

A ROUGH EQUIVALENT: SCULPTURE AND POTTERY IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD.

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In his essay entitled 'End of the Streamlined Era in Painting and Sculpture', first published in *The Times* in August 1955, the art critic David Sylvester announced that 'the most obvious difference between the art of today and the art of the inter-war period is that rough surfaces have taken the place of smooth ones'.¹ Sylvester argues that this change reflects the move on the part of post-war British artists away from an impersonal art based on collectivist ideals to a more individualistic art where 'roughness of surface is the symptom and symbol of a revolt against the anti-humanism of the streamlined surface, an assertion of the artist's humanity and of the value of the creative act, considered as an act'.²

Sylvester refers to the importance of 'the so-called machine aesthetic' to the Constructivist sculptors of the 1920s and 1930s, whose use of modern materials such as metals and plastics typically resulted in a smooth finish that gave little opportunity for the kinds of gestures that revealed the idiosyncratic touch of the artist's hand. Sylvester extends his argument to sculptors such as Henry Moore and Brancusi, who used more traditional materials and methods of making. He claims that these artists 'have chosen to identify themselves, not with the robot, but with the great impersonal, elemental forces of nature'.³ The end result, according to Sylvester, was much the same. Sculptural surfaces that alluded to the kind of purifying, 'blind' effects that the wind, the rain and the sea inevitably have on stone and wood could be equated with streamlined forms and surfaces that were shaped, either literally or metaphorically, by the

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impersonal power of the machine. In both cases the resulting smoothness spoke of a willing retreat on the part of the individual artist in the face of much greater, universalising forces. In contrast to this, Sylvester states that 'the present age delights in texture and irregularity, exploits the accidental, courts imperfection'.⁴

Sylvester is of course being selective in his arguments and his examples in more ways than one. To begin with, he was talking about painting and sculpture and had nothing to say about ceramics. This is hardly surprising: during the post-war period in British art there were few opportunities for potters to exhibit alongside painters and sculptors, and it is likely that work in ceramics would simply not have been noticed by him.⁵ However, in an immediate, visual and tactile sense, Sylvester's conclusions could be applied just as much to ceramics as to painting and sculpture. As this current exhibition 'A Rough Equivalent' demonstrates, there is a roughness of surface on the glazed and unglazed pots and ceramic work of the period that corresponds with the sculpture of the time. This correspondence opens questions about why such a juxtaposition of ceramics and sculpture might be so long overdue.

One reason - perhaps the key reason - is that during the twentieth century the respective discourses of ceramics and sculpture developed mostly independently of one another. Had Sylvester been aware, for example, of the body of critical writing on studio pottery that preceded the publication of his essay (and indeed been aware of the pots themselves) then he might have found it more difficult to construct and sustain his basic premise. Indeed 'roughness' understood as the celebration of textured and irregular surfaces, the deliberate courting of accidental effects and the aesthetic elevation of the idea of imperfection had been commonplace within ceramics for half a century or more. In 1940, in what is still regarded by many as the key text of the twentieth century studio pottery movement in Britain, Bernard Leach referred approvingly to the 'accidentals' and 'incidentals' that characterise pottery at its best. The first chapter of Leach's *A Potter's Book* is a sustained and passionate polemic in support of an Oriental aesthetic which,

according to Leach, reached its apogee in the potters of the Chinese T'ang and Sung dynasties and continued to hold sway in South-East Asia into modern times. Leach writes: 'in China the clays are often coarse and usually exposed, the glazes are thick, and crackled, and run, and occasionally skip, the brushwork is vigorous and calligraphic, not realistic and "finished", the throwing and moulding are frank, and accidental kiln effects are frequent'.⁶

Like Sylvester, Leach writes as if this was a newly resurrected idea, or at least new for Western artists and their audience.⁷ With his early life experiences, philosophy and studio practice rooted so firmly within China and Japan Leach was never able to acknowledge that the acceptance, and even the encouragement, of imperfection as an aesthetic choice had a considerable and continuing history much nearer home. In particular, the use of the kiln as an active, creative and often unpredictable element within the artistic practice of early British studio potters was already well established by 1917, when a reviewer in *The Pottery Gazette* wrote admiringly of the accidental effects achieved by Edward Baker at the Upchurch Pottery in Kent, commenting appreciatively that such effects were due to 'the caprice of the fire'.⁸

This phrase leads neatly to a consideration of a central controversy in sculpture between the first and second World Wars around the role that materials or processes might legitimately play in the creation of art. On one side was the critic Stanley Casson, who, writing in 1930, was appalled by sculptors who 'revel in submitting their wills to the caprice of the media'.⁹ Barbara Hepworth and John Skeaping, amongst others, were identified as being responsible for this 'retrograde tendency'. They were guilty of abnegating their responsibilities as artists – 'their chisels are never their own, their hands are never free. The shapes of their otherwise admirable creations conform to the demands of their material in a way which suggests a step backwards in the course of evolution'.¹⁰ Casson's position was clear: 'throughout the sculptor must have absolute

control, he must not let his chisel be guided by the accidents of nature, by the cleavages and stratifications that he finds in the stone’.

An alternative view was put forward by R. H. Wilenski, who was more relaxed about the idea of ‘collaboration between the sculptor and the essential character of the block of resistant substance beneath his hand’.¹¹ Indeed, Wilenski’s book *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, published in 1932, put forward this point as number eight in ‘the modern sculptor’s creed’. Ideologically this accorded in many respects with the modern potter’s creed, which was never itemised as such in the manner of Wilenski’s model but was nevertheless eloquently expressed both by the potters themselves through their work and words, and through their staunch apologists writing in the mainstream art journals of the day. In *The Studio* in 1925, Bernard Rackham from the Victoria and Albert Museum said of the potter Reginald Wells that he was one of several artists who had begun ‘to find in clay as a material and the kiln an auxiliary agent a sympathetic means of self-expression’.¹² Since the beginning of the twentieth century studio potters had been all too aware that granting a degree of agency not only to their materials, but also to the sometimes intractable potter’s wheels and kilns on which the success of their work so much depended, was a combined practical as well as an aesthetic imperative. That this would lead to a degree of ‘roughness’ was a justifiable and welcome development within the philosophical positioning of the studio potter as a legitimate modern artist.¹³

It could be argued that in his endorsement of rough surfaces in 1955 Sylvester was (somewhat surprisingly) ignoring the debate about the role of materials in the creation of sculpture that was so important to his inter-war predecessors and (quite unsurprisingly) failing to acknowledge the rich contribution that a consideration of pottery might have made to such a debate. In hindsight Sylvester’s essay can be seen more as an attempt at shifting the theoretical and philosophical ground on which British painting and sculpture could be understood and appreciated rather than as a discovery of some

major change or innovation within the practice or intentions of the artists themselves. For both sculptors and potters roughness, imperfection, and a celebration of the active participation of materials and processes had been aesthetically important for some time, but there was something about the post-war context that required such things to be emphasised as part of the contemporary, psychological struggle of human beings to make art – or at least to make painting and sculpture.

This 'something' was famously articulated by Herbert Read in his essay 'New Aspects of British Sculpture' in the catalogue to the exhibition at the British Pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale. Read wrote: 'These new images belong to the iconography of despair or of defiance; and the more innocent the artist, the more effectively he transmits the collective guilt. Here are images of flight, of ragged claws "scuttling across the floors of silent seas" of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear.'¹⁴

This passage locates the sculpture of the period within a post-war climate of nervous pessimism, engendered on the one hand by the devastating effects of a second world war and on the other by the very real fear of impending nuclear annihilation. As thousands of people from all over the country made their way hopefully to the South Bank in London to celebrate the Festival of Britain and to dream of a brighter future, a small group of metropolitan artists were beginning to be assailed by existentialist doubts. They were encouraged in their thoughts by the circulation of key texts such as Jean-Paul Sartre's essay on Alberto Giacometti, first published in France in 1948, and soon afterwards by a series of writings by David Sylvester who, according to David Mellor, 'articulated a discourse of existential pathos'.¹⁵

Central to this discourse was the idea of contingency – the unavoidable riskiness of being in the world, a fundamental human predicament which artists had so long ignored. In 'The Search for the Absolute' (1948) Sartre points to the numerous public statues based on classical ideals, noting 'we have become so accustomed to the sleek mute

creatures, made to cure us of the illness of having bodies: these domestic powers kept an eye on us when we were children; they bore witness in the parks to the conviction that the world is not dangerous.¹⁶ By contrast, Sartre says that a Giacometti figure 'tells us of the astonishing adventure of the flesh'.¹⁷ This fascination with flesh and skin, not as beautiful, smooth, trustworthy delineators of the human form, but as vulnerable, perishable organs, prone to damage, open to adventure and offering an all too imperfect boundary with the rest of the gross, physical world, came to be a signifier of a post-war art that David Mellor characterises as 'a curious romance of abject material'.¹⁸

As the 1950s turned into the 1960s the existentialist underpinning of British sculpture became less marked. In the catalogue to the 1967 exhibition *British Sculpture 1952-1962* David Thompson noted an important change in tone and emphasis during that decade, saying of Eduardo Paolozzi and Hubert Dalwood that the 'feeling of edginess and nerviness, and even violence, is as remote from them as it is from Armitage'. It has to be acknowledged that such a feeling had always been remote from the immediate post-war ceramics world. We look in vain at this time for the kind of anxious texts that would have stirred the ceramics community in the same way that Sartre and Sylvester stirred the sculptors. The general response of potters was to move towards a communal, rather than an individualistic idea of their craft. Working together became the progressive ideal and the reparative and therapeutic value of pottery making was emphasised as part of the practical rebuilding of society. Tanya Harrod notes that 'the craft world became less intellectual just at the moment that large numbers of men and women – in reaction against the harsh disciplines of war – wanted to join in'.¹⁹

Yet, as work in 'A Rough Equivalent' shows, during the late 1950s increasing numbers of potters were trying to articulate something more individual and expressive in their work. They were perhaps taking a lead from the sculptors, and it should be noted that the dates of most of the ceramics in this exhibition are generally later than comparative work in sculpture, although this could be a function of the particular collections from

which this work has been selected. However, it is certainly the case that ceramicists were not without histories of their own where risk taking was encouraged and contingency was there to be embraced.

The majority of work in 'A Rough Equivalent', both sculpture and ceramics, displays formal characteristics that reflect powerful echoes of earlier, essentially discrete discourses. Indeed, sculpture and ceramics have mostly remained as discrete practices until the present day - written about in separate publications, shown in different venues, appreciated by different audiences and assembled within private and public collections that rarely include both kinds of work. The public collections in Leeds and York, from which the works in the exhibition are selected, offer a case in point. The Leeds sculpture collection has only a handful of 'finished' works in the medium of ceramics, i.e. works in clay that are not maquettes or models for pieces later to be cast in other materials. This reflects the widespread neglect of clay as a respectable art material. Interestingly, as can be seen, the substantial ceramics collections of York Art Gallery include many pieces that have a sculptural intent, although they have remained categorised as 'ceramics' or even as 'pottery' although they have no utilitarian function.

What then, justifies the bringing together in 2010 of the kinds of mid twentieth British sculpture and ceramics that have never substantially been shown together before? Firstly, this is happening in a context where discipline boundaries within visual art are becoming increasingly fluid. In recent years the Henry Moore Institute has facilitated exhibitions that have explored relationships between sculpture and other forms, such as architecture and furniture, making an opportunity to explore relationships between sculpture and ceramics a welcome continuation of that process. Secondly, there is something aesthetically contiguous in the works displayed here - the vigorous surface treatments, roughness of texture and imperfect finish were qualities that were employed by both sculptors and ceramicists of the period and, by the end of the period under review in 'A Rough Equivalent', they were bringing their own histories to bear on work

which, half a century later, can be seen to be much more alike than was appreciated at the time.

The phrase 'the patina of pathos' comes close to describing what is going on in all these works. James Hyman uses these words to describe the sculpture of the early 1950s, noting 'the foregrounding of the work's surface' and identifying the 'skin' of the sculpture as a site where harsh treatment was meted out. Significantly he says that these features 'would become even more important in the years that followed' and he additionally mentions the 'frontality of many British sculptures in the late 1950s.²⁰ This can also clearly be seen in the ceramics and it is particularly obvious in certain pots, where the viewer is put in no doubt that there is a front and a back to the pieces. Appreciating the work in-the-round is not an option and in a few examples this is emphasised by the physical squaring of the pot. The anthropomorphic interpretation of pottery – the idea that the pot stands for its maker, both physically and metaphorically – has a long history and here we see that idea emphasised with appendages on the sides of the pots, like wings or limbs, echoing similar stylistic features in some of the sculptures. We can also note various kinds of oily, waxy, dripping, melting surfaces on both the ceramics and sculpture, as well as evidence of scratching, sanding and piercing.

In calling this exhibition 'A Rough Equivalent', the intention is to draw attention to the surface treatment of certain three-dimensional artworks which use a range of materials such as metal, plaster and clay, which were made in Britain at a particular period and which are drawn from two major public collections situated in close geographical proximity. These artworks forcefully articulate something about the riskiness of making art as well as the riskiness of being in the world – neither ever runs smooth. 'A Rough Equivalent' makes the argument that there is a shared aesthetic between the two disciplines of ceramics and sculpture, despite the fact that there is little in the way of a shared history. An equivalency of sorts is established, although this itself remains contingent on the degree to which the two disciplines continue to make connections with

one another beyond the two collections represented in this exhibition. However, this much remains certain: whether looking at the sculpture or the ceramics in 'A Rough Equivalent', you will see no 'sleek mute creatures' here.

Notes

¹ David Sylvester, 'End of the Streamlined Era', in *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948 – 96*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1996, pp.49-52, p.49.

² *Ibid*, p.51.

³ *Ibid*, p.50.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.49.

⁵ The use of the terms 'pottery' and 'potter', and 'ceramics' and 'ceramicist' are often contentious. For much of the twentieth century, and certainly in the post-war period in Britain, the term 'pottery' or 'studio pottery' would have included non-vessel forms such as figurative and sculptural work in clay.

⁶ Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book*, London, Faber and Faber, 1940, p.24.

⁷ Sylvester acknowledges that the kind of art that he is arguing for is 'a resuscitation of the great *malerisch* tradition ... but it is much more than a mere revival'. See Sylvester, 'End of the Streamlined Era', p.51.

⁸ *Pottery Gazette*, April 1917, quoted in Victoria Bergesen, *Encyclopaedia of British Art Pottery*, London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1991, p.273. For further discussion of this issue see Jeffrey Jones, 'Potters of Independent Means', chapter 1 of *Studio Pottery in Britain 1900-2005*, London, A&C Black, 2007.

⁹ Stanley Casson, *XXth Century Sculptors*, Oxford University Press/London, Humphrey Milford, 1930, p.19.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.20.

¹¹ R. H. Wilenski, extract from *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (1932), in Jon Wood, David Hulks, Alex Potts (editors), *Modern Sculpture Reader*, Leeds, Henry Moore Institute, 2007, pp.106-108, p.108.

¹² Bernard Rackham, 'The Pottery of Mr. Reginald F. Wells', *The Studio*, vol.xc, no.393, December 1925, pp.359-363, p.359.

¹³ For potters, rough surfaces were usually associated with matt surfaces and these were preferred to smooth, glossy ones. See Jones, *Studio Pottery in Britain*, p.180.

¹⁴ Herbert Read, 'New Aspects of British Sculpture', in the catalogue to the exhibition of work at the British Pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale, unpaginated. [Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, Special Collections].

¹⁵ David Mellor, 'Existentialism and Post-War British Art', in Frances Morris (editor), *Paris Post War Art and Existentialism 1945-55*, London, Tate Gallery, 1993, pp.53-62, p.54.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Search for the Absolute', (1948), in Jon Wood, David Hulks, Alex Potts (editors), *Modern Sculpture Reader*, Leeds, Henry Moore Institute, 2007, pp.180-188, p.187.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ Mellor in Morris, 'Existentialism', p.60.

¹⁹ Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century*, Yale University Press, 1999, p.208.

²⁰ James Hyman, 'Henry Moore and the Geometry of Fear', in *Henry Moore and the Geometry of Fear*, London, James Hyman Fine Art, 2002, pp.6-11, p.10.