

### Excerpt from catalogue essay by Tanya Harrod 2001

It is always of interest to visit a ceramic studio – a place where objects are made single-handedly or by a small team. Ceramic studios present as syntheses and critiques of early industrial practice; there are shelves of carefully labeled glaze materials, neat rows of tools, sieves and buckets. But there is also an air of freedom and evidence of artistic adventure, with postcards and cuttings pinned up alongside hastily scribbled drawings and lists. The character of the ceramicist may be read from the appearance of her studio, each being a productive universe designed and ordered by its owner. The studio and associated kiln sheds offer a chance to create a small scale Utopia for an industry of one. But there is nothing intrinsically traditional about this kind of setup. Most studio potters start from a *tabula rasa* like castaways. As Jane Hamlyn explains of her early career: “The first few years were spent accumulating a body of knowledge”. By this she means experiential knowledge, tacit knowledge. Processes are rediscovered or invented; designs are freshly evolved. Talking to potters one recalls Daniel Defoe’s masterpiece *Robinson Crusoe* and Crusoe’s continuous anxious reiteration of lists of tools and materials and of skills and techniques gained over time while working in isolation.

This is not to say that Jane Hamlyn works in absolute isolation. She is very much part of an international community of salt-glaze studio ceramicists. She lectures. She wins prizes. She organizes exhibitions and she writes. In a practical sense she collaborates with her husband, the painter Ted Hamlyn, who helps with heavy work and fires her kilns. Hamlyn’s career goes back over thirty-five years, amounting to over a quarter of a century of research and development. I know she would not thank me for dwelling on the past. Like all artists she is constantly impelled forward, whilst we, the onlookers, often find it hard to keep up and feel unease with changes in a familiar, well-loved pattern of work. But her history is of great interest – embodying the possibilities open to creative men and women in the 1970s.

Hamlyn had trained as a State Registered nurse. Then, married and with a young family she took up ceramics and by 1972 had enrolled on the Vocational Course in Studio Pottery at Harrow School of Art. Some of us will know what that means. Harrow prepared students in those years to set up as self-sufficient production potters, able to make a living and to carry out and understand each and every ceramic process, from preparing clay to building kilns and wheels. It was a course very specific to a particular time and to a particular fashion in handmade tableware.

Jane Hamlyn has been on the run from that marvelous course ever since. Above all she defied Harrow by bringing complexity to domestic pottery in the form of intense surface decoration. This might seem odd as she is a salt glaze potter and salt-glazed surfaces are strongly textured in any case. But the combination of orange peel surfaces and intense impressed pattern set a new standard of sophistication and a sense of luxury redolent of nineteenth century art pottery.

Since I last saw her work and studied it seriously it has changed markedly, looking less rooted in a long complex history of decorated vessel forms. Jane Hamlyn has always drawn on a multiplicity of sources. Eighteenth century English salt glaze comes to mind but so too does a far more complex system of ornament that connects with Victorian applied art, with what Owen Jones called “the grammar of ornament”. Then there were the dramatic effects gained by paper resist, slip pouring, dipping and trailing to achieve subtle colour differences within the blue-green-gold salt glaze continuum. At one point there appeared to be a range of pieces – “for use and ornament” –mugs and platters, handsome bowls, lidded jars, casseroles and oval dishes all with textured, modelled handles. They seem to demand some form of fairly celebratory eating. However the variousness of the results gained through the salt glaze process meant that there was never anything “standard’ about the “range”.

So now her new work looks different – less stable, less, dare I say, domestic, less reassuring. This exhibition is a mixture of old and new. There are the familiar blue/green ceramics –perhaps a little more austere and simplified than usual. Then there is work that has come out of a new kiln - gas rather than oil fired, the kiln is a beautiful object in its own right. This is not to say that all the difference can be attributed to the new kiln – that would be an over-simplification, but the inevitable problems posed by working with it have nudged Jane Hamlyn in a new direction. As I write I am looking at two photographs that Hamlyn has sent me of a group of oval leaning vases. They look deceptively simple and the range of colours is greater than has previously been usual in Hamlyn’s work. There is a tautness and a tension which reminds me that she has made similar shapes in the past, but mostly embellished with a distracting little handle. Handle free, the shape comes into its own as a series of formal experiments. Hamlyn plans to show these new “simple” pieces as a group of say 15-20 pots, perhaps flanked by other smaller groupings. Ideally she would like to sell them as an ensemble, as a series of still lifes. This provision of a context for ceramics by grouping has been effectively adopted by Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and more recently by Edmund de Waal. But in fact Jane Hamlyn has already explored the possibilities of what she calls the “array”.

In 1995 she curated a marvelous exhibition for Exeter’s Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Art Gallery entitled *Making Sense*. It had an exquisitely designed and printed catalogue in which one found the voices of the artists she had selected, a foreword by June Freeman and an essay by Hamlyn which read and reads like a manifesto. It was really a series of aphorisms that distilled the wisdom of a highly intelligent and well-read maker. For example: “Making is an optimistic pursuit; it looks to the future and seeks to improve things.” Then again: “Skill is not necessarily virtuosity or complication but knowing what is appropriate”. *Making Sense* was a deeply serious and thoughtful exhibition. One of its many pleasures was an “array” of some thirty jugs by Clive Bowen set on a high long plinth running down the center of a room. Jane Hamlyn created a

haunting installation piece with Bowen's pots, the first and probably the last time they have been treated in that way. Now this sensitivity towards another artist's work will be applied to her own new pieces.

In a letter Hamlyn sent me when she began to wonder what had happened to my catalogue essay she relayed some hard facts about her new oval leaning forms. "They look simple but they must be thrown meticulously and then altered, cut and shaped, invisibly joined to a base, refined and finished...and if not made right they can (and still do!) distort in an unseemly fashion in the firing. It takes me two eight hour days to make five (plus another three days each firing to glaze, prepare, pack and fire 30 pots) and several get rejected at various stages, both during the making and after the firing." This then is the reality and the toughness behind the beauty. It is the Crusoe like dedication that enables an artist to set out to form vessels by hand in an industrial society.

As I have suggested, Jane Hamlyn has never been a production potter in the old Harrow School of Art sense of the term. She likes the idea of domestic scale but she has never "bashed- out pots to fill the kiln". She is strong on self-criticism, commitment and energy. She throws a lot out. But she finds a rhythm in quantity production. That is how shapes and decoration evolve, hence the similar but different vases, hence the idea of an array. Now she is modestly proposing something else – an arrangement of pots which function as a distributed art object, best seen as a group. Let us hope that some wise patron of art and craft understands this particular ambitiousness. And for the rest of us there are still the deeply thought out individual pieces, for use and ornament.

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