Alison Britton

**Old Stuff - New Life - Still Life : The Lure of Junk**

Most of the artists and designers I know like to go to flea markets and second hand shops, rummage and linger in jumble sales and car-boot sales on a regular basis. Some have even become junk dealers. This seems to be a passion that is most consistently sustained by the art community rather than normal people. Why do we treasure old thrown-out objects, and wander for hours in their pursuit? Because of the open-ended random nature of what we might discover.

**Secondhand**

Material evidence of things made for human need, objects now in the limbo of disuse because people move house, or die, or change, is compelling to people who make things. History is a hook to artists who want to be informed, to understand objects, and to surprise themselves. We may like finding old techniques and manufacturing processes, like engraving, that usually decorated early industrial ceramic tableware. There is pleasure in recognizing the luxury of so many layers of process on a 19th century plate, for instance, a lost extravagance of skill. The cobalt blue print transfer, raised paste relief, hand-painted colours, acid etching through glaze as another tactile band of pattern under the final firing of gold; this sequence of accumulating ornament is far removed from the decorative norms of the tableware industry today.

There is a dogged economy in junk shopping too, the opposite of decadence and excess. Junk buying can be seen as rescue and repair, making a stand for resourceful adaptation and less consumption. Frugality is a virtue, an *unwasting*, beloved of the just-post-war generation with their careful parents and the last years of rationing. An old restraint has been strengthened by a deep new sense of waste, both from decades of commercial pressure to acquire new things, and from diminishing world resources. We could see bric-a-brac as resistance – just a *find*, not a thing endlessly advertised and sold to us. Junk is outside the normal chain of commerce; we have not been coerced.

Beyond the considerable charm of the bargain, I think the roaming search process satisfies in various ways, and is one way of thinking about your own work and what to make next. Perambulatory quest has a distinct artistic pedigree. French Romanticism’s idea of the *flaneur,* a restless intellectual pacing the streets at night like Baudelaire, resonates through the writing of the critic Walter Benjamin with new thinking about the city, the crowd, Surrealism and Cubism.

Both of these modernist art movements celebrated the found object, collage and bricolage, aspects of freedom breaking away from academic conventions of taste. Leftovers, digressions, the random, these are modern intrigues that inspire and provoke. Every junkshop could confound your expectations because *anything* might be there, hidden in residues of house clearance. But it also matters that these things are thrown away, detritus, rejects to be seen with fresh eyes and perhaps remade. The searcher is *Looking at the Overlooked [[1]](#endnote--1)*, to quote the title of a book on still life painting, relevant to this human sifting habit of accumulating ordinary things. The table, fruit, game, plates, glasses; still life in the huge history of painting has been a small thread of connection with the everyday, and with the impermanence of life.

Finding the right object, seeing something that speaks to *you*, unseen by hordes of others, makes a creative path. And an insight into the material past of lived lives. People in junkyards may look for a thing that fits with their inner idea; but an unpredicted fit, a jolt too. The random object may be a starting point as things are sifted and used, actually and conceptually, for thinking into making. Finding old furniture, ornaments and crockery in markets and junk shops, few artists are immune to the pull and most find themselves collecting some kind of stuff. In three progressive phases of response, there is collecting, then the more engaged process of simulating or incorporating found objects in your work, and lastly, letting adaptations of found objects *be* your work.

Using objects in art is not a new practice, but as an apparent focus of the past decade in ceramic art, it is a phenomenon to be explored.

**Bricolage**

For two of my most eminently bricoleurial ceramic colleagues the quest for junk is meaningful enough to be described in their biographies, books published for retrospective exhibitions in 2003. Carol McNicoll and I used to spend most Sundays in the early seventies searching for old evening dresses in Brick Lane (then far scruffier) in London’s East End, that we could wear to work in the ceramics department at the Royal College of Art. McNicoll uses the search in her current practice as a version of travel, which artists have always done as a way of finding fresh ideas. As Tanya Harrod writes : ‘ .. she was keenly aware of developments in other disciplines in the 1990s, particularly the odd interactions between material culture studies, anthropology and the fine art world. Her compulsive wanderings round flea markets and junk shops went hand in hand with her strongly nuanced sensibility concerning things and their odd trajectories from high social value to ambiguous status to the category of rubbish.’ [[2]](#endnote-0) Harrod also describes McNicoll’s décor in her flat and studio in an old piano factory as manifesting the same work ethic, a found-and-adapted style: ‘The two interiors she created at Apollo Works ….were in themselves works of art; a scaled up version of her pattern-making, collaging and salvaging activities. They remind us of the woman herself and her endlessly inventive spirit, in which the magus artist’s tabula rasa is set aside in favour of playful experimentation with what already exists. As we shall see, this tendency to trawl, drift and wander through urban space was to come into its own in the late 1990s. But these predilections had always been apparent in her appearance – her clothes being an exquisite extension of herself’. [[3]](#endnote-1)

Cathy Courtney writes in the biography of Richard Slee: ‘By the late 1990s found objects began to appear in the work. Many were collected by his young daughter when she accompanied him to car boot sales searching for treasures. When his daughter reached adolescence and presented him with a bin-bag full of the china ornaments she no longer wanted, Slee found himself unable to throw them away and gradually began to subvert them by creating new contexts for them, … In a typical Slee amalgam of practicality and commentary, *Wheelbarrow of the Medusa* (2001) is not only a gesture towards Théodore Géricault’s(1791-1824) *The Raft of the Medusa* but brings this sequence to a close by loading the remaining figures from Pearl’s bin-bag into a modelled wheelbarrow.’ [[4]](#endnote-2)

And in his catalogue for the Tate St Ives showcase exhibition of 2003, Oliver Watson wrote of the emotional charge that can be felt from the autobiographical, as well as daft and comical, use Slee has made of the cheap figurine: ‘To be interested in ornaments is inevitably to be interested in ceramics; ceramic history at one level charts the fluctuations of taste of just the level of culture in which he is interested. Slee knows the power of the Toby jug, the Staffordshire flat-back, the ceramic basket-of-flowers, the mantelpiece knick-knack. It is his talent to be able to appropriate these, and re-present them to us, in a way that lets us into his secrets.’

[[5]](#endnote-3)

**Materials**

I want to turn now to a consideration of material**.** Ceramics sits apart from other media because it cannot be remade. Ceramic as a material is irreversible, we are stuck with it, it cannot go back to being clay. Through the transformations of heat in firing it has changed chemically and irrevocably. Thus, unlike metal and glass that also thread through the utilitarian history of human life, it is not stuff for *actual* recycling. The fact that discarded metal and glass objects can return to their molten material state is spectacular. Good for the rapid realization of cash, as in stealing the lead from church roofs, scrap-dealing and pawn-broking, but dangerous to historic certainties of style.

Melting down has been the cause of gaps in art history because metals, in particular, have been so precious. It is understood that many historic ceramic things, vessels mainly, across the world have aped the shapes of more expensive things made in metal, and have been cheaper versions of these high-class things. [[6]](#endnote-4) Clay is a splendidly imitative material, and while the metal objects have been recycled when tastes and fortunes changed, the ceramic versions have survived despite being more fragile and less valuable, because they can’t revert.

In the present time recycling is seen as a norm of good behaviour, most materials are reclaimed in recent years of ‘sustainability’ conscience. In our earlier domestic culture of make-do-and-mend, knitting can be unravelled, clothes have always been unpicked and re-stitched, or made into rags or felt. Think of the folk-art history of quilts, patchwork and rag rugs. Furniture gets adapted and remade, the old timber a precious advantage. But not ceramics. When you smash crockery you get shards, leading maybe to ingenious repairs with metal staples, an add-on beaten metal spout or neck, or glue, none of which entirely restores the object. [[7]](#endnote-5) There is a long record of the shard, enduring fragment of the midden and the rubbish tip, informing art history and anthropology, and social and technical histories. The shard has a place too in contemporary art. Fragments may say more than wholes; Clare Twomey installed a huge pile of reject crockery and shards in the exhibition  *Possibilities and Losses : Transitions in Clay* which she curated at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art in the north of England in 2009. In the same year Grayson Perry included a room full of archive cases containing shards of his pots in an exhibition at Victoria Miro Gallery in London.

When you smash crockery and bricks you also get rubble, bits of hardcore, the bulk of stony fragments laid under a road, path or floor, which leads us to building.

**Building and Re-building**

The history of human living has building at its core, and once depended on rocks and trees, stone and wood, which can be used countless times. Building is a good model of an essential process of re-use and repair seen in everyday life. There is such obvious sense in rebuilding because of the durability of traditional materials. Pilfering from ruins. Timber improves with age, a beam or a stone lintel has intrinsic strength and can be carted away from a ruined cathedral and used in a barn. Slates for roofs, fired clay as bricks; these are modules, transportable, re-buildable, adaptable. To stray from ceramics for a moment, the artwork which won the Turner Prize for Simon Starling in 2005, *Shed Boat Shed*, is in my view a wonderfully bold, energetic and skilful revelation of re-use and adaptation, un-building and re-building on a large scale. He found an old shed near the river Rhine, took it to pieces and made a boat out of most of it, carried the rest of it down the river to Basle, where he rebuilt the shed in a Swiss museum.

Building is also a way of working with clay. Hand-building was a prominent technique in post 60’s ceramics and clarified a decision not to throw, and often led to making sculpture or pots for looking at rather than functional pots. But

there was also new studio use in this period of the industrial technique of slip-casting from plaster moulds. Moulds could be taken from intentional designed shapes, but also from found objects. A lot of energy in the modernist and postmodern context went into recycling forms in a new material, for multiples and repetition, replication, simulation, and assembling complex sculptures from piles of cast elements.

Allusion, quotation and reference have appeared across all art forms in the postmodern era and reward a knowing audience with a frisson of recognition.

**Practice: Borrowing and Taking**

Any surveyor of contemporary ceramics will notice that the plunder of forms and actual objects from demotic and popular culture is an aspect of new work over the last decade. Simulation, the re-use of an object’s *shape* in a new medium, has been taken further into appropriation and incorporation, the inclusion of real found objects rather than replicas. The artists I have already referred to, McNicoll and Slee, have explored that transition in their different ways.

I think there are two main types of appropriated ceramic form, ornaments and crockery. Both of them are cheap and found in flea markets, and working with

them raises questions about high and low culture, class, taste and value in general. (It is noticeable that precious ceramics are rarely re-appropriated in the crafts, that is the province of the upper reaches of fine art. It is hard to forget that Ai Wei Wei dropped a Han dynasty vase in 1995, an act recorded in a triptych of photographs, and he dipped a lot more in paint. Presumably a less exalted potter finding a piece of Sèvres in a car-boot sale would take it to auction and make some money? Only the famous and rich can destroy ancient and priceless things, with a thousand times more provocation and pause for thought.)

The first ceramic appropriation type is kitsch, the cute figurine, toy, souvenir, or mantelpiece ornament. These have been seen in the UK in the work of the sculptor Tony Hayward, Barnaby Barford, and in Richard Slee for those few years of the purposeful disbursement of his daughter’s trinkets. The second ceramic type is the everyday functional object, tableware, especially the plate. The flatness of plates has great potential as image as well as object. This has been beautifully explored in Scandinavia for instance, in the work of Irene Nordli, Kjell Rylander and Caroline Slotte; and Kari Skoe Fredriksen who used the title *Still-life* for a composition of plates that synthesized an old photograph of women engaged in needlework. Slotte takes appropriation to creative heights in the pure finesse of her craftsmanship, like a jewell-cutter she carves back through the glazed surface of a plate. In a series made in 2009 called *Unidentified View* she took plates decorated with a typical ‘chinoiserie’ engraving, so beloved in Europe, and a tableware norm in the 19th century. It is a scene of a river, a man carrying a fishing rod near a bridge, pagoda towers. When she has finished, after painstaking hours with a fine grinding drill, a sandblaster and a final sanding by hand, we have sculpture instead of painting, (via the printed image). The little man, or a pagoda, is in perfectly nuanced relief on a bare white plate.

The figurines in a McNicoll piece may be cast from souvenirs but are often figures modelled by her, like the dumpy tourist who appears in her polemic anti-capitalist pieces. Printed images which crowd across the surfaces may be appropriated too, or based on her own drawings. Her pieces with 3D additions have usually brought in other media, glass vases (fake cut glass cast with geometric facets), or brass plates and trays, and the assembly is often threaded together on a metal rod for solidity. For her it has been a chance to mix media. Also for Slee, whose broader sculptural range and scale now includes large additions like broom handles and spades. He too has lifted print images from familiar sources, like the generic graphics that advise the public; how to put litter in a bin and so on.

**New/Old qualities**

So what is most important about the practice of re-use and are there any drawbacks? The questions I would ask of this way of working are these:

Might extraordinary skill exclude the need to appropriate – do you take what, and when, you cannot make?

Is categoric ambiguity, allusion, and openness to interpretation, less likely in work that incorporates actual and recognisable things?

Could we be looking at the advance of cliché and nostalgia? And is that a problem?

In the digital age when every image and fact is so accessibly replicable, is regurgitation of the past more, or less, likely?

Though a ceramic artist I am an outsider in this field, but I imagine that the following nouns could be interesting reasons to cajole old objects into new ceramic art. Perhaps they could be made into strings of words like a concretepoem**:**

*mimesis, quotation, replication*

*simulation, distortion, repetition,*

*homage, narrative, humour*

*surprise, irreverence, satire,*

*politics, synthesis, possession:*

*making it yours.*

For me there are three special qualities that show up in these rebuilt objects that all begin with ‘A’ : *Absurdity* is part of humour, and is a strong trait of English work as seen in the juxtapositions of Slee and McNicoll. *Adaptation* is a way of understanding changing conditions, play, rethinking objects into the present, the opposite of a controlling pursuit of clear concept into perfect form. And lastly *Accommodation* is the opposite of imposition, the negotiation of awkwardness and disjunctionin finding new roles for objects. A truly contemporary skill for the complexity of our times**.**

**Re-used**

I will finish this essay by returning to the idea of the collection as a prop for thinking. Walking the dog day by day I pick up shards of blue and white china that I come across in the woods, more appearing after heavy rain. I collect stray cups, mostly white, many bought abroad, no repeats, which are in daily use. I have a teapot from Afghanistan, a re-used Chinese teapot, broken on purpose and riveted together with a new metal base so you can boil tea on the fire with milk and sugar in it. I have had it since the seventies and I think of it as an artwork, a beautiful hybrid, and anenlightening adaptation. Recently I have realised I am collecting unfinished crockery, left semi-decorated by the factory because of flaws, the strangeness of this half-baked emptiness is often striking. The unfinished is another version of the fragment, leaving room for the mind’s eye to run.

A few years ago I was given £50 to spend on junk and write about it for a design group’s magazine giving thought to the secondhand.

I will end by reusing part of that text, appropriated from the recent past.

“Like words in a sentence, it is the relationships between objects that make

them mean something to the eye. It was the forming of tableware groups, like fantasy/mundanity still lives, that made sense for me. Buying junk in a street market like the Waste in Hackney the great piles of dross you wade through to find a gleam of interest, the chanciness of what you might or might not find, is appalling: most of the tableware, for instance, is thick, ugly and ill-proportioned and was not worth manufacturing in the first place. Objects with character shine through very directly, like seeing a face in a crowd. On a Saturday at the Waste when it rained all day I sloshed through plastic boxes of old crockery like sinks of washing up, looking for quirks . . . .

Tableware is everyday stuff, but it has the formal joys of verticals and horizontals, upright jugs, flat plates. What is visual wit? Part of the impulse to put things together is a small drama with improvisational humour, or play, behind it. Then there is the appeal of making patterns out of chaotic jumble – a simple human inclination.

Old stuff/new life/still life.” [[8]](#endnote-6)

I find no way to *make* with my pile of cobalt-printed shards, though perhaps some echoes of the ‘unfinished’ begin to appear in my own work.

I don’t want to make or re-use tableware, but 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.

1. Bryson,N. (1990) L*ooking at the Overlooked,* Reaktion Books [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Harrod, T. and Goldberg, R. (2003) *Carol McNicoll,* Lund Humphries [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. op. cit. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Courtney, C. and Clark, G. (2003) *Richard Slee,* Lund Humphries [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. Watson, O. (2003) *Richard Slee Grand Wizard,* Tate St Ives [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Dr Oliver Watson, at the time curator of Ceramics at the V&A, gave a paper on this subject *Pottery,* *Form and Status* at the Vessel conference for the Gulbenkian Foundation in Birmingham in 1987. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
7. The new display of the Ceramics Galleries at the V&A includes an interesting case full of breaks and repairs.

   Riches,D, (ed) *The Companion* (2009) magazine. A UBM Live Publication in conjunction with Designersblock for Interiors Birmingham 2009.

   **Picture captions**

   AB1

   *Feira da Ladra,* Thieves’ Market, Flea market in Lisbon, 2010. Photo: Luciana Britton Newell.

   AB2

   Carol McNicoll, *Globalization*, 2004. Photo: David Cripps.

   AB3

   Richard Slee, *Wheelbarrow of the Medusa*, 2001.

   Photo ©Phil Sayer / *Marsden Woo Gallery*, *London.*

   AB4

   Clare Twomey: *Monument*, 2009. Installation at MIMA Middlesbrough UK.

   Photo Dan Prince.

   AB5

   Carol McNIcoll: *Subtext.* 2010. Photo ©Phil Sayer / *Marsden Woo Gallery*, *London.*

   AB6

   Richard Slee: *Mushrooms Pan and Dish*. 2006, photo ©Phil Sayer / *Marsden Woo Gallery*.

   AB7

   Tony Hayward: *Bearing Gifts*, 2010. Photo ©Phil Sayer / *Marsden Woo Gallery*.

   AB8

   Second hand plate before reworking by Caroline Slotte. Photo: Caroline Slotte.

   AB9

   Caroline Slotte: *Unidentified View*, 2009. Photo: Øystein Klakegg.

   AB10.

   *Afghan Teapot* 1970s, collection Alison Britton. Photo: Alison Britton 2011.

   AB11.

   *Unfinished Crockery*, collection Alison Britton. Photo: Pelle Crépin 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
8. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)