Alison Britton’s new show at Marsden Woo, previewed by Teleri Lloyd-Jones

Pouring and pairing

It’s a couple of weeks before Alison Britton’s Marsden Woo show opens, and there’s a surprising amount of work left to do. Standing in her Stoke Newington studio – a converted butcher’s shop where the ceramist has been since 1986 – we are surrounded by work by vessels that bulge, lean and poke without apology. ‘I always cut it quite fine. I have to build this awful rash, she explains. Unifying Britton’s practice is a continued ability to harness recklessness. Discussing the gestural swathes and drips of slip that wrap her surfaces, I hunt for the right adjective – ‘dangerous’ she suggests. ‘That’s me. I like that anyway. That’s part of what one does when one’s leaving things late. I think risk and creativity are quite connected. So when you’re pouring something on, you can’t get it off again. It’s that moment of taking a deep breath.’

Standing and Running, which continues until 17 March, features roughly 10 new works, a mix of jugs and plates. The show marks two distinct changes in Britton’s approach. As well as the buff clay that has been her constant for the past few decades, she has been using red clay, and for the exhibition she will be showing vessels which are paired – one made in white, one made in red. This shift in material came after time spent thinking about Devonshire slipware, followed by a trip to Japan last year, to lecture on Hans Poncelet, fellow graduates of the Royal College of Art. Hers was the articulate voice for this disparate yet potent group of contemporary makers and artists, all eager to shake up the establishment. Add to this that Britton began teaching at the RCA in 1984 (something she continues doing to this day), and what we have is a portrait of a far-reaching polymath.

With its gestural surfaces and awkward posture Britton’s work can be approached purely in terms of form, colour and, yes, surface – but it would be a mistake to ignore her oblique yet profound relationship to domesticity. Throughout the 70s, as her work became harder-edged, jagged and more abstract, their titles began to refer to the household; ‘Standing and Running’ is at Marsden Woo, and when one’s leaving things late, Britton mays hint at a softening, a return to the echoes of traditional tableware, but don’t be fooled that her work has lost the iconoclastic dynamism for which it became famous. Perhaps as a response to her retrospection, this current series introduces both new material and new practices, while retaining her all-important fascination with the awkward, the unfinished and the broken. After all, as Britton points out, creativity should always engage with a bit of risk. ‘Standing and Running’ is at Marsden Woo Gallery, London EC1V, until 17 March. For details, see Crafts Guide www.craftsguide.com

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