



"Made in China" by Clare Twomey, 2010

## Objects of feeling and substance

Witty, challenging, expressive: British pottery as contemporary art

The exuberance and drive of this exhibition of British studio pottery will astonish and startle even those familiar with the field – it detonates the ghostly good taste that has constantly dogged it.

Clare Twomey launches the exhibition and wrongfoots us perfectly with sixty or so of her life-size, brazenly glazed *jardinières*, collectively titled *Made in China*. The eighty pieces which comprise the entire work were made in a ceramics factory in Jingdezhen – Twomey selected the fabricators via the internet and never visited the factory during production. One *jardinière* was decorated in 18-carat gold at the Royal Crown Derby Factory. According to the catalogue, it took longer to decorate that vase than to produce the eighty in China and cost more. At a stroke, Twomey brings the world of studio ceramics into the forefront of contemporary art. Anonymous production, crossing cultures and economies, conceptual rather than artisanal on the artist's part, an installation that permits mutations and variations in display, it challenges the viewer to participate, walk through its pathways and around its clusters. It is also very funny, mocking the solemnity of craft as the true indicator of a nation's culture.

In 1935 Bernard Leach, the (sometimes tedious) father of modern British studio pottery, brought back to Britain an eighteenth-century Korean Full Moon Jar in glazed white porcelain. The work passed to Lucie Rie and eventually wound up in the British Museum. Just over 18" tall and nearly as wide, this beautiful object has assumed a talismanic significance for modern British pottery.

Adam Buick leads four contemporary responses with his own Moon Jar, similar in scale and finished in a white Chun glaze. A companion piece by Buick, "Intertidal Jar", captures the lunar power and properties of the original. Akiko Hirai's wrought and over-

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Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, until June 18

Glen Adamson, Martina Droth, Simon Olding et al

THINGS OF BEAUTY GROWING  
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472pp. Yale University Press. £49.50 (US \$65).  
978 0 300 22746 8

wrought variations and Gareth Mason's volcanic jars with the fire and fury of the kiln still about them are far from the reflective calm of the original but powerful and moving in their own right. Nao Matsunaga's coiled and slabbed stoneware vessels, decorated aggressively in black-and-white glazes, set on stilts and titled "The Illusion of Reflection", complete the Moon Jar homage. Collectively they set the tone for the entire exhibition: testing and pushing the limits of ceramics to win a new expressive freedom and abolishing the taint of "craft". We find ourselves in the invigorating world of contemporary art, unabashed at making objects of feeling and substance.

William Saite Murray becomes a major presence when looking at British pottery in this light. Starkly abstract, disavowing any functional purpose, Murray was an early champion of the artistic independence of pottery. Highly regarded by his contemporaries in the 1920s and 30s, he was elected a member of the Seven and Five Society, exhibiting alongside Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Christopher Wood. At the beginning of the Second World War, he found himself stranded in Rhodesia, abandoned pottery and gave himself to his Buddhist faith.

Another big shift in this history is the

unquestioned authority and influence of Lucy Rie and Hans Coper, eclipsing Bernard Leach as the central and commanding figure. Leach's influence, through *A Potter's Book* (1940) and his St Ives Pottery, was omnipresent at one stage, shrouding British ceramics in tasteful dowdiness, though Leach himself was capable of inspired work, such as "The Tree of Life Charger" in the present exhibition. Lucy Rie and Hans Coper, however, have established themselves as the springboards for a contemporary ceramic mode with less harking back to eastern models. Coper's expressiveness and monumentality represent one pole of making; Lucy Rie's refinement and capacity for endless variations on a theme, another. Rie's abstraction, her individuality and capacity to project "inwardness" in ceramic form have given her an influential presence in modern British ceramics.

The last decades of the twentieth century were particularly rich in invention, wit and surprise. Ewen Henderson's *art brut* "Sack Form Vase" mixing stoneware, bone china and porcelain, hand-wrought and rough-cast, allowed the matter of the media to speak with an elemental force. Gordon Baldwin's enigmatic black-and-white vessels show a keen understanding of recent abstract painting brilliantly adapted to ceramic form.

Most striking of all in this story is the key role woman potters have played in giving British pottery a fully contemporary outlook and ethos. Alison Britton, who contributes a lively essay to the excellent catalogue, and Jacqueline Poncetel hand-build their vessels. The originality of their glazes, boldly painterly, determined to make and leave their mark, places them squarely within the discipline of pottery, always the product of the hand with no aspiration to sculpture.

The wittiest of this gifted generation of women potters is Carol McNicoll. The sheer

exhibitionism of her "Yellow Coffee Set with Tray" steals the show with its dazzling shapes and glazes, happily combining the organic and the geometrical. She is a deconstructionist without the solemnity. Her "Unravelling Vase" and "Fruit Bowl" with spreading flaps for sides are witty assaults on conventional taste and expectations – there is a shoal of trout on one flap of the "Fruit Bowl", for instance.

Another striking development over the past two decades is ceramics on a monumental scale. Julian Stair's 6-foot-tall lidded jars have a presence suggestive of mighty funerary urns from some distant, mythic past. Amid the welter of postmodern forms and attitudes, they have a gravitas not readily experienced elsewhere in contemporary art. On a similar scale Felicity Aylieff's "Chasing Blue" and "Chasing Red", both glazed porcelain vessels, are the perfect complement and contrast to Stair's impersonal monumentality. They too were fabricated in Jingdezhen, harnessing the exemplary skills of Chinese fabricators. Their boisterous decoration of leaping and falling painterly episodes recall oriental calligraphy and abstract expressionist gesture, satisfyingly united in the boldness of Aylieff's hand.

Halima Cassell's "thirty-six hand carved clay bodies in a range of stoneware and earthenware, unglazed" brings this extraordinary exhibition to a resonant conclusion. Drawing on Islamic architectural motifs and ornaments for her forms, Cassell found her clay sources across the globe, from Britain and Europe, America and Oceania, from Pakistan to Cuba. She groups these individually shaped containers into sequences of light and dark, and they bear the names of virtues – Clemency, Joy, Tranquility, Honour and so forth. Ranged on tables, they ripple away from you like an abstract banquet.

TLS APRIL 20 2018