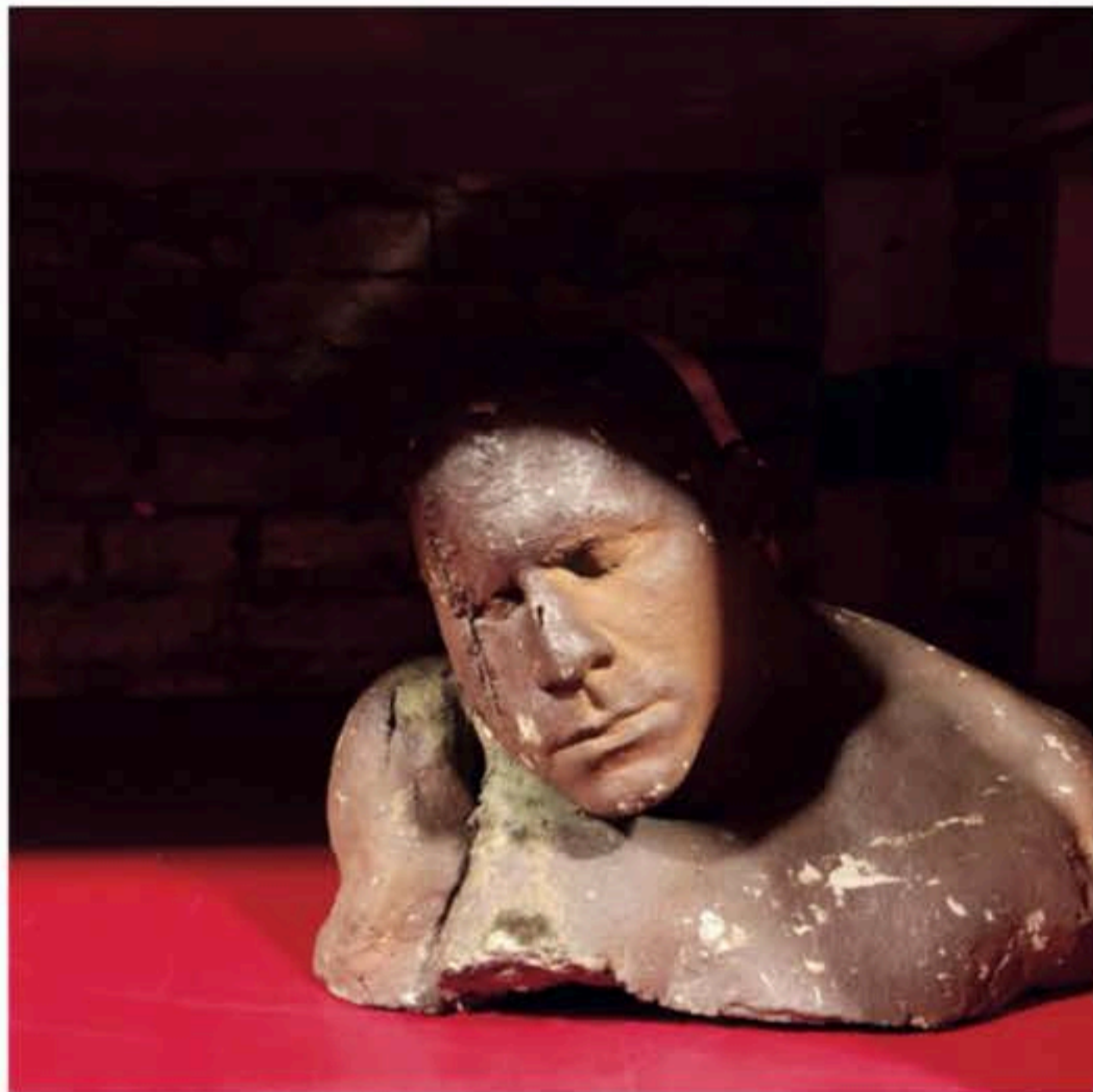


# Basement of treasures



While resident at the International Ceramics Studio in Hungary, *Tim Martin* discovered a subterranean store of ceramic art dating back to the 1970s. He tells us more about his finds



Fusz György

Every so often during my time as artist-in-residence at Hungary's International Ceramics Studio (ICS), I would pass a set of heavily padlocked doors next to my workroom and feel an unmistakable draught drifting out between the cracks. I would squint between the doors: the daylight revealing stairs leading steeply to a deep basement. 'There's a mystery down there,' I thought, and as it turned out, I was right.

The ICS compound in Kecskemét is the result of acquiring humble worker's homes and barns over 44 years. They jostle together on one block, and are now studios, sleeping quarters, exhibition and conference spaces, kiln and glaze yards. To wander through the various walled courtyards of the ICS is to be part of a unique European ceramic heritage. Wood-fired kilns pepper the spaces, bands of stacked timber line the perimeters and elegant trees offer shade in summer. The setting feels rural but surprisingly it is a short walk away from the town centre. The lively farmer's market – for which Kecskemét is famous – is just moments away. For a visiting artist eager to focus on work in a large studio and be immersed in a new and distinct culture, it is a ceramic utopia.

The ICS began in 1977 with the desire for artists to revive their cultural roots and gain a greater freedom of expression during a climate of oppressive politics. Its

founder, János Probstner, wanted the spirit of his 'cloister of clay' to be 'the experience of freedom', and by so doing, he encouraged the centre to be internationally accessible. Summer camps and annual symposiums accompanied residencies and programmes, and it grew over the decades.

#### SECRETS REVEALED

Normally buzzing with artists, students and courses, the ICS has been in hibernation due to the coronavirus pandemic restrictions. I recently spent four 'lockdown' months as artist-in-residence, sheltered in some respects from the chaos erupting around the world, and working steadily on new work. I watched as the seasons changed, travel stopped and the world shrunk. My days irised down: wake, work, walk and cook. The focus paid off and it turned out to be an enormously productive and explorative time.

But the institution has something else to offer other than studio space and focused time, and, like many hidden treasures, it is underground. Those gnarled wooden doors next to my studio were eventually unlocked to reveal their secrets: a rabbit warren of chilly vaulted rooms and corridors, which held a trove of ceramic works collected from each resident artist who has stayed and worked here. Ancient storage cellars had been transformed into a subterranean museum. Not your usual standard museum

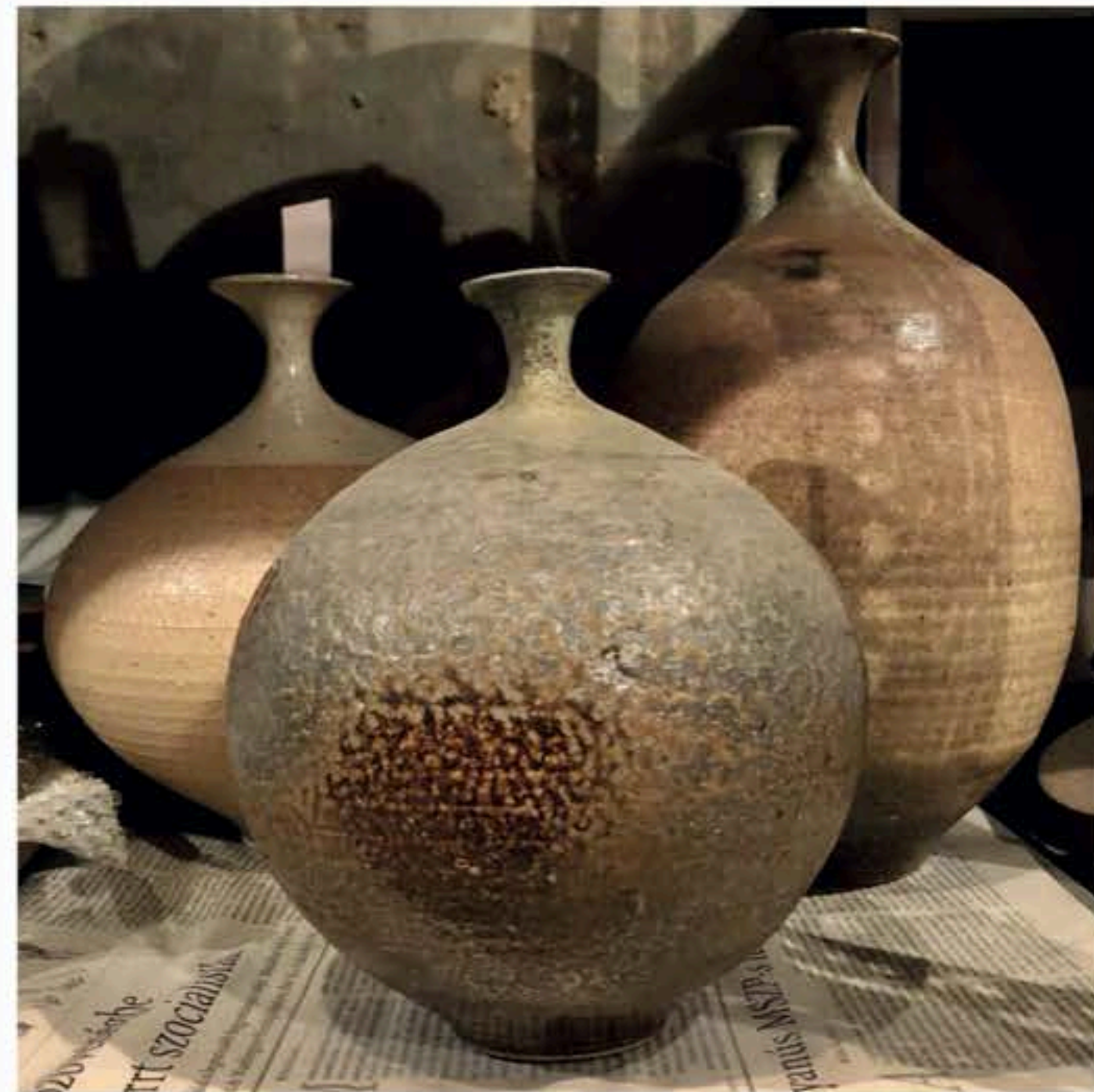
Images: Tim Martin and Mária Geszler Garzuly



Mária Geszler Garzuly



Akio Takamori



Fred Olsen

but a valuable, well-archived collection of more than 3,600 pieces of ceramic work from over 500 artists, originating from around 45 countries. The distinctive feature of the collection is that all the pieces were made here at the Studio complex: it has become a unique cultural record of global ceramic practice and art.

Wandering around the labyrinth of corridors is, in itself, an experience. The air is freezing and alert, as if you've been lowered into a deep cavern. Artworks are laid out on shiny red shelves, with larger pieces lurking in corners and against brick walls. Porcelain jostles with burnished earthenware; gaudy glazes with blackened raku firings. Clay faces stare out at you, totems are piled high, lustres flash and glossy vessels catch the light. And there are the labels alongside each work: Michael Flynn, Vladimir Tsivin, Regina Heinz, Paul Soldner, Gustavo Perez, Sergei Isupov, Ivan Jelinek, among the many. All have been artists-in-residence, sharing the studios and kilns, exchanging ideas and processes, cooking, drinking and living the ceramic dream.

#### LIFE ON DISPLAY

A quick stroll around the cellar is impossible; every shelf holds a world of rich discovery. Non-functional sculpture is by far prominent, and all the big questions of life appear

*Ancient storage cellars had been transformed into a subterranean museum with a well-archived collection of more than 3,600 pieces of ceramic works from over 500 artists*

to be on display: references to politics, feminism, history, design, what it is to be human, what it is to feel.

Some luminaries stand out. Hungarian artist Fusz György's presence looms large here at Kecskemét. An influential teacher in many Hungarian ceramic schools, his works emit strange, powerful, ancient energies. His sculptures are rough and mangled, and unapologetically undecorated. They rise up from the earth, alien and primordial. Figures are grotesque, deformed and predatory, often suggesting a death-mask. His ceramics breathe with an emotional weight.

Mária Geszler Garzuly is another artistic force from Hungary, with 40 years of working and firing at Kecskemét.

Her pieces are largely autobiographical and use white porcelain as the main medium. Garzuly has developed several transfer techniques, which lend an ethereal, illustrative quality to her work, whether it is figurative, impressionistic or abstract. She instructs her wet porcelain like a master: folding, curving, bowing. I had never seen porcelain show so much power.

I pass a shelf with a group of standing figures in conversation by Akio Takamori, who taught ceramics in Seattle, Washington. He is known for portraying historical characters, contemporary society and rural villagers, evoked from the artist's childhood in Japan. His work draws on shared human relationships: it is subtle and alive with nuanced expressions, inner thoughts, simple postures. I dare to look a little closer... I'm sure his figures are breathing.

#### CERAMIC STORIES

Other names and work I immediately recognise. Janet Mansfield's thrown and salt-glazed stoneware jars are reminiscent of the hues and textures of the Australian desert. Simon Zsolt József's brutally jagged cast porcelain shapes suggest open flowers and other flora. Fred Olsen's wood-fired pots stand proud with their elegant necks and full bellies. Olsen returned to Kecskemét again and

again to build kilns, as he also did at Guldagergaard International Ceramic Studios in Denmark.

I retrace my steps, lock the cellar doors behind me and go back to my studio, pondering this astonishing ceramic cache now returned to darkness beneath my feet. But it is as if the pieces are in suspension, waiting for something, needing to see the light. A celebration of the collection's 40 years was held in 2017, and further exhibitions are most likely in the works. But a collection of this size and importance belongs in a permanent museum space where it can be appreciated. It chronicles so many regional and international contemporary artists, and, importantly, it offers a compelling snapshot of four and a half decades of ceramic thought, method and collaboration.

It seems to me that what the art and ceramic world could do with right now, when we return to some sort of normalcy, is to share and celebrate as much work as we can. I hope that one day the collection has a larger, ongoing audience – ceramic and otherwise – so it can help tell the compelling stories of the many wonderful artists who have passed through the gates of Hungary's very special International Ceramics Studio. ■

*International Ceramics Studio, Hungary; [icshu.org](http://icshu.org)  
Follow Tim Martin on Instagram @timmartinworkshop*