

Fresh - from the Horse's Mouth

A participant's perspective of the British Ceramic Biennial, 2013

Helen Doherty



Opening night of *Fresh*, with some of Clare Twomey's vases in the foreground.

During the Rose period (1904-1906), reputedly his happiest time with Fernande Olivier, Picasso produced his highest selling painting, *Boy with a Pipe* (1904). It was a time when he was indisputably 'in the pink'. A striking aspect of this Biennial which, for me, effectively sums up its ethos, is the theme colour. From the logo and lights guiding guests on the opening night, to the online website, pink - in a scale of tones from hot cerise, to fuchsia, to dogwood rose - is confidently, playfully dominant. Conveying vitality and potential, its presence also lends greater cohesive intimacy to the rambling Spode factory, the site of the exhibition. Touted as a selection of the top ceramic graduates of the UK, *Fresh* provides an exceptionally broad representation of contemporary ceramic practice, which made choosing only a few artists quite a challenge. My criteria were work which pushes the boundaries of ceramic practice and also resonates with me.

Earth to earth ... a controlled, uncontrollable experiment

The line of enquiry highlighting ecological sensitivity, whilst simultaneously commemorating the closure of distinguished ceramic factories – Wedgwood and Spode, for example - is one which artists such as Clare Twomey and Stephen Dixon

have taken up.¹ Questions their work foregrounds concern not only the current position of ceramics within a heavily industrialised milieu but, more precisely, to quote Leopold Foulem, the nature of its 'ceramicness.'² In short, by what criteria is a ceramic object defined? In *Contain*, Annie Jones brings this challenge to the viewer apropos the appropriate place(s), properties and display of 21st century ceramics.



Contain, 2013. Annie Jones

Within five, hermetically sealed glass cubes mounted on steel plinths at eye level, layers of raw slip interspersed with bleeding oxides, confront the viewer. The red rust of iron, the celadon of copper and the smudge of black, meld into disintegrating landscapes punctuated by myriad, extruded tubes of raw clay. The intended focus, Jones' statement suggests, is the cyclical decay and regeneration of ceramic and chemical compounds.³ Yet Jones' choice of title expands our reading. Since 'contain' denotes both to accommodate and constrain or hold something against its will, a conflictual relationship between clay and glass, both containers in their own rights,

¹ In Blossom (2007), for example, Twomey 'planted' thousands of hand-sculpted, unfired clay flowers at the Eden Project, Cornwall, to mark the closure of the Hinks China factory. Metaphors for the factory, these raw clay objects eventually disintegrated, becoming indistinguishable from the soil. Sourced on 10/10/13 from Website: http://www.claretwomey.com/monument_-info.html.

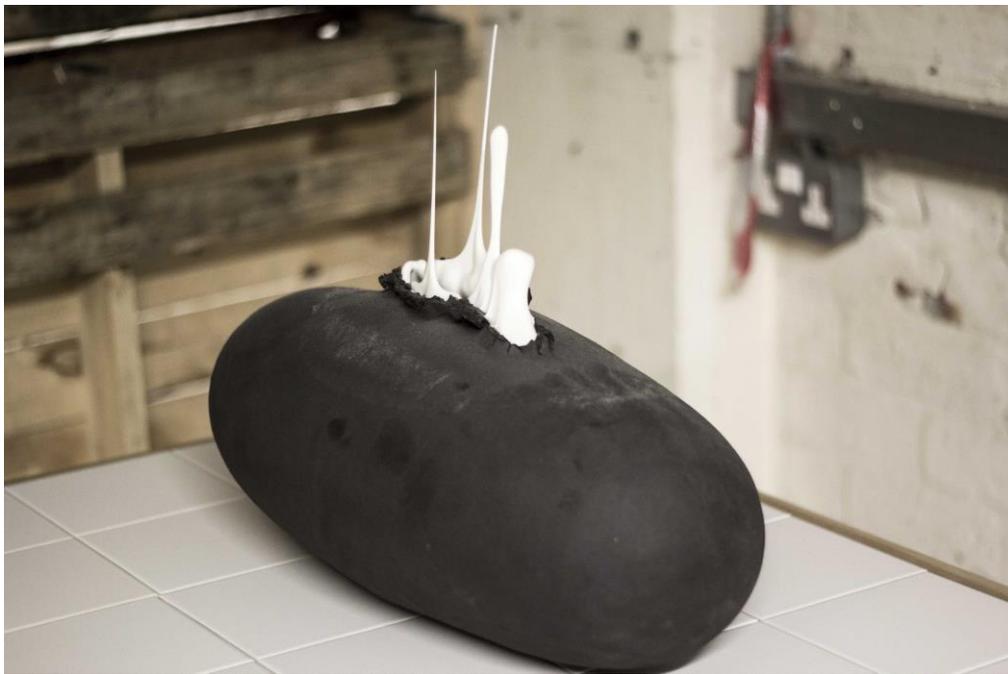
² In his lecture, *Ceramic Paradigms and Paradigms for Ceramics* (2000), Leopold Foulem declares that whilst some clay objects may indeed be classed as fine art, all objects made in clay do not necessarily possess "ceramicness." Sourced on 07/10/13 at http://ceramicsmuseum.alfred.edu/perkins_lect_series/foulem/

³ Jones' work brings to mind Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Life* (2001), a video piece which compressed the lengthy decay of a classically arranged bowl of fruit into 3.18 minutes, making the narrative structure of mortality immediately visible. Youtube video of Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Life* (2001), accessed on 09/10/13, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MlzXWGcb3u0>.

is implied. This tension is replicated in the viewer since *Contain* is premised not so much on a denial of kinetic access, as an assertion of haptic revulsion: despite their intrigue, these decaying landscapes do not tempt us to touch. Jones invites us to engage instead in a primarily visual capacity as witnesses to a narrative of disintegration - yet the faint odour of putrefying matter interrupts this visual feast, brings us back to our senses, so to speak.

Visceral catharsis of *Release*

Similarly complex, Emily Gardiner's installation of simplified, unglazed geometric forms being punctured by highly coloured - red, yellow, white - eruptions of glaze, brings to our attention an aspect mostly invisible in exhibited work, yet critical during the making process: the clay-glaze dichotomy. *Release* seems to embrace, even celebrate this dynamic, the work effectively externalising the difference between the mobile, glassy glaze construct and the comparatively static clay body. This fertile tension between materials is what Gardiner readily exploits. To engineer a compound with high glass percentage to fuse harmoniously at high temperature with one rich in sand and kaolin, is tricky. Glazes crawl, shiver, crackle and craze when the fit is incorrect. One of the first things I learnt as a ceramist was the correct terminology for the ways glazes demonstrate their resistance.



Release, 2013. Emily Gardiner.

Embracing this 'natural' tension, Gardiner, who describes herself as 'a ceramic explorer', directs our attention, as exhibition viewers, to this normally concealed

aspect of ceramics – the imperfections, misfirings and mistakes - which necessarily precede successfully realised works, and perhaps most importantly can lead, through unpredictable results, to breakthroughs.⁴ By enclosing the glaze within a clay form and ‘freezing’ its moment of eruption from this crucible, Gardiner subverts the conventional use of glaze to cover or seal a porous clay body, thereby inverting the clay-glaze relationship. There is an overlooked beauty here, she suggests, and directs us to look afresh at clay and glaze as separate elements. The eruption of glaze from the clay body, which is underscored by violently ruptured exit points in the clay, suggests both a puncturing - the glaze’s will to break free, and a forceful expulsion - the clay’s rejection of the glaze. In Gardiner’s work, to invert David Hockney’s definition of art, new ways of feeling can mean new ways of seeing.⁵ In *Release*, by engaging the viewer viscerally, Gardiner effects in the viewer a change of perspective: that glaze should serve clay is no longer a given.

Unbearable burdens

An artist whose work also addresses conflict, but of a different nature, is Phoebe Cummings. As artist-in-residence at Spode, Cummings’ starting point is a 19th century dinner plate made by the factory.



After the Death of the bear, 2013. Phoebe Cummings.

⁴ Extract from Gardiner’s online statement on the Fresh website, accessed on 10/10/13

⁵ Quote by David Hockney on art: “In art, new ways of seeing mean new ways of feeling, you can’t divorce the two...” accessed on 09/10/13 from website: http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=50

Depicting a bear being hunted in India by men riding elephants and horses, this plate is displayed alone, dwarfed in a large vitrine at the entrance to the installation. Echoing the willow pattern as a hybridisation of Chinese and English landscapes and narratives, this blue and white plate testifies to English colonial presence in India. A time of enormous colonial expansion driven by religious and pseudo-scientific ideas, it was perhaps the claim *terra nullius* which facilitated England's rapid annexation of land in the 19th century. Cummings' reconstruction of this exotic, conquered landscape sans its players, brings to mind this infamous thesis which asserted that 'empty' land – defined as devoid of civilised, settled peoples – was available for appropriation.⁶ By modelling the entire scene in raw clay in a space enfolded by plastic sheets, Cummings delivers an indictment of colonialism as a landscape destined to crumble built as it is on the sand of dubious claims. The atmosphere created by the plastic sheets and wet clay patches in between the palm trees and grasses is clammy- one is tempted neither to touch nor linger. It's an uncomfortable landscape, this post-colonial one; and as a subject of the former-Empire, one is bound to feel like an intruder.

Tolling Belles

Moving on to more figurative work, which similarly references historical narrative as source material, is the highly decorated *Vasilisa* of Lisa Maria Svensk. Moulded in the shape of bells with elongated handles painted as a woman's face and torso, these forms have considerable visual and tactile appeal. Simply executed, the painting, concentrated on the head and the upper part of the bell shaped body, draws the eye around the entire form, a process involving the viewer in the visual narratives.

⁶ Jan Nederveen Pieterse describes *terra nullius* in his book. *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, as a recurrent theme in mid-nineteenth century exploration imagery, which depicted vacant land as 'essentially uncultivated and uninhabited,' and therefore 'rightfully available to colonization'. Yale University press: New Haven and London, 1992: p.35.



Vasilisa, Lisa Maria Svensk.

Bold, slightly sinister stories drawn from Slavic folklore of Bhabha Yaga and Vasilisa the Fair, embellish these forms in cobalt blue and manganese maroon; and the freely drawn content, coupled with the uneasy bell shapes, ensures this work sidesteps the merely decorative. Yet there is something sinister about these legless female figures, a mood which recalls Louise Bourgeois' early sculptures of women with houses as heads and Paula Rego's brooding, omnipotent girl-women.

Mapping a post-colonial identity

Engaging with an aspect of colonialism cited as an inevitable consequence of this clash of different cultures, my work is the beginning of an exploration of the implications of hybridisation. It is rooted in personal experience, as I grew up and was educated in both South Africa and Britain, inheriting both cultures. Appropriating a form historically associated with military and colonial conquests - the Staffordshire flatback of a horse and rider - and splicing contemporary narratives, I hope to present a sense of the fertile, yet volatile environment which this mish-mash of identities and cultures has created. How this exhibition has changed my perspective on ceramics is perhaps a matter for another article, but one thing it has done, is stretched my understanding of the possibilities of clay, in terms of its presentation, properties and place within the art world.



Helen Doherty's *Spilled* and *Cactus* in the background. Porcelain and earthenware, 2013.

ⁱ In his lecture, *Ceramic Paradigms and Paradigms for Ceramics (2000)*, Leopold Foelum, declares that whilst some clay objects may indeed be classed as fine art, all objects made in clay do not necessarily possess "ceramicness". Sourced on 07/10/103 from website http://ceramicmuseum.alfred.edu/perkins_lect_series/foulem/