



Things and Work

Everyone has things, but artists do something else perhaps with the objects they own, in using them to think with. This thinking happens of course in the studio, but also at home, where most of the things reside. In my case the studio is not at home but ten minutes' drive away in Hackney. I make pots in the studio and write at home in an 'office' on the top floor. I think in all my rooms, and eat and use my cups, plates and spoons in the kitchen/living room. Some of the objects showing here have been brought from the studio but most from home. Always a home includes objects that furnish your life beyond function, other needs are met; stimulus, self-representation, sensuality, recollection. All objects can be symbols of something, especially if you became used to seeing the symbolic strength of things as a child, through toys or things in habitual surroundings.

As part of my teaching at the Royal College of Art I have sometimes been part of an exam board in another department, Design History for instance. For one such occasion I read a dissertation about the growing artisan/merchant class in Holland in the 16th/17th Century having developed a large, centrally important, chest/cupboard/wardrobe¹ as the key piece of furniture in which most of the protectable possessions of a family could be stored – there were that few of them. Usually an inventory of everything in the house was made; another powerful idea, and seen from the present as a rapid insight into a way of living, so much was revealed by simply reading the list. For me this was an enviable image of the past, and I hoped to find a rationale for making an inventory of the things that really mattered in my house, but could not begin: too many things. Perhaps this exhibition is a slim version of such a list, made visible.

In curating the exhibition *Three by One* for the Crafts Study Centre in 2009 I had found such treasures and insights in Ethel Mairet's Balkan braids and Bernard Leach's pot collection, including the 14th century English jug, dull grey with a splodge of vivid green glaze, and his East Asian bowls. After this I came to see the things I have scavenged, swapped, bought, and gathered around me in a slightly more serious light, they were my 'study collection' also.

For an object to belong in a study collection, though it sounds a bit pompous, means it might have an impact on what you make, might be part of a kind of growing tactile vocabulary. You don't always know why you bought or kept a thing till its moment arrives and it seems suddenly to promote an idea needing to be made. You change your mind, relevance can shift. If you have enough space or can put up with clutter, then you hold on to things even when they are not currently exciting. As with all imaginative engagement you need the sustenance of different things as time passes and work evolves. I love the comment from Michael Cardew about objects from far afield and from the past working as models of aspiration, in writing 'We do not want to make Chinese, or Korean, or primitive pots. But we have seen clearly what they have which our own so badly lack, and having seen it we are not likely to lose sight of it again.'²

Twenty years ago, after an early retrospective exhibition, I wrote in *Ceramic Review* about getting a body of work started, and how I might jolt myself out of the normal early phase of indecision by looking at other objects - you don't always have to actually possess them.

The sight of another object is often a trigger. I might go and look for it or come across it incidentally. The greater the translation needed the more comfortable I feel. I am very puritanical about influence, the filters of absorption must be thick. The object that excites will be recognisable, will in some way, because of its three-dimensional shape making a relationship with things that I have already made, already belong to me.

I gave the example of a small Indonesian rice bowl/plate in what was then the Museum of Mankind, a thin curved wooden plank, with straight sides added. A small compartment was boarded off in one corner, for some other sauce or ingredient needing to be separate. Like both a boat and a plate 'it fell into my context.'³

The contents of this exhibition are a so far uncounted number of objects I have collected, seen mostly in groups, because objects do things to each other and make new kinds of sense. This to me is what Still Life is about, putting things in contexts, holding them 'still' for a moment to take them in.

In Life, in use perhaps, they are on the move. The collected things are in glass cases, as a kind of loose frame of reference for my own pots shown in the open nearer the floor. I could not say which objects have had a direct connection with the way I want to make, it is less specific than that. They have all impinged with some spurring connective impulse, or spark, and it has been a gradual honing process of a subliminal kind to decide which ones to bring when there are a lot of them. Sometimes the drive comes not from an object on its own but how it sits with others. The way they reach out to each other is a clincher, whether through colour, strangeness, relief, form, pattern or content.

Crockery is a fundamental category, a baseline of ceramic understanding, and perceived through touch and use as well as sight.

Tableware is everyday stuff, and everyone eats, so everyone understands the basis for these forms – pots, bodies and eating are entwined. The ordinariness of the object field of table, cup, plate, bowl, jug, and the habitual rhythm of getting up, washing, drinking, eating, going out to work, and returning to eat again, give us, in the history of ceramic forms, an assimilated sense of bedrock understanding. There are good pots and awful pots, but we know where they are coming from.⁴

For decades I have looked for a white high-fired cup in almost every place I have travelled to, and bought in hardware shops and flea markets and fine china showrooms across Europe and in Japan. These I collect on purpose, the rest of my objects find their own way into my need for them. There are cups from fellow artists too, the one-off and the studio production line, the industrial and the hand made in communication. The jug and the plate are other important types, verticals and horizontals, profiles and picture planes.

Closer to my own practice, I am showing clay works and small sculpture made by friends; including Bryan Illsley who shares my studio, and Jacqui Poncelet and Richard Slee whom I have known since college. Apart from ceramic I am exhibiting things made of many other materials, as well as drawings, paintings and

photographs. Some of these are images of 'still life' in an overt way, though everything brought here is casually in that paradoxical pairing of my exhibition title.

As for my work, extending the slight archival tendency I am showing new and older pieces. Since 2007 I have reformed the way I deal with the surfaces, no longer spraying a clear glaze everywhere over an entirely slip-painted external surface. Re-learning the immediacy and risk of pouring and dipping was a liberation with messy beginnings. During a short working period in Japan at Shigaraki in 2010 I re-found red clay, having used it a lot at school, and the beauty of its unglazed colour led me to make new sorts of surface exposing quite a lot of it unglazed. This feels very daring. My pots always held water in the past although that was generally the only function on offer.

A couple of the pots are older white pieces, when not many have been so colourless. *Squirrel* is from the 2009 exhibition I shared with the Norwegian artist Marit Tingleff, where she used the wall and I used the table, but undercurrents of domestic reference were in both bodies of work, at very different scales. In the recent pieces I find myself making more symmetrical pots, to accommodate the wildness of pouring slip and glaze, and flat and upright forms more simply than before, as if the plate and the jug are, in my case, inescapably in the background. What we perceive and what we produce are not the same thing, but both engage imaginative energy, the *intake* and the *outpour*, which could be titles for pots.⁵ I am still not going to make tableware, though I am 'drawn into its realm of thought, its human connection, its ordinariness, its verticality and horizontality, its offer of containment, for the dry, the wet, or just air.'⁶

Taking these things, my habitual context, out of the house into the exhibition; bringing the pots from the studio to the house to be photographed on the bathroom floor in daylight; seeing them brought together at the Crafts Study Centre is a special opportunity. The archives and holdings of the collection have inspired me to an active response, to put the long gestation of a particular attention to things and what they may communicate more evidently in a public space.

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 recognize and celebrate *the intrusion of living into work*.

1. Called a *kussenkast*

2. Michael Cardew's essay in *The Maker's Eye* catalogue, Crafts Council 1981

3. Alison Britton, 'The Story So Far', *Ceramic Review* 129, 1991

4. Alison Britton, 'Laying the Table: synthesis, continuity, and the everyday', essay in (ed) Simon Olding, *The R J Lloyd Ceramics Collection: artist as collector*. Burton Art Gallery and Museum, Bideford, 2010

5. Michael Foley quotes the philosopher John Dewey from his 1934 lectures 'Art as Experience' thus: 'Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy ... We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to take in'. *Embracing the Ordinary*, Simon and Schuster, UK, 2012

6. Alison Britton, 'Old Stuff-New Life-Still-Life', essay in *Thing Tang Trash – Upcycling in Contemporary Ceramics*, (ed) Jorunn Veiteberg, The Bergen Academy of the Arts, Norway, 2011