

Why clay is the right material for memorial

Quietus: the Vessel, Death and the Human Body

mima, Middlesbrough TS1

13 July – 11 November 2012

Catalogue: £10

Reviewed by Shane Enright

Julian Stair's astonishing exhibition is both portentous and beguiling. Approaching the gallery, two enormous grey vessels on the high balcony of *mima*'s fractured modern architecture stand proud, like ships' funnels or chimneystacks; sentinels overlooking the town's square.

In the triple-height glass-walled atrium, *mima*'s own large Stair vessel welcomes visitors; a five-foot tall vase coiled and thrown in sections, pewter-grey and monolithic, acquired through Art Fund Collect back in 2008. There are echoes of industry and enterprise in these impressively large works, fired in brick kilns, but nothing to prepare for the solemnity and grandeur of the first room in the display or the final realisation to come. This exhibition of funerary urns – or cinerary jars as Stair prefers to call them – and sarcophagi might have been mawkish or morbid, but instead is profoundly humane and uplifting.

Entering the gallery the first impressions overwhelm; the facing wall of the small space is arrayed with cinerary jars, plainly coloured and lidded, the scale of cookie jars, shelved in white niches five abreast, which soar in rows from the floor to the distant ceiling, a grandiose columbarium ten meters high; 130 vessels in all, every one unique and individual. Seen up close each has its own personality; stoneware jars in muted blacks and mottled greys; some a warm earthy brown, amber or flagstone yellow, others in white porcelain glazed soft as creamware or dry and dazzling.

These wheel-thrown works, whether round, squared or faceted, are each marked by more or less vigorous turning rings and rough burrs attesting to the tactile labour and the intimacy and immediacy of their production. On one side wall two further jars, one dark, the other light, float chest-high on L-shaped plaster corbels, paired but apart; opposite them, another might easily have been overlooked, bracketed high above as if soaring skyward. On the floor there is a single sarcophagus, a black



Above (l-r): *Monumental Jar VIII*, coiled and thrown Etruria marl, 1.98 m high (inc. lid), 2011; *Monumental Jar X*, coiled and thrown Etruria marl, 1.74 m high, 2011; *Monumental Jar XII*, coiled and thrown Carboniferous shale, 1.84 m high, 2012
Below: *Columbarium*, 130 cinerary jars, thrown, constructed and hand-built porcelain, basalt, carboniferous shale and red stoneware, 9.6 x 1.9 m, 2012.
All by Julian Stair



slab of clay into which has been cut a poignant child-sized profile.

The effect, at first awesome and monumental in this absurd white shaft of a gallery space, soon gives way to a sense of reverence and contemplation; each vessel attesting to a life, apart or together, unique but collective. The next two rooms develop this theme with more sarcophagi, and a series of large lidded urns, coiled and turned in sections, whose head-high and shoulder-wide or crouched proportions attest to the human scale and potential purpose – these are gathered in groups but each unique and distinct. One particular crouched jar catches my attention; the colour of coagulated blood and flecked by iron rust, it had a lingering smell of linseed oil. A taller group makes me momentarily nervous; disquietened by a fleeting thought of entombment, claustrophobia and darkness.

Clay, this show reminds us, is a material for memorial and ritual; not only metaphorically through the transmutation of earth to earth and ashes to ashes, but also literally, in the ancient jars and shards of the Jomon hunter gatherers of early Japan and the Bronze Age burial urns from Norfolk, and also in our contemporary cultures too... Is death to be hidden underground or are lives

to be celebrated in mausoleums or on mantels? Should *memento mori* put the fear of death into us, or might we instead celebrate and cherish lives lost?

Quietus concludes with the boldest of assertions. In the final room we see a single vessel, a round white matt cinerary jar, spotlighted on a dull lead plinth. This is Stair's *Reliquary of a Common Man*, 2012, made for and from the cremated remains of Lesley James Cox; bone china, quite literally made from the bones and body of Julian Stair's friend and uncle-in-law, whose life we are introduced to in an accompanying Super-8 film, a slide show of portraits and in the soft-spoken murmur of his storytelling. Here lie the mortal remains of a man. There is no resurrection, none of the bombast and resistance of fetishistic memorialising; instead we have testimony, witness to the worth and merit of a person, wrought by hand on the wheel and forged in the fire.

Mima has programmed extraordinary ceramic installations alongside pedigree visual arts; this show is a triumph.

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E8, 2012, by Ane Christensen, part of the 60-40 Starting Point Series at Siobhan Davies Studios

Specimens from the dance laboratory

A Situated Experiment – 60|40 Starting Point Series: Ane Christensen, Fliiss Quick, Rhian Solomon
Siobhan Davies Studios, London SE1
6 July – 23 September 2012

Reviewed by Marilyn Zapf

What happens when an exhibition becomes a laboratory? This seems to be the question lurking behind the *Starting Point* series at the Siobhan Davies Studios, where collaboration results in fresh experimentation, and ultimately transformation. Within the school turned dance complex, a silversmith becomes a maker-in-concrete, a jeweller a sound installation artist.

Now in its fourth year, this partnership between craft collective 60|40 and Siobhan Davies Studios asks three artists to respond to the materiality of the dance environment. While you may not find many 'craft objects' on display, the exhibition-cum-laboratory delivers specimens that will leave you reflecting on the importance of place and materiality to the creative process. Take the work of visual artist Rhian



Solomon, for example, whose photographs respond directly to the building itself. Her images document the physical imprint of architectural surfaces on the body. Like a vessel awaiting decoration, Solomon 'embosses' the leg, the neck, the cheek with patterns found throughout the building. The ornamentation is captured in poses struck by Solomon's subject, and the final images are returned to, and displayed in, the space from which they came.

What emerges is a meditation on these different types of 'skin'; of the body and the building. The photographs, through their correlation with the material environment, reveal details of the space that were previously unnoticed. As you continue through the exhibition, it is impossible not to begin identifying different sources of the embossings, with the experience of Solomon's piece continually developing

through the viewers' changing perception of the space.

Downstairs, the studio is transformed yet again. This time by Fliiss Quick, who draws attention to a stage that is often overlooked: the office. Quick's film emphasises the rhythms and movements – the dance – of everyday gestures and occupations. The clicking of a keyboard and the gurgling of a water cooler form a chorus for the rituals of the workplace.

This choreography is also accessible by way of live performance. Strategically placed microphones pump the real office sounds of Siobhan Davies Studios into the central exhibition space. The installation draws attention to the desks, bookshelves and printers – not to mention the workers, who we can observe through a window framing the scene. The timing of my particular visit did not