

ALISON BRITTON

Standing and Running

16 February to 17 March 2012

"Things are already as close to words as they are to things, and reciprocally, words are already as close to things as they are to words."¹

"... the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolised the world to the first speaker and hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry."²

Approaching objects through words, or vice-versa, is problematic. It runs the risk of imposing a 'wordiness' on objects and involves a form of translation. While a transferral of information is generally straightforward, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out this approach invariably produces bad translations, because, as mere transmissions of the message of the original, they often produce nothing more than an "inaccurate transmission of inessential content"³. And for objects with a poetic quality, like these in the new body of work Alison Britton has made for this exhibition, something essential - the same thing that draws you back to them - always evades and resists. So my aim in trying to write about them is not to en-close, but rather to dis-close through words, or open the word out toward the object.

Alison crafts objects and words and I find a directness and integrity both to the pots she makes and to her writing which would resist any form of sophistry. The title she has chosen for this exhibition presents, conjoins and plays upon two words: *Standing* and *Running*. So, rather than "fall back on appropriate words"⁴ or on theory, which may convey little more than packaged information about her new work, it could be that an excavation of these two words, whose qualities I think Alison explores, juxtaposes and re-creates through the pieces that we see, may help to touch or glance on the poetic within the work.

In keeping with her interest in the prosaic and the poetic, and the ability of the ceramic object to contain both, these are common, almost ubiquitous, functional words, which adapt to diverse contexts. People, politicians, armies, water, lamps, and posts all stand. Just as rivers, tights, thoughts, nations, heavenly bodies, pipes, pigment and presidents, all run, or are run in some sense of the word. And yet their roots are deep. The origins of *stand* and *run* are Old English and indigenous like one of the sources of inspiration for this new body of work. The new red clay which is introduced to, and interacts with, Alison's usual buff clay and slips, echoes the limited palette of a collection of traditional, everyday slipware made in north Devon since the 16th century⁵. This was made from red Fremington clay, white slip, clear lead or honey glaze with touches of copper green or cobalt blue.

Poets/artists need to work within constraints, to explore the indefinite within the limits of a given definite and the rigour imposed by this restricted palette and the reduced formal vocabulary of the domestic slipware interacts with the artist's ongoing concerns: bodies, buildings, physical and psychological spaces, "ordinary domestic stuff, inner worlds"⁶. It injects an energy into the work which plays itself out in the tensions made manifest in the relationship of surface to form.

Stand is a strong verb; it has held an etymologically recognisable form since the 8th century. The graceful, imposing line of the vertical jars and horizontal plates reflects this presence, embodying a sense of stability and control within which collars, rims, spouts, pipes and handles are explored and played out. *Run*, however, is less steadfast. Its modern form is the result of the coming together of two related Old English words: *rinnan* - to run and *rannjan* - to cause to run. The former of these, the intransitive, which limits the initial purposeful intent to the grammatical subject, is stronger. For me it echoes the intention contained within the action or moment of beginning to pour, which initiates the run. But in its

weak transitive form as a verb expressing an action, which it shares with its object, this latter *run* has proved less predictable. Like the runs on the vessels, it has slithered, slipped, morphed, dribbled and deviated over the object.

Alison's use of a present continuous aspect of the verbs *Standing* and *Running* denotes a sustained action maintained in the present, which, like her new work holds a past and future aspect within it. Forms and ideas that she has been working with over many years resurface, develop and move forward. Yet as adjectives they also describe the quality of some thing and here they allude also to fluid states: contained, still, stagnant or connective, flowing, pouring and moving through. In this sense then these objects embody a material manifestation in their form and surface decoration of these two aspects of the words, a holding-in-motion created by the tension between the two actions.

Objects matter to Alison Britton, but words also matter. Possibly in equal measure. From what I can see, in her practice she deploys both - words and matter - with the same careful, calibrated consideration. This relation or friction between the two, between what is 'seeable' and what is 'sayable'; between what can be expressed visually through the objects she makes, and verbally through her writing has been a constant preoccupation within her practice. It is tempting to use the plural to draw a line, and call these parallel practices, but I think that the relation resists it. It is more complex and far more interesting.

¹ Francis Ponge, quoted in Serge Gavronsky's introduction *Francis Ponge: The Power of Language*, trans, Gavronsky (Berkeley, 1979), p. 21.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Poet*, 1844

³ *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin. Pp. 69-83, *Illuminations*, 1999, Pimlico, Translated by Harry Zorn.

⁴ Alice Oswald, *Dart*. Faber and Faber, 2002

⁵ "Laying the table: synthesis, continuity, and the everyday." Alison Britton. In *The RJ Lloyd Ceramics Collection: Artist as Collector*, Burton Art Gallery, April 2010.

⁶ *The Fiction of Form*, Alison Britton, *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Mar 2009.