

## **Study Day: The Art of Clay, 12 September 2018 Centre of Ceramic Art, York Art Gallery**

**Report by Sarah Griffin**  
Curator and collector

The Contemporary Art Society has recently launched a new fund for acquiring ceramics, the Jackson Tang Ceramics Award, open to applications from curators of both craft-centred and visual arts collections. To foster debate on ceramics in the inaugural year of this ambitious award, CAS staged a conference at CoCA (Centre of Ceramic Art at York Art Gallery) in York for member organisations, stimulating discussion around the significant points and wider attendant issues for curators of media-based practice. The conference offered perspectives from long-established practitioners, curators, gallerists, historians and commentators, and included a visit to the exceptional collection of British studio ceramics curated by Helen Walsh at CoCA.

The discipline of clay has its own specific techniques, processes, tendencies, language and culture – operating independently from the visual arts – as well as more recently becoming increasingly subsumed into broader visual arts teaching, practice and production. Acknowledging the historically established institutional and cultural distinctions between visual arts and craft, the conference aimed to explore clay as a hybrid, collaborative and interdisciplinary practice; to consider whether these notional boundaries continue to have significance for contemporary curating of public collections and programming; and to explore the possibilities that new and emerging clay practice are introducing to the museum context.

The first session set the scene for the day, with contributions by Alison Britton and Richard

Slee, leading artists who have challenged the conventions of British studio pottery. Alison Britton is a significant figure among the generation of innovative British ceramicists who emerged during the 1970s; her distinctive hand-built and expressively painted pots can be found in major public and private collections internationally. Richard Slee transcends the utilitarian roots of ceramic art, and uses humour to engage with contemporary debate about material specificity in visual arts. Both have had long and influential teaching careers, at the Royal College of Art and UAL (formerly Camberwell) respectively.

Alison and Richard began by agreeing that the material presence and versatility of clay is why they each chose to work with it. The haptic engagement with clay during the process of making is key: it can both carry and inform meaning during the process of making, and once it is “fixed” after firing. The material itself holds qualities that encourage debate, and are open to interpretation. In its fluidity, clay can be both familiar and distant, incorporating associations with the past and suggesting new meanings and “dramas”.

Followed a presentation by Adam Sutherland, Director Grizedale Arts, an experimental and developmental project that operates as a working farmhouse. The philosophy that art has a transformative socio-political function, and that artists can affect change and benefit wider culture and society, underpins the programme.

Grizedale Arts grew from The Grizedale Society’s 1969 - 1999 programme of site-specific forest sculpture and land art activity in the Grizedale Forest. Leading the organisation since 1999, Adam Sutherland (formally a freelance curator and producer) has led the centre into more experimental territory, generating cultural activity of all kinds at a local, national and international level. It was Sutherland who initiated Grizedale Art’s interdisciplinary making platform.

The morning continued with a presentation by Alun Graves, Senior Curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum London. He is particularly interested in interdisciplinary approaches, ephemeral practice and has been a vigorous champion of artists working in the expanded field of ceramics. In 2006 he curated a series of events and performances called *Clay Rocks!*.

Alun began by suggesting that clay is predisposed to performance: the acts of making and firing a work in clay being essentially performative, ceremonial even. With images of work by Simon Carroll and Phoebe Cummings, he demonstrated that clay lends itself to performance in its receptivity to gesture, as well as its ability move fluidly between different states.

In a brief historical overview of performance and clay, Alun raised an important question about ephemerality: can a clay performance which is no longer physically present, but recorded in a different medium (such as film) exist in the canon of ceramic art?

Alun described the wide-ranging themes brought to life by combining clay and performance, including destruction, transformation, and the act of making as private performance and public spectacle. Clay performance in a museum context can raise questions about the status of the material as an art form; its role in industry; as a conduit for audience interaction; intervention and critique. Finally, Alun acknowledged the challenge to curators and institutions of staging and archiving clay performance, but noted that it is nevertheless essential for this adventurous work to have a platform.

The day continued with a panel discussion between Isabella Smith, Assistant Editor at Ceramic Review, discussing form and finishes with artists Aaron Angel, Nao Matsunaga and Aneta Regel. Addressing each panellist, Isabella asked “why clay?”. Circumstance, biography, opportunity and rebellion all played their part for the artists. While they share a deep commitment to clay practice, they all individually expressed interest in plurality of materials, new processes, diversity of form, and the use of methods operating outside the conventions of ceramics discipline. Opening up the discipline to these concerns informs a satisfying critical and reflective practice for each of the artists.

In response to the subject of “finishes”, Nao talked about glaze as the locus for playing with ideas of skill and learned process, inventing new techniques and terminologies to keep his interest in the medium fresh. Aneta added that the transformative element of surprise during the process of firing opened up new possibilities for her formal connection to a work. Aaron has forensically explored the classical tools and processes of clay and glaze to counter the high production value of contemporary British sculpture.

This sessions was followed by a talk by Tanya Harrods, who took listeners through a century of ceramics, contextualising positive moments for the medium: demonstrating examples of shared ambition and community within the discipline (Ewen Henderson and *Pandora's Box* of 1995); shared dialogue with the broader visual arts, (citing the display of 1930s work in *Modern British Sculpture* at the Royal Academy 2011); and positing potter Gordon Baldwin and School of London painters as exemplars of comparable contemporary response to anxieties of the modern age.

Tanya identified important moments in the twentieth century which helped disrupt prevailing visual hierarchies, those in which ceramics occupied a lowly position, such as public collections. The advent of anthropology broke with aesthetic preoccupations and emphasised the instability of authorship in visual production. Published in 1971, Philip Rawson's book *Ceramics* opened up an understanding of ceramics through a phenomenological-based reading of pots, offering a "live" reading which went beyond the conventional formalist response to pottery.

Referencing the "variousness" of clay and the need for it to be authentically experienced in many contexts, Tanya ended with a question: context proves the essential problem; are we in an exciting move forward or is ceramics being crafted to death?

The last discussion of the day was between gallerists Tommaso Corvi Mora and curators James Beighton and Andrew Renton, discussing the challenges of exhibition making that includes ceramics. Moderated by Sarah Griffin, it began with background questions: around the medium/discipline specificity of a work with the need to incorporate it into a more complex context, for instance exhibition programming and collections displays? Is it still relevant to look at artefacts or contemporary objects by being medium specific? What can be gained by doing this? The British potter Julian Stair provides a useful intersection for the discussion, in that each of the panelists have commissioned or hosted a major exhibition of his work.

The themes echoed through the conference programme – of the fluidity, versatility, responsiveness and innovative properties of clay – underlined the myriad opportunities the material presents for curators to inform their projects. These could include the reimagining and interpretation of historical collections; actively engaging the viewing public as part of a living artwork; and foregrounding innovative and experimental contemporary art practice.

## Essential Bibliography:

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