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# Statement of Practice

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## The Fiction of Form

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**Alison Britton**

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Alison Britton was part of the radical group of RCA graduates in the early 1970s whose work laid the foundations for what became known as “The New Ceramics.” Working from a London studio for more than three decades, Britton also writes, and with Martina Margetts co-curated the contemporary ceramics exhibition *The Raw and the Cooked* for the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1993. She is a Senior Tutor in the Ceramics and Glass Department of the Royal College of Art, and was awarded the OBE in 1990. Since 1998 her work has been represented by Barrett Marsden Gallery, London.

### **Abstract**

Britton has selected three snapshots of her practice. The first reflects some of the themes of Professor Queensberry’s lecture from the viewpoint of a student in his department in the early 1970s. The second, twenty years later, describes her development of a sustained mode of working with reference to a retrospective exhibition that toured the UK and concluded in the Netherlands. In the final section she attempts to define her current preoccupations and the mixed context of ideas that inform her ongoing practice.

**Keywords:** ambiguous, place, double, disjunction, container, fiction, uncertainty, flow

### **1970**

I brought my protractor and compasses to the exam at the RCA in 1970, prepared by my diploma teachers at the Central School for the design project that the exam was known to be; quite an ordeal for me. This was the first year, however, that the sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi had set the exams, and cheerful exuberance was expected, covering sheets of paper with imagined masks. Carol McNicoll walked

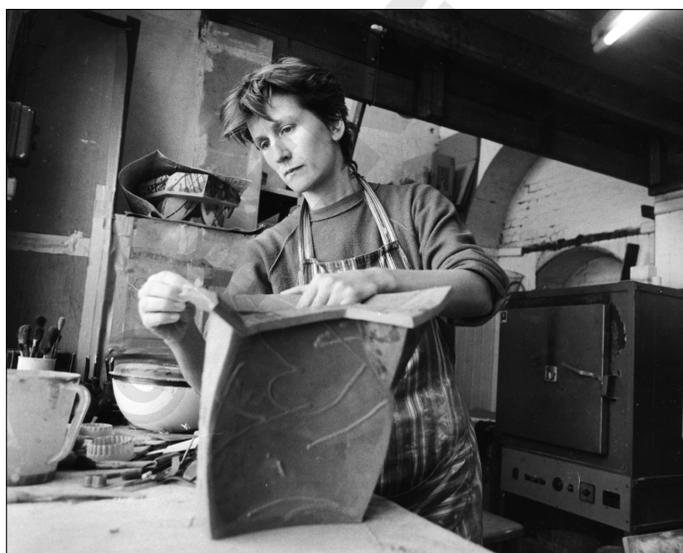
out halfway through but I was happy. At the interview, the large body of men, seven I think, asked each other if I wouldn't be better off applying to textiles after they saw my etchings and my pattern-filled portfolio. But I was offered a place, and so was Carol, and looking back I wonder if some of them thought I was a potential convert for surface decoration in the ceramic industry (a job often taken up by textiles graduates).

In the mid-1960s Professor David Queensberry had brought the strong personalities of the potter Hans Coper (from 1966) and Paolozzi (from 1969) into his department to expand the teaching on his course. From the top a certain zeal for recruiting designers for the ceramic industry was always a slight undercurrent of the department experience, but it made no sense to me. After a strange start (lots of photography of architectural ornament and hours printing in the darkroom), I gravitated more and more towards Hans Coper for

the most responsive tutorial discussions, objects and feeling. By halfway through the course I had decided that he was my personal tutor, and that seemed to work, although I was painting on tiles more than making pots.

In the year before my arrival at the RCA, Hans Coper had shared an exhibition at the V&A with the modernist textile artist Peter Collingwood. The only known publication of an "artist's statement" was wrung from Coper for the catalog, and has been much quoted:

Practising a craft with ambiguous reference to purpose and function one has occasion to face absurdity. More than anything, somewhat like a demented piano-tuner; one is trying to approximate a phantom pitch. One is apt to take refuge in pseudo-principles which crumble. Still, the routine of work remains. One deals with facts.



**Fig 1** Alison Britton in King's Cross studio, 1983.  
© *The Guardian*

The concentrated inquiry in these sentences was alluring to many of us as students, as was the focus on ambiguity, the intrigue of the *phantom pitch*, which proposed that ideas could be pursued with uncertainty, within craft. Coper outlines an ambivalent connection with function and content. The words “absurd” and “economy” are repeated through the whole text, revealing an austere and understated existential pull.

Turmoil was in the air in those years for postwar babies becoming adults; politics, the student union “sit-in,” reading *The Female Eunuch*, developing a “whim of iron.” We were, it seems to me now, growing the strong capacity for *not knowing our place*, both as artists in the craft world and as women in the art world.

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## 1990

In 1990, Tanya Harrod curated a retrospective of seventy of my pots for the Aberystwyth Arts Centre which toured museums in the UK and ended in the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam. By this time I was 42, I was a single parent with two daughters, I had made a working system that included some teaching and some writing, and occasionally curating. I had worked in three studios—sharing first with Carol McNicoll and then later with Jacqui Poncelet, both fellow students and continuing friends from the RCA. By 1986 I was in my current studio which is a de-koshered butcher’s shop in Stamford Hill. I had got away from the tile commissions, and had been exhibiting pots since 1976. It was a sociable time—there had been a lot going on with the emergent Crafts Advisory Committee (later the

Crafts Council) and the British Council, both energetically commissioning exhibitions of new work here and abroad. Museums were purchasing the contemporary and there was lots of attention for a group of artists that included my RCA generation and others more established. In his book of 1986, Peter Dormer designated us *The New Ceramics*. The Crafts Council shop at the V&A was run by Tatjana Marsden and was the best place to see rapidly changing small exhibitions of new work in the 1980s. It was an expansive period and we were a lucky generation.

A number of things had become norms in my way of making. I rolled out sheets of clay and painted them with slip on both sides in a relaxed way before cutting them up to make half-planned forms, a kind of equivalent to tailoring but without the crispness of intention or pattern-cutting. Pots were therefore painted two or three times; first with slip, which is opaque and can be stained any color; and then with underglaze pigments, also derived from metal oxides, stronger and not opaque. I painted them when flat, when built, and then after they were biscuit-fired. It was like negotiating both body and dress, with the dress making the most of the body, and the final painting being the point where resolution was attempted. I worked with stoneware clay but made earthenware objects, out of obstinacy (earthenware was seen as inferior by the dominant preceding potting generation) and a desire for warmer colors. All the surface events on my pots were under the glaze; the glaze was just a clear matt surface which pulled it all together and enriched the colors.

“All art is a synthesis of improvisation and order,” says the film director Mike Leigh, who is famous for starting without a script.

The system I described above is my order. The rest is improvised, changing a little from piece to piece. I had gone through a series of formal and thematic preoccupations which were visible in the pots. I made many jugs, I drew narratives across their surfaces, I compared imagery and pattern as signs of nature and civilization, I used fish and tulips as male and female symbols. Moving past the anthropomorphic jug I made more box-like forms which often turned out to be torsos, and the brush marks on the surface got rougher and more vague and abstract. The forms leant and lurched, or were made of stacked parts, or awkwardly conjoined chambers, sometimes in pairs or groups of associated pieces.

I had finished with drawing pictures on the pot walls after my Crafts Council solo exhibition in 1979, but certain forms—jug, square dish, double pot—have circled and

re-entered my imagination, time and again, lightly disguised to move things on.

In the monograph that Tanya wrote for the 1990 exhibition I still enjoy the gift of this quotation from the psychoanalyst Marion Milner's book *On Not Being Able to Paint* of 1950 (published under the name Joanna Field):

I woke one morning and saw two jugs on the table; without any mental struggle I saw the edges in relation to each other, and how gaily they almost seemed to ripple now they were freed from this grimy practical business of enclosing an object and keeping it in its place.

Here Milner is writing about perception and representation, about suddenly seeing form; an artist taking charge of a sight in the world and feeling moved, through the eyes, enough to paint it; about the process of



**Fig 2** "Green Double Pot," 1993, h. 36 cm. Photo David Cripps.

catching an image out of reality, and making an imaginative construct that stands for the real thing. I can feel all that—have felt it as a painter and a photographer stimulated by what I see. But I feel something three-dimensional too—shapes in the chest. I don't know what jugs she was looking at, but I can visualize *my* two jugs on a table, a double image, compare and contrast, a slice of life and still life at once (which is what I wrote about in *The Maker's Eye* catalog for the Crafts Council in 1981, the first bit of writing that pushed my thinking somewhere it hadn't been). These words of Milner's are like a small manifesto for me. It's about not being kept, neither me nor the pots, in our place. My pots, too, ask to be freed from any grimy practical business although I am stuck with the container form—I need to make open objects not closed ones. There are so many layers and possibilities to allude to: bodies, buildings, ordinary domestic stuff, inner worlds, etc.

Curiously, I already knew about Marion Milner. I had tiled her fireplace when I was a student at RCA. She was a friend of my aunt.

1990 was a good point to wind up a review of my sheerest work, all planes and angles fused together, lots of flat surfaces, a few curves. Pots like these were photogenic, easy to focus on. Pots made after the retrospective gradually included softer, coiled and modeled aspects as well as slabs. They became more fully three-dimensional, more plastic, less haphazard (and harder to photograph).

In 1995 I called an exhibition in Germany *Form and Fiction*. Detached from their normal partners, *function* and *fact*, that pairing of words is still a useful prod to my thinking because fiction is as important as food. Pairs

are significant too: the *double* as an essential form, probably conflicted but nonetheless attached. In an exhibition leaflet for a small show in Wales in 1996, Bryan Illsley, my studio-sharer, wrote that my pots conveyed "provisional accommodation, power sharing, partial peace ... Disjunction is her forte, disparity her game." The lashing together of parts, the awkward marriage of shapes, is a pot-type I revisit, as in 1995 with "Double Green Pot" (Figure 3), where there were hints of figuration again; I thought of it as a forest.



**Fig 3** "Double Green Pot," 1995, h. 33 cm.  
Photo David Cripps.

Since 2000 I have tried to be less boring with titles, to use words more suggestively without going over the top poetically—*Borderland Pot*, *Hybrid*, *Overlap*, *Shelter* and *Prospect*, *Side Issue*, *Bearer*, *Dry Space*, *Tank*, *Undergrowth*.

I have since recycled some of these words as stencils layered into the surface painting of later pots. The small double piece that wasn't ready for an exhibition in Paris in 2001 that opened on 9/11 was



**Fig 4** "Trough," 2001, h. 17 cm. Photo Philip Sayer.

called "Trough" (Figure 4). With this piece my interest in *flow* as a subject began. In life, swimming is my dream medium. I can't ignore water and in Venice I have trouble staying on the pavement. Flow is a connector

of parts whatever they are; and in the collection of the Institut du Monde Arabe, a frequent stopping place for me in Paris, I had seen a North African ceremonial sink-like object made of stone, a stepped form where water could run from chamber to chamber.

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### 2008

Pots for a show at Barrett Marsden Gallery in 2003 (the Marsden part is the same Tatjana from the V&A shop in the 1980s) explored an unexpected interest for me in some aspects of classicism—despite the fact that to me it has always seemed a very masculine phenomenon. I used the acanthus leaf, for instance, as both a relief and a painted image, which has been used



**Fig 5** "Scrawl," 2003, h. 34 cm. Photo Philip Sayer.



**Fig 6** "Sprite," 2003, h. 48 cm. Photo Philip Sayer.

so diversely in successive cultures and is still to be found everywhere in architectural ornament. I made a group of single forms (except one double piece) which were of two kinds, square open pieces like the capital, as in the piece called "Scrawl" (Figure 5), and tall fluted cylindrical pots like the column, as in "Sprite" (Figure 6); heads and bodies, males and females, houses and tree-trunks.

After that, I started to work with the pipe form as an animating attachment—a male image, you might say, but also a continuation of ideas about flow.

The constants in my life and practice are important. There are stable practical things I can take for granted, so the work is able to freewheel a little all the time. I



**Fig 7** Tools, studio, 2007.

can doodle around the consistency. I have taught part-time at the RCA for ages and love the ongoing connections with new ideas and people at the start of their careers. Tatjana Marsden has been my main agent/confidante/dealer since the 1980s in four different locations, I have lived in the same house for more than thirty years and in the same studio for more than twenty. And I still make pots. The pleasure in doing so has a lot to do with accepting the balance of what you can control and what you can't, and in



**Fig 8** Studio, 2007.



**Fig 9** "Sluice," 2007. Copyright Alison Britton.

letting the strength of clay's material qualities be evident. In the last couple of years my weariness with spraying the outsides of my pots with glaze has been suggesting change. It

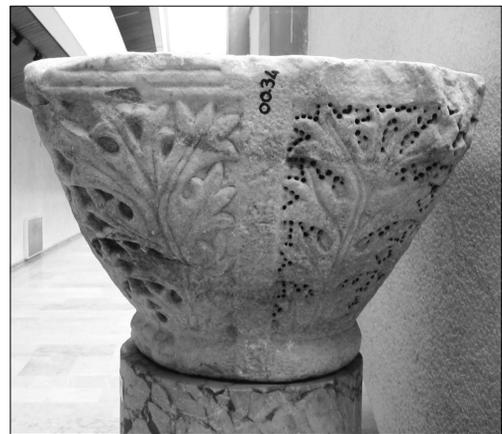


**Fig 10** "Piebald," 2007, h. 36 cm. Photo Philip Sayer.

is a boring way to make a surface and implies that uniformity is desirable. I now want to use glaze in a fleshier way, to include color in it, to immerse in it, to pour it, slosh it on. I need to leave more unpainted space for lapping and flowing, and there is more risk and uncertainty for things going into the kiln. This led me at first to make smaller pieces that I could handle easily over a dustbin of wet glaze. I am trying not to be thrown by the plethora of new possibilities; to be both aloof to, and engaged with, the danger of glaze dominating form.

In 2006, I made two trips to Istanbul in spring and autumn. I had to go and see this city full of chaotic complexity and overlap after reading Orhan Pamuk's novel *My Name is Red*, which is concerned, among many things, with the relationships between words and pictures, and old and new influences. It is also a thriller and a love story. Both in narrative and content it depicts many viewpoints—even the horse in a painting writes a chapter, as does the color red.

As I make pots now, I am interested in seeing how fiction might alter form.



**Fig 11** Capital. Archeology Museum, Istanbul.

Some of the qualities I'm pursuing have been affected by things seen there, mostly not ceramic things though glaze and color is vibrantly everywhere on the tiled surfaces of buildings. In Istanbul walking, looking, photographing and reading, the place is stuffed with sensory depth and disorder. I loved the ubiquity of the color turquoise, even on the tram hand-rails—just right, not cloying or

sweet. There is water everywhere in the views.

In current forms I continue working with the pipe as a daft attachment, and with cylinders and squares, columns and boxes. In a piece like "Sluice," made in 2007, I am still taken with the collision of architectural and domestic forms and the underlying body, the human scale of pots, holdability, disjunction and flow. An unfinished journey.



**Fig 12** Alison Britton portrait, 2007. Photo LBN.