Objects of feeling and substance

Witty, challenging, expressive: British pottery as contemporary art

The exhibition and drive of this exhibition of British studio pottery will astonish and startle even those familiar with the field—it detonates the ghostly good taste that has constantly dogged it.

Clare Twomey launches the exhibition and wows us perfectly with sixty-six of her life-size, brazenly glazed jardinières, collectively titled Made in China. The eighty pieces which comprise the entire work were made in a ceramics factory in Jingdezhen—Twomey selected the fabricators via the internet and never visited the factory during production.

Just over 18" tall and nearly as wide, this beautiful object has assumed a talismanic significance. Vase, bowl, and cup simultaneously, it is also very funny, mocking the solemnity of craft as the true indicator of a nation’s culture.

In 1905 Bernard Leach, the (sometimes tedious) father of modern British studio pottery, brought back to Britain an eighteenth-century Korean Pol Pot Moon Jar in glazed white porcelain. The work passed to Lucie Rice and eventually wound up in the British Museum. Just over 18" tall and wide as well, this beautiful box has assumed a talismanic significance for modern British pottery.

Adam Buick leads four contemporary responses with his own Moon Jar, similar in scale and finished in a white Chin glaze. A companion piece by Brick, “Inertial Jar”, captures the heuristic power and properties of the original. Akiko Hirai’s wrought and over-life-size, brazenly glazed jardinières, collectively titled Made in China. Eighty pieces which comprise the entire work were made in a ceramics factory in Jingdezhen—Twomey selected the fabricators via the internet and never visited the factory during production.

One jardiniere was decorated in 18-karat gold at the Royal Crown Derby Factory. According to the catalogue, it took longer to decorate that vase than to produce the eighty in China and cost more. At a stroke, Twomey brings the world of studio ceramics into the forefront of contemporary art. Anonymous production, crossing cultures and economies, conceptual rather than artisanal on the artist’s part, an installation that permits mutations and variations in display, it challenges the viewer to speculate, walk through its pathways and around its clusters. It is also very funny, mocking the solemnity of craft as the true indicator of a nation’s culture.

The last decades of the twentieth century were particularly rich in invention, wit and surprise. Edwin Henderson’s art brut “Sack Form Vase” mixing stoneware, bone china and porcelain, hand-wrought and rough-cast, allowed the matter of the media to speak with an elemental force. Gordon Baldwin’s enigmatic black-and-white vessels show a knee under-standing of recent abstract painting brilliantly adapted to ceramic form.

Most striking of all in this story is the key role women potters have played in giving British pottery a fully contemporary outlook and attitude, they have a gravitas not readily experienced elsewhere in contemporary art. On similar scale Felicity Aylliff’s “Chasing Blue” and “Chasing Red”, both glazed porcelain vessels, are the perfect complement and contrast to Stair’s impersonal monumentalism. They too were fabricated in Jingdezhen, harnessing the exemplary skills of Chinese fabricators. Their bodiless decoration of imprinting and filling painterly episodes recall oriental calligraphy and abstract expressionist gesture, satisfyingly aligned in the boldness of Aylliff’s hand.

Reproduced by Gorkana under licence from the NLA (newspapers), CLA (magazines), FT (Financial Times/ft.com) or other copyright owner. No further copying (including printing of digital cuttings), digital reproduction/forwarding of the cutting is permitted except under licence from the copyright owner. All FT content is copyright The Financial Times Ltd.