

# Things of *beauty*



Simon Olding, co-curator of *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery*, on show at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, reflects on the aims and objectives of this ambitious exhibition, which started out at the Yale Center for British Art in North America

New Haven in Connecticut, USA, has found a taste for pots. In September 2015, *The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art* (co-curated by Sequoia Miller and Jock Reynolds) opened, displayed inside Louis Kahn's 1953 modernist masterpiece, the Yale University Art Gallery. The exhibition featured pieces from the exemplary ceramic collection of Linda Leonard Schlenger. Pots by Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, John Mason, Peter Voulkos and many others were set in elegant counterpoints with paintings, sculptures and works on paper – a two-handled jug by Magdalene Odundo, for example, was the serene companion to Isamu Noguchi's *Mitosis*, 1962; one carbonised terracotta, the other glowing black marble.

Two years later I collaborated with my co-curators Glenn Adamson and Martina Droth to open the exhibition *Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery* at the Yale Center for British Art – located across the street from the Art Gallery. Built in the 1970s and meticulously restored in three phases between 2008 and 2016, the Center was also designed by Kahn, and was in fact his last building. This was the first ceramic exhibition ever held at the Yale Center for British Art. It was also, so far as we curators know, the first extensive display of British studio pottery held in an American museum, and so it has made history of its own.

### IMPORTANT COLLECTION

This exhibition has now transferred to The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge. Former Director Tim Knox comments: 'This is a perfect fit for The Fitzwilliam as the exhibition speaks to our impressive permanent collection of ceramics, ancient and modern, which continues to grow due to the generosity of donors such as Sir Nicholas Goodison. Displayed in our temporary exhibition galleries, *Things of Beauty Growing* has given us the opportunity to highlight this particular strength of the museum, and has encouraged us to look at our own collections in a new light. It has also enabled us to highlight the important collections of British studio pottery held in other UK museums, who have so generously lent to the show.'

At The Fitzwilliam, the grammar of the show has changed. It does not sit adjacent to fine art collections as it did at Yale; instead it is embedded, so to speak, amid the Museum's internationally acclaimed – and growing – collection of world ceramics. This is important, because we can read the show in a specific context. For example, Clare Twomey's large-scale installation *Made in China*, 2010, dispersed throughout the Yale Center but mostly massing in the great Entrance Court, is here distributed throughout The Fitzwilliam's galleries of Korean, Chinese and European ceramics. The show interacts with its surroundings in new and insightful ways.

### POETRY AND PROSE

The title of the display was deliberately bifurcated; the first clause provides a sense of the poetic. In his introductory essay to the exhibition catalogue, Adamson notes that potter Michael Cardew (quoted in Robert Genn's book *The Painter's Keys*) said: 'If you are lucky, and if you live long enough, and if you trust your materials and you trust your instincts, you will see things of beauty growing up in front of you, without you having anything to do with it.' Cardew is represented in the exhibition by several works, including an exceptional rose bowl, a virtuoso piece of throwing that reconfigures the old tradition of English slipware, turning what could be revivalist country pottery into a piece akin to abstract art. It could be a metaphor for the whole exhibition and its themes of transfiguration, reflection and reimagining.

The second clause of the title, *British Studio Pottery*, is at first glance prosaic, but it too is allusive. It refers to the title of the magisterial 1994 catalogue of the Victoria and Albert Museum's ceramic collection by the scholar Oliver Watson. The fullness of our title – combining poetry and prose – is

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Gordon Baldwin, *Venus Love Trap Vessel II*, 2003–4, stoneware with yellow pigment, hand-built; artist unknown, *Vase*, c. 960–1280, Song dynasty China, stoneware, incised floral designs painted in dark brown on a white ground

**LEFT:** Bernard Leach, *Tree of Life*, 1923–25, earthenware, brown slip with galena glaze **RIGHT:** Nicholas Rena, *A Romantic Impulse*, 2012–15, hand-built, painted and polished ceramic

Images: Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Crafts Study Centre, Farnham; Phil Sayer; Yale Center for British Art; Heini Schneebeli; Joshua Nefsky; Victoria and Albert Museum; The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

*'The exhibition makes no claims to present a comprehensive history of British studio pottery, neither should it be seen as a survey of the field's most important makers... our aim, instead, has been to bring out a history of ceramic forms – to focus not on a canon of makers, but on a canon of vessels'*



meant to give weight to both emotion and research in equal measure, to encourage the visitor to be swept along through time, and to find connections between pots, whether deliberate or coincidental. It is no coincidence, for example, that Cardew's rose bowl sits snugly alongside a smaller bowl by Norah Braden, for the one is an echo of the other, though they may never have been seen together in public before. They are pots made in respect and a tender regard – one by a great and renowned figure, the other by a potter who deserves much greater attention.

### LAYERED APPROACH

Even in the generous spaces of the Yale Center and The Fitzwilliam Museum, there would not be adequate room to tell the full and summative story of British studio pottery. We decided at our collaborative meeting to shape and

define the show according to an organising principle of typology, that is, by various forms of pot or vessel. This layered approach paid particular attention to the exhibition bays at the Yale Center, whose inner walls allow the visitor to look down into Kahn's entrance atrium, and whose outer walls allow natural daylight to bathe and wash the spaces. The typologies of the vessel became the means of inclusion and exclusion, the visual and chronological thread that tied the show together.

The sections – bowl, vase, charger and set, and the more metaphorical terms vessel, pot and monument – are sited in a time span that takes us from the antecedents of British studio pottery (including Song dynasty bowls from 12th-century China, as well as the unexpected but powerful Japanese art pottery designed by Christopher Dresser) through to work of the present day – including



pots made expressly for the exhibition by Nao Matsunaga, Akiko Hirai, Adam Buick and Jennifer Lee. It culminates with an installation of carved vessels by Halima Cassell made using clays dug the world over, itself a work continually in progress.

The show starts with a section on the moon jar, a particular form developed in Choson dynasty Korea, which has played an important part in the story of British studio pottery. In 1935, Bernard Leach bought a notable example in an antique shop in Seoul while on a collecting trip with his friend, the Japanese philosopher Sōetsu Yanagi. The pot, dating from the 18th century, was seen as an exemplar of the standard that Leach felt was an immutable ambition of pottery. It was a captivating symbol of the work of the 'unknown craftsman'. It entered Leach's personal collection of ceramics, but unlike the other pieces, which were displayed and handled at the Leach Pottery in St Ives, this work was first loaned then gifted to Lucie Rie, who kept it in her showroom at Albion Mews until her death. Leach gave it to her in 1947 in memory of a life-long and deeply felt friendship, finally remarking, 'keep the Korean pot in memory'.

Although the actual work is not in the exhibition, its symbolic presence lives on in the works of several contemporary potters, including Buick, who made a pure white porcelain moon jar especially for *Things of Beauty Growing*. This section reprises the Korean Cultural Centre's *Moon Jar* exhibition of 2014, echoing the show's presentation of the important history of the moon jar and using it as an underpinning theme throughout. These are pots with both sentimental and public pasts.

### EASTERN INFLUENCE

The introductory sections of *Things of Beauty Growing* – moon jar, vase and bowl – highlight the influence of the 'Song standard' on the emerging field of British studio pottery, and the emulation of early Chinese work is represented both as a liberating force and a straitjacket. The Canadian potter Harlan House wrote, in an exhibition catalogue for the *Ceramic Modernism* exhibition in 2002, that he admired Coper and Rie because: 'they did not bow down to Leach, and did not jump on the Japanese, West-meets-a-tiny-bit-of-the-East bandwagon.' The exhibition pays attention to this tension. In the section called 'Vessel' there is, for example, a remarkable set of saturnine works by Rie, most of which are sourced from the magnificent collection of John Driscoll, who has assembled the most important private collection of British ceramics in North America. These works range from a Vienna-period plate of around 1927, to Rie's so-called 'Black Firing' in May 1981 –

**LEFT FROM TOP:** Lucie Rie, *Bottle with Flaring Lip*, 1970s, mixed stoneware and porcelain with glaze; Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled*, 1995, hand-built, terra sigillata, polished and carbonised terracotta clay **RIGHT:** Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled*, 2000, stoneware



when most of the pots came out of the kiln an all-over black. Rie saw this in retrospect as an omen of Coper's death.

The assemblage encapsulates Driscoll's search for a career-long set of examples. His collection demonstrates range as well as depth, and one of the great glories of this display is the exceptionally rare chance to see this major private collection of British studio pottery in public. They join works by other notable American collectors such as the couple Lawrence and Janet Larose. Not all works transferred from Yale to The Fitzwilliam, but everything is illustrated in the accompanying catalogue, with specially commissioned essays by notable authors such as Tanya Harrod, Penelope Curtis and Miller.

The vessel section also marks both a mood and colour switch, as well as a remodelling of form. Gone are the quiescent harmonies of Song dynasty precedents. In the hands of Angus Suttie, Gordon Baldwin, Alison Britton or Jacqueline Poncelet, the vital sculptural and painterly possibilities of clay are made explicit; the declining interest in function and the departure from traditional forms becomes vividly evident.

The finale of the exhibition melds many of the themes and approaches of the exhibition, but using significant scale as the means of expression. Three elegiac monumental jars from *Quietus* by Julian Stair are grouped together, using, as co-curator Adamson explains: 'that material which symbolises our origins and then making vessels to house the body to take it back to the ground... a wonderful kind of circularity.' Equally dramatic is the modestly titled *Large Pot* by Alan Caiger-Smith, with its references not to China or Korea, but to the maiolica traditions of Italy and lustreware of the Middle East. Both Stair and Caiger-Smith had to find solutions to seemingly intractable technical challenges to create these pieces and yet make work of utter certainty and ease. The 'large scale' in Adamson's words, is 'being used to signify a new level of artistic aspiration for the vessel form.'

### CANON OF VESSELS

Adamson, who is also Senior Scholar at the Yale Center, goes on to remark that this exhibition has boundaries. It 'makes no claims to present a comprehensive history of British studio pottery, neither should it be seen as a survey of the field's most important makers... our aim, instead, has been to bring out a history of ceramic forms – to focus not on a canon of makers, but on a canon of vessels.'

This has been both liberating and rigorous, for it has focused a steely attention on the selection of the individual works. It is not a coincidence that Odundo's untitled pot, also shown in *The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art*, is in this exhibition. It is one of her canonical shapes, and seems as if to say that pots should be at the heart of all great art collections without question or demur. That argument holds fast in New Haven and in Cambridge.

Droth, co-curator and Deputy Director of Research, Exhibitions and Publications, and Curator of Sculpture at the Yale Center, locates the exhibition against the sweep of



history. 'The antiquity of the vessel, the familiarity of its shapes and forms, provides a ready-made language, which ceramic artists have for decades invoked and emulated but also distanced, transformed and renewed,' she explains. In this light, *Things of Beauty Growing* places the ceramic vessel in an international context, where pots are of the world, not just a specific garden in Wiltshire or even a country. Nowhere is that clearer than in Twomey's 80-vessel installation *Made in China*. It is a work raising questions of identity, the meaning of labour, the contested relationship of Britain and China, and the creative synergies between them. ■

*Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery, The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, 20 March – 17 June 2018; fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk*