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Book Review

Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design *Alison Britton*

London: Occasional Papers, 2013. 240 pages, 94 color
and 14 black-and-white illustrations. GBP20 (paperback).
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The artist Alison Britton is largely known as a British ceramist,
of international repute, but she is also widely recognized
for her work as an educator and curator and as a writer
on contemporary craft. *Seeing Things* is a selection of her
writings, produced between 1981 and 2012 and, for the most
part, previously published in the UK. They include catalog
essays, exhibition previews, reviews and articles for specialist
craft journals, the transcript of a BBC radio interview, notes
prepared for a speech and a conference discussion, and
published and unpublished correspondence. The book is
structured by decade: the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s and, in
addition to her chosen texts, she provides reflective comment
in her introduction to the anthology as a whole; in her brief
prefatory remarks to individual essays; and in her postscripts
to each decade.

A defining feature of Britton's approach to craft criticism
and her interpretations of the work of other artists is that she
writes from the middle of things. She comments: "I am usually
aware of my obligations as an 'insider', as someone who also
makes, a fellow traveller rather than an official investigator"
(p. 138). Glenn Adamson notes in his preface: "Like many
artist-critics, an important point of reference is her own work.
Notice how she registers her sensibility as a potter even as

she writes about furniture, turned wood, glass, textiles and avant-garde lighting” (p. 5). Yet the reader is left in no doubt as to the integrity of her response to the work; as Adamson writes: “Even if you don’t agree with her positions, you will invariably respect the means by which she arrived at them” (p. 5).

The collection begins with Britton’s contribution to *The Maker’s Eye* catalog (Crafts Council, 1982), in which she accounts for her selection of personally significant objects while exploring the critical context of her work and its terms of reference, a kind of proto-manifesto for her studio practice (pp. 15–19). Questions as to whether or not the crafts should, or even could, be theorized were raised throughout the ’80s and well into the ’90s. This topic of debate is acknowledged in Britton’s inclusion of a letter addressed to *Crafts* magazine by the British playwright John Fletcher in 1984. In his letter he denounces the introduction of critical theory into the crafts, naming her as one of the culprits (pp. 28–9). Britton responds:

There is neither doubt nor apology in my decision to make abstract rather than figurative pots, and my working processes are as intuitive and untheoretical as always. My purpose in writing as well as potting is to sharpen my own, and hopefully others, views of what I and my contemporaries are up to. Writing can reflect and enhance as well as impose restrictive judgements. (p. 30)

An article titled “Sèvres with Krazy Kat” (*Crafts*, 1983) also proved controversial at the time. In this she discusses the kinds of ceramic objects that were being made by her contemporaries, recognizing the influence

of recent West Coast American ceramicists with their apparent freedom from tradition. She describes the British artists’ rediscovery of decoration and visual metaphor; their enjoyment of invention and mixing of cultural influences and codes (pp. 20–5). All this she identifies in her postscript as postmodernism “lapping unacknowledged around our feet while we made decorative decisions about form rather than function” (p. 80). The energy of this decade in the crafts, she suggests, was “in a rearrangement of the received wisdom” (p. 81).

She sometimes quotes from her previous writing, consciously testing aspects of her critical framework. The reader will also pick up on reverberating concerns. The interest that she expresses in *The Maker’s Eye*, for artifacts that have “purpose and commentary” (p. 18), is found again in the essay “Use, Beauty, Ugliness and Irony” (*The Raw and the Cooked* catalog, 1993), when she considers a category of ceramic work: “although as pots they are objects, they also have ‘the pot’ as their subject matter, in a way that is both ironic and reflexive” (p. 120). Later, when explaining her curation of the exhibition *Three by One* (Crafts Study Centre, 2009), she expresses the belief that “the vitality or imaginative life in an object is its most important quality” (p. 214).

By the 1990s Britton was an established commentator on the crafts and her writing was more contextual, informed by cultural history, and directly engaged with topical craft debates. A central argument of the exhibition *Beyond the Dovetail: Craft, Skill and Imagination* (Crafts Council, 1991), curated by the critic and writer Peter Dormer, was that skill and tradition should be upheld as ethical tenets of craft. Britton was invited

by the editor of the exhibition's catalog to offer an alternative view. In her contribution titled "The Manipulation of Skill on the Outer Limits of Function," she postulates that traditional notions of craft skill have become less pertinent to the evaluation of contemporary art and craftworks. Instead, she argues:

People develop new skills to achieve untraditional ends, and they aren't always of general and impartable use. I strongly believe that the traditional skills should be taught as a basis, but not as the whole curriculum. (pp. 93–4)

In her postscript to the 1990s, titled "Skill and Anxiety," Britton notes that, at the time, she had possibly underestimated her own depth of knowledge, but maintains that the acquisition of skills can be "driven by desiring the result" (p. 152). She raises the issue again in a list of reflections titled "If Only ..." (*Ceramic Review*, 2007):

I wish I'd known that skills really matter; I rather took them for granted because of the emphasis on them in the way I had been taught, and in my teaching over the past decades I have seen them slipping away from the norms of people's lives. (p. 196)

Her selection of writing from the 2000s only briefly touches on the "expanded field" of ceramics. There is a review of Satoru Hoshino's *Clay, Fire and Body* performance at the V&A (2001) and a dissection of the book *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches*

to *Ceramics* (published in 2007). However, when discussing recent installation work in ceramics and its exponents (many of whom were once her students) within her final postscript, she states that she has only rarely been commissioned to write about this area of practice.

A significant theme of this final section of the book is "the habits of daily life," where she suggests that living (being a mother, walking the dog, reading a novel) and working (making pots, exhibiting, teaching, writing, curating) can coexist productively. Britton's final essay of the collection, "Things and Work" (*Life and Still Life* catalog, Crafts Study Centre, 2012) concludes with the words:

Letting the everyday shape thought, the slight subversion in thinking of the house as a place of practice, it is only a small step further to recognise and celebrate the intrusion of living into work. (p. 241)

Through its mix of primary texts and subsequent reflective commentary, *Seeing Things* offers a useful overview of both the major themes within and influences upon recent studio and experimental craft. Well illustrated with images of artworks and portraits of artists, it not only charts the evolution of ideas within craft and in the wider context of art and design, but also reveals the development of Britton's thinking about her own personal creative and critical practices. Her penetrating observations are a valuable contribution to the study of the field.

