a way in which the people who live in a building also become it. The cells of their skin become the dust that lodges between the floorboards and their sweat, the embodiment of

hopes and dreams, is absorbed into the plaster of the walls. We linger, in this way, in places that we once lived. The fabric of the building retains the physical traces of our passing and it is possible that a building can also communicate the way that we felt when we lived in there.

Adrift in such stormy existential seas, design is a way of putting order on the world and objects within the home have symbolic, as well as practical, functions. Tables for example, as Pablo Neruda suggests, 'are trustworthy: titanic quadrupeds, they sustain our hopes and our daily life.' [VI] And the act of setting a table, that 'small acreage of symmetry and ceremony' with its semi-redundant formalities, is one of courage. [VII] In this way, 'small domestic rituals can quiet the mayhem of the human spirit.' [VIII] The simple pot, likewise, is an expression of faith. Reinvented as a contemporary art form, it is no longer essential to daily life but yet, because of its functional ancestry, it has a quality that neither painting nor abstract sculpture can offer. Because the vessel form embodies primitive memories of survival, the pot is a powerful talisman of protection within the home. We are surrounded by equipment that will keep us safe, the burglar alarm and the deadbolt door, but protection itself is a more complex question, 'its most reliable accessories more difficult to determine'. [IX] The pot, a vessel that once stood between us and harm, is one of these. It connects us with the fragility of human existence in the wider world.

**Dr. Eleanor Flegg**, writer and craft historian

I Busch, Akiko, The Uncommon Life of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday, New York: Metropolis Books, 2005, p151
II Busch, Akiko, The Geography of Home, New York : Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p163
III *Ibid*
IV De Botton, Alain, The Architecture of Happiness, London: Penguin, 2007, p88
V *Ibid* p22
VI Neruda, Pablo, Ode to the Table
VII Busch, Akiko, The Geography of Home, New York : Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p60
VIII *Ibid* p55
IX Busch, Akiko, The Uncommon Life of Common Objects: Essays on Design and the Everyday, New York: Metropolis Books, 2005, p34



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*Foreword:*
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*The Camaraderie Of Objects:*
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*Fragility of Home:*
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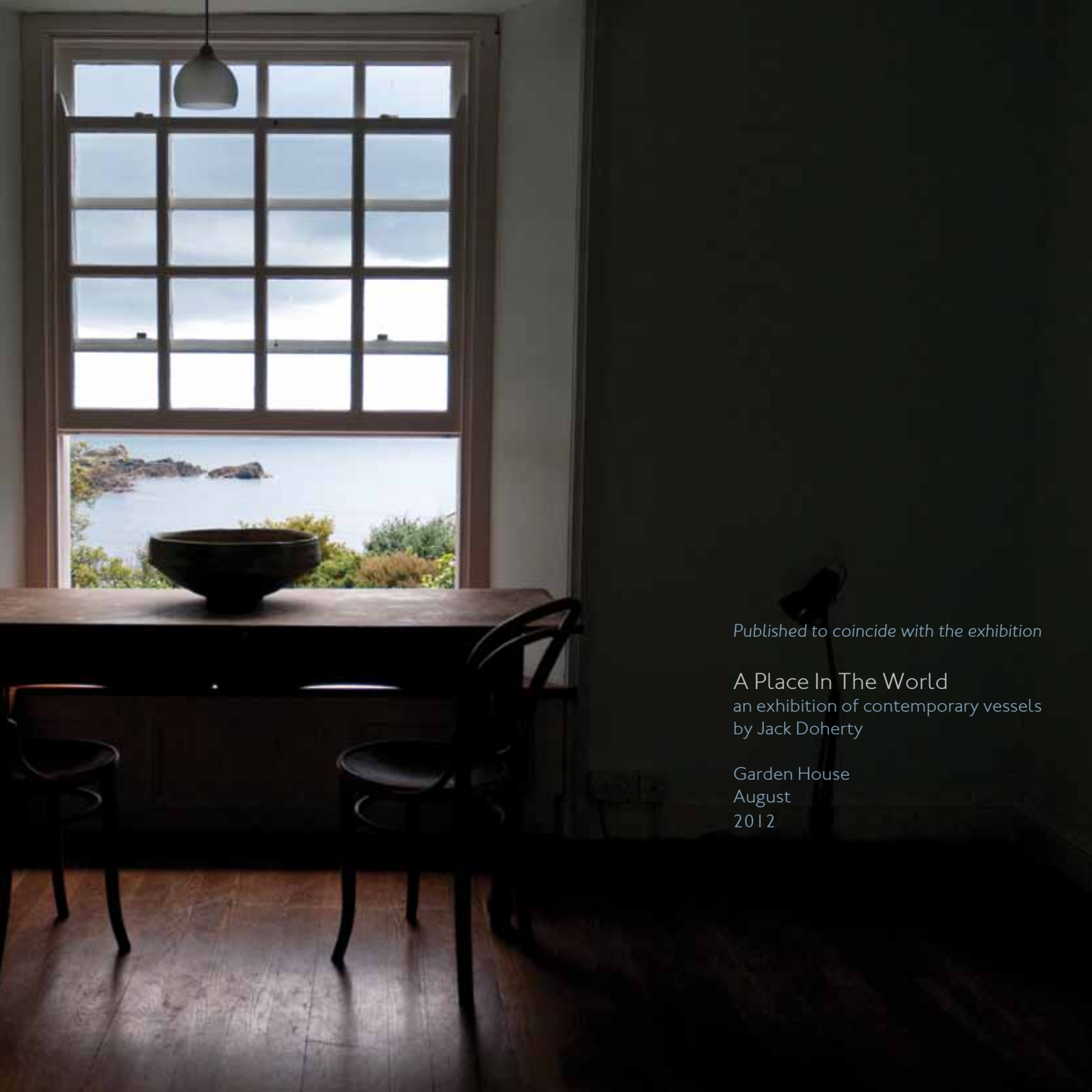
*Visual Documentation:*
**Rebecca Peters** Photographer
rebeccapeters.co.uk

*Website and Catalogue Design:*
**Erwin Van Wanrooy** | adifferentdesign.co

University College Falmouth;
**Dr Virginia Button** Head of the Department of Art
**Kate Southworth** Award Leader, MA Curatorial Practice
MA Curatorial Practice colleagues 2012

*Also thanks to;*
**Laura Gray** Curator and Research Fellow
**Nick Brierly** Technical Support
**Laura Jones** lunodesign.co.uk



*Published to coincide with the exhibition*

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an exhibition of contemporary vessels
by Jack Doherty

Garden House
August
2012