



Preface: Circling

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As Glenn Adamson explains in his introduction, a quotation from Michael Cardew, deeply encouraging to potters, gives the exhibition its title. I want to pick out one phrase from it to start my own enquiry. Cardew says that if you keep at it, and trust your instincts and your materials, “you will see things of beauty growing up in front of you”. You note that things of beauty are *growing up*, not emerging cautiously, or scraped into inspired being. They are growing, like a plant, or like a pot being smoothly pulled up in the slippery process of throwing on the wheel. This is the normal understanding of what a pot is.

Dora Billington, in her wonderful book of 1937, *The Art of the Potter*, says: “The making of pots on the wheel . . . is by far the most exciting method. In swift directness it can be compared to drawing, and like drawing it must be done and left, for retouching can only spoil it.”¹ William Newland, who was a pupil of Billington’s soon after World War II, goes into more detail in an interview with Peter Dormer in 1985:

Throwing is concerned with inner force—dynamic growth from the wheel, like a triangle on its apex or a crocus from its stem striking its way upwards. The hands make a gesture in space and the clay records the gesture. There is a simple aesthetic concerned with throwing and it is to do with growth and natural form. . . . All good thrown pots must express joie-de-vivre, uplift and umph—there are no saggy pots in the British Museum.²

I made my first pot when I was nine or ten, a moneybox, but no money ever went in it. Our teacher for pottery lessons at school was a German refugee, who found her way into education after working in the factories in Stoke-on-Trent. She had thrown a series of beehive shapes on the wheel, closed at the top. She had semi-dried them so that we could carve into, or build onto, one and cut a slot in the back for the money. I made mine into a bull, which was sitting down as a dog might. I remember feeling uneasy that I had not made all of it—the thrown body done by a more skilful pair of hands. As a teenager, still at the same school, I made large numbers of circular, press-moulded, red clay plates and gave most of them to my boyfriend’s family. His father said they would have to get a navy to wash up.³ I painted on them with

William Staite Murray, *Tall Jar, The Bather*, 1930 (detail of cat. 28)

wax resist, and then poured over a thin tin glaze, which fired to a milky brown. The drawing hidden under the wax was the dark iron-brown of slightly glazed terracotta. The only one I still have is also, inexplicably, decorated with a bull (fig. 1).

While at school I began learning to throw on a squeaking kick wheel, and was taught more thoroughly on an electric wheel at art school. And though I could do it, and enjoyed the progress of controlling the glistening lump, it never became the real route of my making. Circles, it began to seem to me in the late 1960s, were not enough. Dormer once wrote, “Alison Britton does not like round forms, she finds them uneventful.”⁴

Although the wheel offers a quick way to try out form, you look mostly at the silhouette, not the deeper nuances of spatial possibility. Hans Coper used the wheel but usually made pots by smoothly combining thrown parts. To understand their complex forms you took time to look around them. They have a more powerful sculptural presence than Lucie Rie’s; hers are more engaged with sophisticated colour relationships through glaze, though much of the aesthetic language of these two potters is reciprocal.

In moving away from the wheel you lose the speed—no other method of pot-making is as direct and fluid. But the urge to be free to make *any* kind of form led me into hand-building with slabs and coiling. Irregular forms brought more engaging ambiguities to mind, as I slid from modernism into postmodernism. Oliver Watson thought mid-twentieth-century British pottery could usefully be divided into “ethical” or “expressive” types.⁵ “Fitting in” or “sticking out” were other definitions of my own.

Since clay is a formless mass of material, a mudheap that could be used for anything, is it a surprise that so many things made with it are circular? The answer may largely lie in potters’ enchantment with the rhythmic and sensual throwing process, as well as the immediacy of its results. Looking at the splendid array of work in this exhibition, tracing more than a century, the majority of pots here hold to the circular form. Not all are thrown. Some are press-moulded, coiled or cast, or digitally translated.

Another kind of pot-making became a cutting edge through the 1980s and 1990s for those who did not look for symmetry, such as Gordon Baldwin and Ewen Henderson (see cats. 92–97). The generation that was taught by them (amongst others) evolved in a free-form, off-the-wheel, vibrant and painterly direction, Jacqueline Poncelet, Angus Suttie, and Richard Slee being particularly inspiring in my view (see cats. 109–114). The antidote to this louder kind of “New Ceramics” appeared in 1999 in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, called *The New White*.⁶ Edmund de Waal was one of seven exhibitors. The pots in this show had an essential clarity and austerity; most of the work was tableware made of porcelain, thrown, circular, and white. You could say that both the circle and the vitreous white material that is porcelain convey a kind of perfection. Julian Stair, another of the participants, wrote that, ironically, “deconstructing ‘the vessel’ back into pottery is seen as a



FIG. 1 Alison Britton, *Plate with Bull*, 1965, press-moulded red clay with wax resist and tin glaze. Collection of Alison Britton

radical step forward”.⁷ The lure of white porcelain is still strong for many potters, and a good number of our students at the Royal College of Art, London, see it as a pinnacle among material options. Others prefer to stay closer to mud.

The history of British studio pottery, then, has been fundamentally concerned with circular form. The use of a wider formal vocabulary has always been, and is still, a field for looser explorations of spatial depth and variation within the idea of the pot, but the wheel remains compelling for many potters.

And after all, who would ever want to drink out of a cup that wasn’t round? I have collected cups for decades. Most of these are industrially made of white porcelain, often bought on work trips in Europe since the 1970s. I envied the heritage of the luminary modernist factories of Scandinavia and Germany, Italy, and Spain. In the past decade I have realized how much, and in what surreptitious ways, the contents of my crockery cupboard are connected to my work. Tanya Harrod’s writing has helped to change my thinking and shake off a dismissive view of the domestic, and to see home as a reflective



FIG. 2 Details of Alison Britton: *Content and Form*, 2016, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photographs by Philip Sayer

adjunct to the studio.⁸ I have written about loving but not *making* tableware, “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”.⁹ The plate form, at a larger scale, is something I am working with now, and in my retrospective in the Ceramics Galleries at the V&A in 2016 I showed for the first time some new pieces that were hung on the wall (fig. 2).¹⁰

Perhaps the scope for current ceramic practice to expand into sculptural territory has lessened the creative purpose of pots that are not preoccupied with function, the exploratory hybrids that were a focus of the New Ceramics. Now new ground is being broken in what may seem traditional fields; recent studio pottery can look more and more like its forebearers in history. I hope to be able to speculate, after seeing *Things of Beauty Growing*, on the unforeseen directions British studio pottery might travel in. The great range of sizes of pots in the exhibition is striking; they run from the familiar hand-held bowl to the surprisingly monumental—cupping and towering, you might say. The balance between “solace” and “challenge”, to use Christopher Frayling’s phrase, is unsettled and creatively intriguing.¹¹ Penelope Curtis, reflecting her view from the greater scale of British sculpture of the 1980s and 1990s, says the vessel form is, “One which allows, in its very obviousness, its very predictability, unexpected things to happen.”¹²

NOTES

1. Dora M. Billington, *The Art of the Potter* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1937).
2. Peter Dormer, ed., *Fast Forward*, exh. cat. (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts and Cambridge: Kettles Yard, 1985).
3. A navy is a labourer working on roads, canals, or railways.
4. Peter Dormer, *British Ceramics*, exh. cat. (Netherlands: Museum Het Kruihuis [Museum of Contemporary Art], s-Hertogenbosch, 1985).
5. Oliver Watson, Introduction, *British Studio Pottery: The Victoria and Albert Museum Collection* (London: Phaidon Press, 1990).
6. Peter Dormer, *The New Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986).
7. *The New White*, exhibition curated by Alun Graves, V&A, 1999. The Julian Stair quote is taken from the exhibition leaflet.
8. Tanya Harrod, “Housetrained Objects: Notes Towards Writing an Alternative History of Modern Art”, in *Contemporary Art and the Home*, ed. Colin Painter (Oxford: Berg, 2002).
9. “Old Stuff-New Life-Still Life”, in *Thing Tang Trash: Upcycling in Contemporary Ceramics*, ed. Jorunn Veiteberg (Bergen: National Academy of the Arts and Art Museums, 2011).
10. *Alison Britton: Content and Form*, exhibition curated by Alun Graves, V&A, 2016.
11. Christopher Frayling, “The Medium and the Message”, in *On Craftsmanship, Towards a New Bauhaus* (London: Oberon Books, 2011).
12. See Curtis’s essay in this catalogue, “Communicating Vessels: On the Artistic Licence Ceramics Offer Sculpture” (143–53).