

## **'Empty Vessels' : A Question of Function**

**Excerpt from an article by Jane Hamlyn for Ceramic Review Issue No 204 Nov/Dec 2003**

Since I set up in 1975 functional pots at large have become more and more decorative and less and less used. Once it is accepted that a piece of functional pottery can hold more than simple utility—and indeed that this extra value is what the audience seems to want— there is a tendency to add embellishments until, in extreme cases function is virtually denied. And although my own pots have always remained usable, concerns like this have recently led me to abandon some of my more complicated forms and surface patterning. I have always liked my small pots but for a potter with ambition scale is also important; larger pieces have a presence, which can command space in the way a small object cannot. But if a functional object is exaggerated beyond a certain scale it becomes cumbersome and seems to lose grace.

In 2000 I built a new kiln. My old oil-fired heavy brick kiln is wearing out and although it still functions, packing and firing it is long and physically arduous and we are not getting any younger. The new gas kiln, built from high-alumina insulating bricks, has a trolley and a hinged door, expensive sophistications afforded by a small legacy and a generous gift. Changing fuel and a quicker firing cycle was bound to make a difference; it takes time to learn to fire a new kiln and pots are usually sacrificed in the process. I anticipated this would happen so I also took the opportunity to embark on a new kind of pot, another change of direction involving trial and error. I thought about which pots are still necessary in our lives today and the object, which occurred to me as indispensable in my own life, was a vase for flowers. In the past my vases invariably had some additional embellishment, this time I would leave them plain. They began as a thrown sleeve curving inwards to a small opening at the top, shaped and cut when leather hard, joined to a base then sand-papered after a bisque firing for a really smooth surface. Simple to look at but not so simple to make. After several false starts the first successful firing contained nothing but vases, basically the same pod-like form but with subtle differences in size and shape and colour. They looked strikingly different from the rest of my work with new colours and surfaces but otherwise completely unadorned, they didn't fit in...but I loved them.

With the realization that these forms were leading me somewhere I hadn't been before, I couldn't stop making them. But I didn't know what to do with these new pots, they had taken me unawares, so after each firing and after sorting and editing, I postponed further decisions by hiding them in a cupboard. For almost a year I made nothing but vases, firing the new kiln with varying degrees of success. Unpacking each time was always a mixed blessing – I discovered a wonderful new orange red – but time and again half the pots came out blistered.

I had to keep making them not simply because I was losing some but because I wanted to see what they would look like. When you make a range of functional pots you work to a kind of loose

formula and your pots become familiar to you... new forms are developed, the firings vary and there are pleasant surprises, it is absorbing and you love your work but by and large you know what to expect. These new pots were exciting and I couldn't get enough of them. Unexpected things kept happening as I continued, the tall 'pod' developed into an elongated elliptical 'pocket' with a wider open top and lower versions of this form revealed much more of the interior space. The rim itself became a defining point and as the interior space became more visible the possibility to develop colour relationships presented itself. I realized that I wasn't thinking about function any more...once I had turned the rim inwards and put colour inside they ceased in my mind to be containers of water for flowers.

This strange behavior of making, firing and hiding pots away in cupboards couldn't go on indefinitely. Eventually, when I brought them all out I found myself arranging them – in pairs and trios, long lines and groups, configurations where shapes and colours within the group worked in relation to each other, complementing or opposing and adding interest and liveliness. The fact that they had been hidden away meant that I had almost forgotten them and distance lent detachment to my view. Potters can't see what pots look like until they are out of the kiln, they make in hope and acclimatize them to disappointment. This was different, my fired pots had become the raw material for the next stage of creative engagement and now I could see what I had to work with. In this case the work of making was not just about the means of production, the act of considered assessment and composition, the decisions taken after the firing were equally important...and enjoyable.

A multiple display of identical objects always looks good and arranging pots in attractive groups is a skill many potters acquire. These are conventional modes of retail presentation, commercial arrangements made within the constraints of domestic scale or gallery shelf where individual items are often removed or replaced as they are sold. My formal groups, composed to work together, were meant to stay together. In these terms the difference between an arrangement and a composition is one of authority, authorship, of who decides what constitutes a piece of work. This circumstance also demands more of the viewers, who must find criteria other than functional tenets on which to base their judgements. It is not a question of picking out the pot they like best - that choice is denied. It is not about the qualities of any one part but how each contributes to the whole... the difference between a solo and a duo, a trio or a symphony. My insistence on 'the group as a whole or nothing' is simply an extension of my responsibility for the consequences, which began as soon as I sat at the wheel. It is a case of my right to decide when a piece of work is finished.

Once I had abandoned function the constraints of making and thinking on a domestic scale also ceased to be relevant. This was liberating but also alarming...if I could do anything how would I decide what to do? With no specific function in mind to guide me I needed to find some other rationale and it would not be an entirely intellectual exercise, instinct, intuition, tacit knowledge,

these would also be involved. I felt I needed a visually simple form untrammelled by organic or anthropomorphic or geological associations. I decided to go back to basics. As a student I was taught that all the shapes made on the wheel derive from three basic forms: cylinder, bowl, sphere. Bowls and spheres are archetypes of domestic functional pottery, cylinders somewhat less so. The cylinder has architectural associations and buildings are often grouped together. It seemed obvious to make my thrown cylinder oval, to cut it at an angle and join it to a base. This is a convention I have used in my functional pots and it works here too, the leaning diagonals add a dynamic movement especially when the forms are seen collectively. The base has added stability ...but have I made a container? And if so why does it seem crucial that it should remain empty? Without function to justify their existence these objects must satisfy in some other way, but I don't want to think about it yet, in the middle of something is not the best time, you don't know what you're doing until you've done it. I continue to make more cylinders and larger...as large as I can, which is not as large as I would like...this is a problem I will confront later. I carry on... bisque, slips glazes, firing...in the old kiln as well as the new ...working with two kilns with such different fired qualities adds an extra dimension.

Look and think, now is the time to ask questions. Why ceramic? Why thrown? Why salt-glaze? The answers are easy and obvious: because it is my medium, because it is my method, because it is my expertise. Because containers made of clay resonate with primeval meaning, throwing gives subtle nuance to the simplest of forms and salt glazing is uniquely beautiful. Because without this conjunction of this potter and these materials and circumstances such particular objects would never have been made. But the most important question is why 'Empty Vessels'? The answer is that they are not empty...they contain space and colour and light and reflection. They are full of space with room for reflection. They leave room for thought.

Another question: If you remove function and what is left is not a pot... is it sculpture? One could as well ask 'What is sculpture? When Martin Creed won the Turner Prize<sup>2</sup> by lighting up a room then plunging it into darkness was that sculpture? Investigative making, like pure research, does not begin by defining itself and I don't think this question is interesting or useful for a maker to ask of their work. The word 'sculpture' when applied to ceramics is an accreditation used to bestow status. Defining work in these terms is a strategy to make important people accept ceramics into the fine art world and it opens up the whole Art/Craft debate, which I do not intend to enter except to say that the categories are becoming blurred. It should not matter to a maker what label is attached to their work by others but of course it does, for two critical reasons: better presentation and higher prices, both of which are inextricably linked and to each of which we all aspire. I haven't come to any conclusions, I don't know where this new work will lead and I haven't finished making functional pots. I hope to keep my balance, to keep interested and to keep awake. We shall see. *Ars longa vita brevis.*

**Jane Hamlyn Everton 2003.**

References

1. Leach, Bernard 'A Potters' Book' Faber & Faber 1960
2. Creed, Martin : Winner of the Turner Prize Tate Britain 2001