

The Music of the Bowls

Belinda McKeown, The Irish Times, June 2000



Its walls lined with books, hung with paintings and fitted with shelves to display the woodturned vessels with which he is making his name, Roger Bennett's front room is the perfect setting in which to take a portrait of the artist. Here, their exhibits and instruments spread before them, Dublin-based Bennett and Rob Canning, the Wicklow composer, are poised to talk about their work in a collaborative project pairing designers with composers, called *Containers*, which premiered at the Galway Arts Festival and is now running at the Bridge Gallery, Dublin. Everything in this room is calm, adroit, orderly.

As befits someone who spent years as an English teacher, Bennett is particularly well-prepared for the interrogation, armed with a set of notes listing all those things so important to mention, so typically forgotten as a conversation takes its natural course. But the element of the unpredictable is close by. Gestures, laughter, deliberations shake the table around which we sit as Canning's instruments - a set of Tibetan singing bowls in a dull, silvery metal - begin to resonate, their humming and chiming sounding the note for that spontaneous participation which is the objective of the *Containers* project.

Containers is the brainchild of curators Sean McCrum and Hilary Morley who, taking as their starting point the idea that good design is a two-way process which incorporates both the designer and the user, last year put together the exhibition *Chairs* for the Galway Arts Festival, one of its highlights. And just as visitors to that exhibition were encouraged not simply to stand and look at the pieces, but to try them out by sitting down and making themselves comfortable, so, this year,

visitors to *Containers* were asked to take design beyond the boundaries of display by feeling free to participate, to touch and lift the containers in the exhibition.

Roger Bennett stresses that this idea of freedom was a vital element of the project from the beginning: "We weren't commissioned to create these pieces," he points out. "Rather, people, both makers of objects - like furniture makers, woodturners and ceramicists - and composers, were invited to come up with work which would be a creative response to the word 'container'."

His own response is in the form of a series of finely turned conical bowls in sycamore, honed down to a paper-thin texture, washed in shades of blue and inlaid with delicate specks of silver, not unlike curving musical staves in their patterning. The bowls are silken to touch, almost weightless to lift.

[Extract]