



Julian Stair

THE SCOTTISH GALLERY
CONTEMPORARY ART SINCE 1842



Julian Stair Ceramics

6 August - 4 September 2010

The Scottish Gallery

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Front: Monumental Jars (to commission)

Left: Vitreous slip tests

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Making: some think weaving - baskets and ultimately cloth - is the oldest of that specifically human activity. Moulding and shaping from earth, from clay, must come at the same time, or next. Extraordinary tiny and startlingly vivid sculptures of female figures in fired clay (as well as stone, ivory and bone) have survived perhaps from 30,000 years ago; utilitarian pottery from say 20,000 years ago. Containers, vessels, receptacles, jars, bowls, pots, urns, beakers are among the oldest things made by us, used by us, and turned into art. The associations of these forms touch all aspects of our shared and communal existence: the preparation, cooking, and the presentation and the storage too of both food and drink; and the great urn or jar shape for burial. Funerary jars have a history of millennia none more astonishing than the thousands upon thousands surviving in Laos's Plain of Jars, 3 to 6 metres high and round, and carved out of rock: megalithic Iron Age pre-historic creations. As artifacts, these, immovable, were fit for purpose. Both shape and scale were in human history readily useable in clay.

It is the absorbing excitement of Julian Stair's continually evolving and experimental practice of ceramics that he occupies, in such an intellectually provocative and aesthetically stimulating manner, a country all his own. The cliché about the past is obvious but nevertheless true: it is another and distant country, but it is Julian's gift to quarry it both far and near. He has made academic studies of 20th century British studio pottery; the extraordinary combination of both veneration and pragmatism that infuses the long history of Oriental pottery

and porcelain is of import. Oriental pottery is both used and worshipped, ritualised and ordinary. There are tea ceremonies; there are small perfections set aside, mounted, admired from a distance. These attitudes are contradictory. From them Julian Stair creates an imaginative, intellectual fusion.

He reaches back into the diverse histories of pottery: that of use, and that of beauty. His open-ended trajectory began of course in student days. There and then during an extensive visual education he made ceramic objects, almost totally abstract with no utilitarian echoes except those we subliminally associate with the use of ceramic as the primary material. Here there was a making of objects which were and are defiantly objects, made of clay and fired clay rather than the more conventional materials of sculpture. They exhibited one prevalent characteristic of the potter's art - that they had to be seen and understood in the round; it is this inescapable multiple viewpoint (no back, front or side) that has almost, albeit not entirely, been an inevitable component of our experience of Julian's work.

Julian, and several of his notable contemporaries, whilst not in any sense a heterogeneous group, have - through the shared studios of several years ago and an apprentice-assistant system that has been alive and well, and is still flourishing - absolutely transformed our understanding and appreciation of so called studio ceramics. This history, shared in time, but immensely various in art, is encapsulated in group and individual catalogues. Moreover several of this small but significant force are writers, historians



Hand building a stoneware ground



Throwing a porcelain beaker

and even theorists. Practice has been complemented by academic study, writing and teaching.

At any time, Julian's beautifully simple, light filled and eminently functional studio houses an international working group. On several recent visits by this writer I met a handful, just enough to share the communal lunch, made each day by a different assistant, apprentice, intern, from Turkey, America, England and India. Knowledge is shared, and Julian is generous: several of his assistants have gone on to make singular careers in their own idiom and language, always the indispensable signal of an outstanding teacher.

Julian Stair's own practice went back for a period to what historians and archaeologists of the history of ceramics would acknowledge as the beginning, and which is usually the starting point: the individual, handmade object of utility, including shallow bowls, saucers and plates which normally only had one surface visible and cups, mugs, beakers and jugs, both held and seen in the round. The well made thing: the oft quoted but little followed William Morris dictum, 'have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful' is astonishingly alive in Julian Stair's practice. Thus there was a period we could almost call hybrid, domestic ware, which also had a life in its own right.

His oeuvre has evolved from making things that are participants in daily life and stages of the day to the making of artifacts that are almost inevitably and inescapably formed into groups that are set apart from practical utilitarian use to quite another

use entirely. Here are objects for their own sake, to be looked at, gazed upon, meditated on, indeed lived with and in a very different way from other visual imagery. First, everything may be, and sometimes inescapably should be, seen at maximum in the round, and at the very least, at a minimum, in a semi circle. But secondly, every object - teapot, beaker, cup, could be used. They are physically robust; we choose to look and at times handle but not to use. Knowing however that we can adds a further dimension to their physicality. The artifacts thus not only echo with an austere pared down elegance and simplicity the domestic, but they are fully realised. Teapots and forms Julian refers to as caddies are lidded. And yet they are completely and irrefutably set apart. Sometimes an artifact is on its own. But almost invariably the artifacts, from a single object to as many as a dozen or more, are set in a row or line on a ground. One installation, a private commission in a London home, a complete work set out in a range of groupings horizontally and vertically projecting from a wall, has ninety individual pots, containers, or whatever word is applicable, and is designed to be seen, and even just subtly glimpsed, from multiple viewpoints. These pots, unusually, are set on ceramic plinths or platforms.

This installation writ large points out and underlines what is for now (2010) more typical practice. A ground, a low-lying platform, almost echoing in form archaic Chinese tables receives and upholds the groupings. The groups may mix forms - beakers, drinking vessels, sometimes with lips, none with handles; lidded caddies and teapots

with handles in their same material - or contain simply one class of form, each individual, coloured differently, glazed or not. They repose serenely, slightly lifted in their special supports, their platforms. Each platform is a different dimension supporting a different group. Thus each form is a syllable, or perhaps a word. Grouped, they are phrases, sentences, aperçus, aphorisms, and visual cadences.

The individuals in their groups are related, in all their different dimensions, in seemingly inevitable ways: independent, co-operative, equal, in a series, sometimes almost slightly different generations, a natural hierarchy. The work is simultaneously narrative and abstract, just as the pieces call on and echo traditions and histories while being new, curiously very unexpected and utterly familiar. The relationships within the groupings are ambiguous, ambivalent, mysterious and at ease: familial.

In parallel, between making containers of various sorts, all of which could fit in the hand, Julian Stair made an astonishing technical breakthrough, into the truly monumental. He has made ceramic monumentals taller than us, rising in oblique angles to the floor, not necessarily curved. A specialist brick factory - Wienerberger Bricks plc - has been the site of this extraordinary endeavour, the technical collaborator, providing the facilities which the imagination of the artist has used and extended, creating works in which the handmade is paramount.

In all, monumental, and the endlessly varied small processions and groupings of receptacles,

there are totally absorbing and inescapable presences. The monumentals have a human scale; the small receptacles imply potential human use. The colours, matt or glaze, are always a range of blacks, greys, ochres, terracottas and whites, subtly changing, an extraordinary variety. The materials too, the slips and glazes, may be combined in many ways: there are pieces that are not yet fired; there is stoneware, basalt, Etruria Marl, porcelain, basalt, and the pieces are thrown, hand-built, constructed in various combinations of techniques. Julian Stair is also a master technician, and experimentally involved with the quality of his materials. One hundred different clays have been used, naturally occurring metal oxides, iron, copper, manganese, cobalt, tin, exploited.

Thus for the visitor to an exhibition, carefully contrived as a satisfying installation of varied pieces, horizontally on free standing surfaces, horizontally and vertically against walls or at right angles, there are relationships to be perceived in each individual piece of varieties of components. Having one's daily life at home enlivened and enhanced by the visibility of a piece by Julian Stair is, as this writer can testify, an exemplar of that almost indefinable response that art finds in us. We are questioned and reassured, comforted and energised, looking at a resolution, yet aware of changing possibilities. The vocabulary is austere, and the language endlessly rich, eloquent, generous and open.

Less does mean more.

Marina Vaizey



Teapot and Two Cups 2010 Thrown Keuper Marl teapot with a basalt beaker and white stoneware cup on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
19 x 24 x 19 cms



Five Teapots and Caddies 2010 t28 x 88 x 18 cms



Caddy 2010 Thrown and constructed circular porcelain caddy
on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
21 x 29 x 24 cms



Two Cups 2010 Thrown stoneware cup and beaker
on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
14 x 19 x 10 cms



Thirteen Cups 2010 Thrown porcelain and stoneware cups and
beakers on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
17 x 112 x 9cms



Two Cups 2010 Thrown Keuper Marl and porcelain cups
on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
13 x 19 x 10 cms



Teapot and Six Cups 2010 Thrown porcelain teapot with stoneware and porcelain cups on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
27 x 42 x 29 cms



Eleven Cups 2010 Thrown Etruria marl, stoneware and Keuper Marl
cups and beakers on a hand built Etruria Marl ground
17 x 83 x 9 cms



Five Teapots and Caddies 2010 Thrown and constructed teapots and caddies, oxidised and reduced
Etruria Marl, basalt, Keuper Marl, porcelain on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip
28 x 88 x 18 cms



Teapot and Two Cups 2010 Thrown porcelain teapot with stoneware cups on a hand built stoneware ground with vitreous slip 23 x 14 x 19 cms



Julian Stair

Education

2002 PhD, Royal College of Art, *Critical Writing on English Studio Pottery: 1910- 1940*
1981 MA Ceramics, Royal College of Art
1974-78 BA Ceramics, Camberwell School of Art

Public Collections

Abingdon Museum	Museums Boijmans van Beuningen, Netherlands
Arkansas Decorative Arts Museum, USA	Museum of Art and Design, USA
British Council	National Museum of Wales
Cleveland Craft Centre	Paisley Museum
Contemporary Arts Society	Rhode Island School of Design Museum, USA
Crafts Council	Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts
Fitzwilliam Museum	Shipley Museum
Gallery Oldham	The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery
Glynn Vivian Art Gallery	Ulster Museum
Hong Kong Museum of Art	University of Wales
Hove Museum	Victoria and Albert Museum
Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art	York City Art Gallery

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Web www.scottish-gallery.co.uk

Right: London studio, East Dulwich
Back: **Thirteen Cups** (detail)



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