



The sumptuous appeal of the tactile

Angus Suttie was at the centre of what became known as the 'New Ceramics', a postmodern flourish in the ceramic world that was first described in Peter Dormer's book of that title published in 1986. He was an exuberant, prolific, and experimental artist who died in his forties, of Aids, in 1993. I can't think of any other clay artist who made such an impact in little more than a decade. By the time he died he had been included in major international shows and publications, and seventeen significant museum collections in the UK, Japan, Australia and Holland.

He was already 30 when he went to Camberwell School of Art in 1976 to do ceramics, after setting out to be an actor in his native Scotland. He survived some years of unrewarding interim jobs in London before he found another creative channel. And 'creative channel' turns out to be the best description for the wonderful pieces made in the last year of his life. His posthumous exhibition at Contemporary Applied Arts in 1994 was simply called *Angus Suttie 1946–1993*. The final group of works, many of them not yet titled, were powerful elongated pots reaching into Pre-Columbian architecture or monument, with fluid zigzagging forms and conduits. Some linked horizontally and some stacked like vertical towers or exotic trees. One on the cover of the catalogue is like a gilded monolith. They are far simpler than his earlier work. I had first seen him as an agglomerator – adding and piling up quite elaborate forms from small organic parts, and then painting over them with slips and glazes and onglaze enamel patterns. Sometimes gold lustre too on the smaller pieces, spoons and cups, a teapot, a knuckleduster ring.

One of the pleasures of writing about other artists is that you get to talk to them while they work. In 1990 I wrote a CAA leaflet for his exhibition with Sara Radstone. By then some of the early joie-de-vivre, (often with red glaze such as *Doodle Plate* of 1982, now in the Crafts Council Collection,) had saddened to a more earthy palette. I spent a good while talking to Angus in his studio in 1990 as he assembled a clutch of simple parts, 'cones and cylinders and cusps', to combine into a speculative, see-how-it-goes, hollow pot. The elements were made in pairs, to form an axially symmetrical whole.

But I did get to borrow that exhilarating *Doodle Plate* twice – first for the touring exhibition *The Raw and the Cooked* in 1993.¹ Then I borrowed it again for *Three by One*, bringing together pieces from the three major public craft collections in the UK, curated for the Crafts Study Centre in 2012.² I am delighted to see that this Ruthin exhibition will also be shown in Farnham at the CSC.

The current exhibition shows his creative energy from early to late work, largely made between 1982 and 1992, drawn from his own collection. It has been looked after since his death by his great friends. One earlier piece is the life-like head of a woman, made in 1979 – perhaps when he was still a student at Camberwell? The cups, spoons, teapots and large plates from the early eighties, with rippling coiled and painted surfaces, have a joyful brilliance.

¹ Touring show curated by me and Martina Margetts for the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, 1993. First shown in the Barbican in London a few months after Angus's death.

² The exhibition combined work from the Crafts Study Centre, The Crafts Council, and the British Council craft collections, all established in the 1970s.



Extended Teapot, c.1991
260 x 560 x 60mm



Teapot, c.1984
180 x 260 x 90mm

His work explores the thrill of colour and the plastic freedom of clay. Over the years the work became larger, more vitreous, less shiny, and quieter in colour. His later pieces touch on the poetic content of both contemporary and ancient pots; the body and the building. In this intense decade he strengthened his formal language – expressive at every stage – as his understanding of life and expectations altered.

Angus knew what he was doing, how to organise, and yet keep the underlying spontaneity. He knew where precision was needed in the structures of living – always doing his accounts at the end of every month, not in a scramble at the end of the year like most of us – and more importantly he knew how to play, through work. He stated clearly, in an interview with himself via a pretend interlocutor called Aeschylus Orton, in a Dutch catalogue of 1985ⁱⁱⁱ, that his work combined threads of folk art and surrealism, and that it aspired to be both *awkward and beautiful*. This could have been the motto for most of the group that looked into ‘the conditions of pottery’ in the eighties – including Angus, Sarah Radstone, Jacqui Poncelet, Richard Slee, Carol Nicoll, Henry Pim, Jill Crowley, Martin Smith, and me.^{iv} That was the potent time for ‘New Ceramics’, and Angus’s brilliant final decade was at its core.

He was a gentle and generous friend and colleague. He wrote well, clear-headed, articulate, and polemic. In teaching, writing, and making he showed his awareness of the outside world, and of the importance of art and expressive production within a deeply imperfect situation. He looked eclectically and far afield for stimulus. Angus was especially interested in South American pottery, seeing it as the crucial manifestation of what is known about their culture and history.

During his life few of Angus’s exhibitions were solo, so this new reflection is important. His largest solo show in 1985, of 96 pieces, was *Angus Suttie: The Whole Works*, with Anatol Orient gallery, in a year of intense production after his partner Geoffrey Horton had died. Angus thought a lot about his work in the wider social and political context and wrote critically about what is expected of an artist in the context of capitalism’s demands for new products and new markets. ‘The importance, however, is that “forward” is not the only direction. By keeping the opportunity open of referring backwards (or sideways) in creative time, the idea of progress or perpetual revolution is not inexorable.’^v

And Pablo Neruda wrote in *Towards an Impure Poetry*:^{vi}
 ‘It is good, at certain hours of the day and night, to look closely at the world of objects at rest... In them one sees the confused impurity of the human condition, the massing of things, the use and disuse of substance, footprints and fingerprints, the abiding presence of the human engulfing all artefacts, inside and out. Let that be the poetry we search for...’

I think Angus’s work encourages us to do that.

Alison Britton

ⁱⁱⁱ see *British Ceramics* exhibition catalogue, Het Kruithuis, ‘s-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands 1985, *Step we Gaily*, Aeschylus Orton/Angus Suttie.

^{iv} see *The Abstract Vessel*, John Houston, Bellew, 1991

^v ‘Ceramic Review’ no 107, 1987

^{vi} ‘Toward an Impure Poetry’ is a short essay by Chilean poet and diplomat Pablo Neruda, in *Five Decades: Poems 1925–1970*. Grove Weidenfeld 1974. My text title also comes from this essay.