

' A Sense of Integrity ' JANE HAMLYN - 30 YEARS OF SALTGLAZE
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The British potter Jane Hamlyn has been making her distinguished saltglaze at Everton near Doncaster for thirty years. Now in her mid sixties, she is in reflective mood, looking back over a long career, dwelling on the present state of ceramics and considering (she is a naturally interrogative and self-critical maker) how to continue. When I visited, the annual studio-based exhibition she shares with her husband, the artist Ted Hamlyn, had just finished. Now in its ninth year this is an important opportunity for people to see their latest projects, their respective concerns as potter and painter.

There is an enviable sense of integration about the set-up at Millfield Pottery, an attractive 19th Century red brick cottage with ample outbuildings for their studios and a well planted garden, an eye sensitive to form, detail and colour which has long been a hallmark of Jane Hamlyn's ceramics. They are a remarkably self-contained couple, dissenting in the best sense, having been able to survive as artists, purely and simply, with a minimum of periodic teaching, since they moved here from London in 1975. They have seen the market expand and contract in that time. And while Jane has begun, in the past few years, to make a range of individual cylinders of great presence, serene and simple in form, sensual as well as austere, she remains loyal and dedicated to the domestic wares that made her reputation – the lovely, lively items she has produced for the table since the seventies.

I cannot but compare her centred, down-to-earth attitude with that of countless makers who have forsaken tablewares for some 'higher' brand of ceramic art. Hamlyn makes no such value distinction or hierarchical judgements. But she does recognize that these two areas of her activity have independent roles. They are related but different.

The big broad leaning cylinders, thrown and altered to a rounded oval shape, she calls "Empty Vessels". They are extraordinarily commanding objects, which celebrate the most basic shape of containment, the most elemental ceramic form, just as Michael Casson's jugs seem to proclaim 'jugness'. They made a big impact when first shown at Rufford Crafts centre in 2002, for here was a new kind of controlled throwing – voluminous structures that made one think about the face of clay in quite a new way and collectively gave the space a remarkable sculptural energy and rhythm. The term "empty vessel" is double – edged, combining matter-of-fact description with a questioning of their function, typical of her enquiring pragmatism. They are superb as pieces of sculpture, satisfying in a purely aesthetic sense as one sees these pots individually and in carefully marshalled groupings, with their varied spatial interactions of shape, their sensitive contrasts and unities of colour. Looking at the deep oxides and slips, variously matt and lustrous, one gets a powerful sense of how the most abstract conceptions can really excite the eye. Yet they also have such certainty and clarity as pots – with some of the qualities of Richard Serra's metal sculpture – and are a refreshing antidote to much of the tiresome installation porcelain

currently prevalent, which can only make its impact in repetition. The Empty Vessels are large in scale and their skillful leans and tensions are taxing to make - consequently highly priced, she does recognize that their audience may be limited. Meanwhile, her recent 'closed narrative' pots, vases that narrow towards the lip, "have a definite function which people can relate to". She has developed some superb new glazes – mottled greys, inky blues and green-yellows, along with vivid matt oranges, red rusts and ochres that are a perfect surface foil to the austere pared-down contours. Hamlyn may be a pioneer of the saltglaze revival but she is also aware of how many people now employ the technique. It makes her keen to continue to look ahead, not simply content with the over familiar 'orange-peel' effect, she aspires to achieve new surfaces and to explore just how versatile the effects of salt can be.

Jane Hamlyn's individual work is shown and sold in London and many international exhibitions, while most of her functional work is now sold from the premises, predominantly at the Summer Exhibition. The Harrow ethos – that of her training at Harrow School of Art – remains strong. It is there in the rich decorative textures of her various plates, dishes, teapots, bowls and jugs – objects that really enhance the everyday rituals. But the new cylinders have introduced a greater simplicity to her work as a whole; she is making abstracted lidded jars with scroll handles and leaning jugs with beaky spouts and nice deep dishes. She works as effectively on a small scale too, feeling that "if one gets beyond a certain size the pot can lose conviction" – a wise philosophy to which some other potters might well subscribe. It underlines her feeling for the potential *intimacy* of ceramics. For her the successful pot is a coveted object, personal in its making, use and ownership - one can be very proprietorial about a favourite mug.

She is interested in the differing contexts in which studio ceramics operate and in the people who buy and sell them, what makes them tick and what they personally take from this pursuit - the notion that they buy into a way of life or something that may offer a form of consolation. All this is an extension of her intellectual curiosity in the nature and uses of modern craft. It is perhaps because she wants to do her job, fulfill her role, as effectively as she can. She is, in essence, a humanist, one who wants to improve individual and collective experience through the pots she makes. The pots breathe life, but they also convey the discipline of their conception. There has always been the highest sense of craft in what she does, of sustained attentiveness in design and making. The application of skill conveys a particular sense of care, of detail and balance, an integrity which instills a true respect and appreciation of domestic tasks and ceremony. They add something deeply positive to the passage of one's day, an extension of Hamlyn's own warmth and hospitality, her love of cooking and the generosity to be found in her ceramics as a whole.

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