

# Julian Stair and his Vessels

## 'Quietus' – The End

Nicole Mueller

**20** days were all I had with Julian Stair working on his latest project "Quietus" in a brick factory in Bristol, western England. As a result of this very intensive period of cooperation, I took a series of photos and conducted an interview about Julian's views, his current project, the way he sees himself as a ceramic artist and his future projects that must not be named.

Nicole:

*Julian, you are currently working away from home at Ibstock Brick Factory in Bristol.*

*What is the purpose of your stay here?*

Julian:

I am making work for an exhibition called 'Quietus', quietus is a term that means release from life. The show is about vessels, ceramic vessels that contain the body and death. There will be work from small scale pieces called funerary or cinerary jars through to full size sarcophagi, first for cremation the second for burial.

*So this work is being made for a specific exhibition; can you tell us more about it?*

Yes it's for a specific exhibition, a museum touring show. It is going to open at mima, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, in July this year, then tour to the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff in 2013, and also to Winchester cathedral in 2013.

There will probably be another venue but that's just being confirmed. The idea is that the three venues are very different in character. mima is a classic white cube environment, so it's about 400 sq. mtr. of gallery space, a very big space with very big rooms; but a neutral space, a very pure white cube environment. National Museum of Wales is a museum a bit like the V&A, National Museum and the BM all rolled into one. They have different collections, from fine art through to decorative art through to archaeology and the idea is that I'll be able to draw on aspects of their collections. Either bring in some historical funerary ware, probably Neolithic funerary ware and exhibit those alongside mine or maybe put my work into the archaeological display. But the idea is to contextualise what I am doing by utilising the



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Detail of Figural sarcophagus. Photo Jan Baldwin  
Work in progress, Cattybrook Factory, Bristol, Ibstock Brick Ltd. Photo Julian Stair  
Sarcophagi awaiting firing. Photo Jan Baldwin



museum collection, and that's quite important.

The 3rd venue Winchester Cathedral is an amazing building, it's one of the most famous cathedrals and the most important cathedral in Britain, it's a 1,000 years old and it just oozes history from every pore of the building. There are crypts and shrines and chapels there, and commemorations from St. Swithun, who is the founding Saint, through to bishops and all sorts of significant historical figures. And one thing they do have, fairly liberally located around the cathedral, is sarcophagi to various figures. So it will be very nice again to make relationships to objects within the cathedral.

*For the foreign readers to understand: this project is supported by the Arts Council England, the national development agency for the arts, distributing public money from the government and the National Lottery. You approached them with a project proposal and the project has been accepted and agreed for financial support.*

Yes, it has received a major arts council grant. It's a scheme that gives out grants for artists, its not media specific, everyone can apply for a grant. You have to fulfil different criteria depending on the amount of money that you apply for. This one is a major grant, I think it's possibly the largest grant that's been given to a ceramic project and one of the largest grants ever been given to a craft project. They do like to categorize things, you know. I was pleased that the arts council decided to award a grant because it's a very expensive and difficult project to make. I have to work in brick factories, and that means basically setting up temporary studio spaces in brick factories, work away from home for a period of time, and then because I am making extremely large work at a half a ton of weight, it's impossible physically to do all of that on your own, so I work with up to two assistants helping out, so really very often it's a three person job to do that work.



*Leading me to my next question: Why are you working in brick factory?*

I am working in brick factory primarily because I'm making monumental ceramics. Obviously you need kilns to fire anything you make, and I haven't got access in my own studio to large kilns. I'm making pieces that are over 2 metres plus long, 2 metres tall and there are not many places that have kilns of that size; another reason for working at a brick factory is the clay. I work with unglazed clay because I am interested in the tactile qualities of unglazed clay as opposed to glazed clay, I think there is something very immediate and very engaging about unglazed clay, and England has very good deposits of clay, lots of interesting colours and textures and that's really obviously what brick factories do, so its very practical in terms of the opportunity to make large work and use their kilns, the palette of clays depending on the factory, depending on the location, the palette of clays can be very good and there are also further issues, such as forklift trucks to pick up very large work, so in many respects it's a practical environment to work in – but I think its also a stimulating environment. It's interesting to work away from a familiar environment, to work in larger spaces, different spaces, where there

are all sorts of different opportunities, practically, but those can set off many ideas as well.

*I assume it is also part of your job to get in touch with the factories, communicate, organise the space, network? How can I imagine the process?*

Yes the first factory I ever worked in back in 2003 I contacted directly myself. This company I am working with at the moment I was introduced to because I was taking part in the British Ceramic Biennial in Stoke last year. That was a ceramic festival, through taking part in the festival I was introduced to them as an initial introduction. Since then I have made all the arrangements. I am also going to work for this exhibition in a further factory, a 3rd factory which is called Petersen, in Denmark. I visited Petersen a couple of years ago, I have known of them as brick makers for a couple of years now because they are a very innovative brick factory. They produced a brick in collaboration with Peter Zumthor for the Columba project in Cologne, called the Columba brick, so they are very savvy, clever brick makers in terms of their architectural awareness. They also have a fantastic range of clays and colours and different firings. That again was a contact that I initiated myself.

*You are saying you started in 2003 to work on that scale. What made you go 'big'?*

Because this idea of making funerary ware has been interesting me for the last decade. Very simply I wanted to make life-sized pots. I wanted to make pots that were 1,80 metres and there are not many places you can do that - because it's about containment, the pot as a container.

Yeah, I'm interested in making pots; yes, they are vessels, they contain, the idea is that they contain. My work my whole adult life since I left college in '81 has been trying to reinterpret pottery within a contemporary context and I'm fascinated by what I see as the layers of interest that pottery offers, whether it's... and a crucial part of



opposite page l.to.r. Monumental thrown pot awaiting firing  
Monumental thrown pot in progress  
Throwing a flange on a lid

top Fired and unfired monumental pots on the factory floor. Photo Jan Baldwin

that is the idea of containment, so if I am making a cup you can drink tea out of it, it's a vessel for holding a drink, if I am making a 2 metre sarcophagus it's a vessel for holding the body. There are many, many other aspects to the funerary ware project. But I call myself a potter because I am interested in making pots; because pots for me have all sorts of possibilities.

*The format of your work slightly changed during the Bristol session, didn't it? There is a lot of horizontal slab-building going on for this project. Are these the first signs of a new approach in pot-making for you? Away from the wheel?*

To be honest it's not significant to me. I think pottery is not exclusively associated with the wheel. The wheel happens to be central to a lot of the work I make but then I've always hand-built. These categories of hand-building or throwing I think are rather

artificial. If you are making a tea-pot, you are throwing but you are also hand-building it. Especially some of the teapots I make where I collage 7 elements to them which are made separately and then joined. The driving force in my work is an idea and delivering that idea; the method of making is a means to an end. I don't see any difference in throwing and slab-building, whether I'm doing them separately or in combining them. I call myself a potter but that doesn't mean I'm a thrower. Because with this particular project I want to make sarcophagi which are large vessels, some are thrown, some are hand-built. But for me it's the content that is important, not the technique or method of making.

*Do you think that after this series of exhibitions spanning over a three-year time period, you might feel like the time has come for an entirely new overall topic in your work?*

This is a theme that I have picked up every couple of years for the last decade or so. I don't want to spend all my life working away from home in brick factories. And there are other ways or aspects of pottery I am equally interested in. I have thoughts in my mind for a future project that wouldn't have anything to do with death or brick factories, and it would be... it's bad luck to talk about things before you do them, but the way I'm thinking at the moment is that would seem to be something quite traditional. But, no, work is always content driven.

*You are saying new work may potentially become more traditional again; talking about terminology: you call yourself a 'potter'. You wouldn't agree if someone would call you an artist or ceramicist? You define yourself as a craftsman?*

That's a complex question, I actually refer to myself as a potter and an artist. Ultimately, you can call yourself whatever you like, but the term artist is probably a term that should be applied to you when your work is good enough. I'm interested in ideas of craft but I don't actually see a separation between what I think are some of the most interesting, and conceptually interesting, areas of craft and art. I think the separation is rather artificial. To be honest that was one of the reasons I went back in my 30s and started a PhD which I finished 10 years ago. The idea of the PhD was actually to research the origins of studio ceramics in Britain. Because in



Exhibition in the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art

the mid-90s, the history of studio ceramics was still somewhat obscure; it hadn't been researched to the extent that it has been by now. In conclusion, what I took away from the research and the PhD was that the studio crafts as we know them in Britain emerged as a result of modernist ideas being imported into England from France at the beginning of the 20th century. So the idea of crafts as an unbroken artisanal continuum I think is questionable, I won't say it's wrong, I personally challenge it. The studio crafts, and I am simplifying like crazy here, but this would be another interview, the studio crafts as we see them really were the product of intellectuals, often romantic intellectuals, who were highly aware, educated individuals, working at the beginning of the 20th cent in a very self-conscious, reflective way. For me that was a highly sophisticated way of working, which positions those pioneering individuals very much within a modernist and art discourse. (...)

I think there is a tendency to get hung up on terminology on art and craft.

This debate goes around in endless circles, it often brings up the worst prejudices and preconceived ideas in people. I don't think it's the most useful way of actually positioning yourself as a practitioner at the moment. It was quite difficult to call myself a potter when I left college in 1981 because pottery, within the London urban elite of the Crafts Council-dominated era when ceramics and craft were undergoing major changes, the idea of making pottery was seen as very passé, as something that was very unfashionable. But I was interested in making pots, I felt like I would have been dishonest if I wouldn't have called myself a potter because that's what I actually wanted to make. My view was that you don't run away from terms, you reinvigorate them. So I don't see any discrepancy between the term potter and artist.

*Which I personally find very interesting because you trained within an entirely academic setting; with your PhD you have 3 academic degrees in ceramics.*

I'm a typical product of English post-war art education and very fortunate to be so; especially at the time I went to college. But in my eyes the artisanal tradition was broken by the industrial revolution. It was revived by all sorts, whether it's the Arts and Crafts pioneers or the early modernist crafts people, such as Ethel Mairet, the weaver, or Michael Cardew or Bernard Leach. It had broken but it was self-consciously revived for a whole set of ideas; to me that's a movement that is self-aware and highly self-conscious with its place within history. Its not an unbroken continuum of craft practice handed down from generation to generation.

*It is certainly difficult to define 'traditional'.*

Exactly, plus, I don't really like the term 'ceramics'. Ceramics can be anything. Because it describes everything from casting sanitary ware through to making bone china tea cups or making salt-glazed pipes for water. It's a material. It's a term that describes a material. It's a non-specific term, apart from the material side. I think that you can't be a potter without having an in-depth knowledge, understanding, appreciation, love of clay.

I don't think as you can be a painter without an in-depth understanding, appreciation, knowledge of how to manipulate paint. There are some disciplines where the material and the practice are absolutely indivisibly linked; and pottery is one of those.

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Photo Jan Baldwin

Presumably all other photographs taken by Nicole Muller

**Julian Stair** (born in Bristol in 1955) is a contemporary English studio potter, trained at Camberwell College of Arts (BA) and the Royal College of Art (MA; PhD). In 2002, he published his doctoral thesis about Critical Writing on English Studio Pottery 1910-1940. His work can be found in many public and private collections including the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in the Netherlands. He is represented by the Adrian Sassoon Gallery in London, and elsewhere. The Quietus tour began on 13 July 2012 at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima).

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