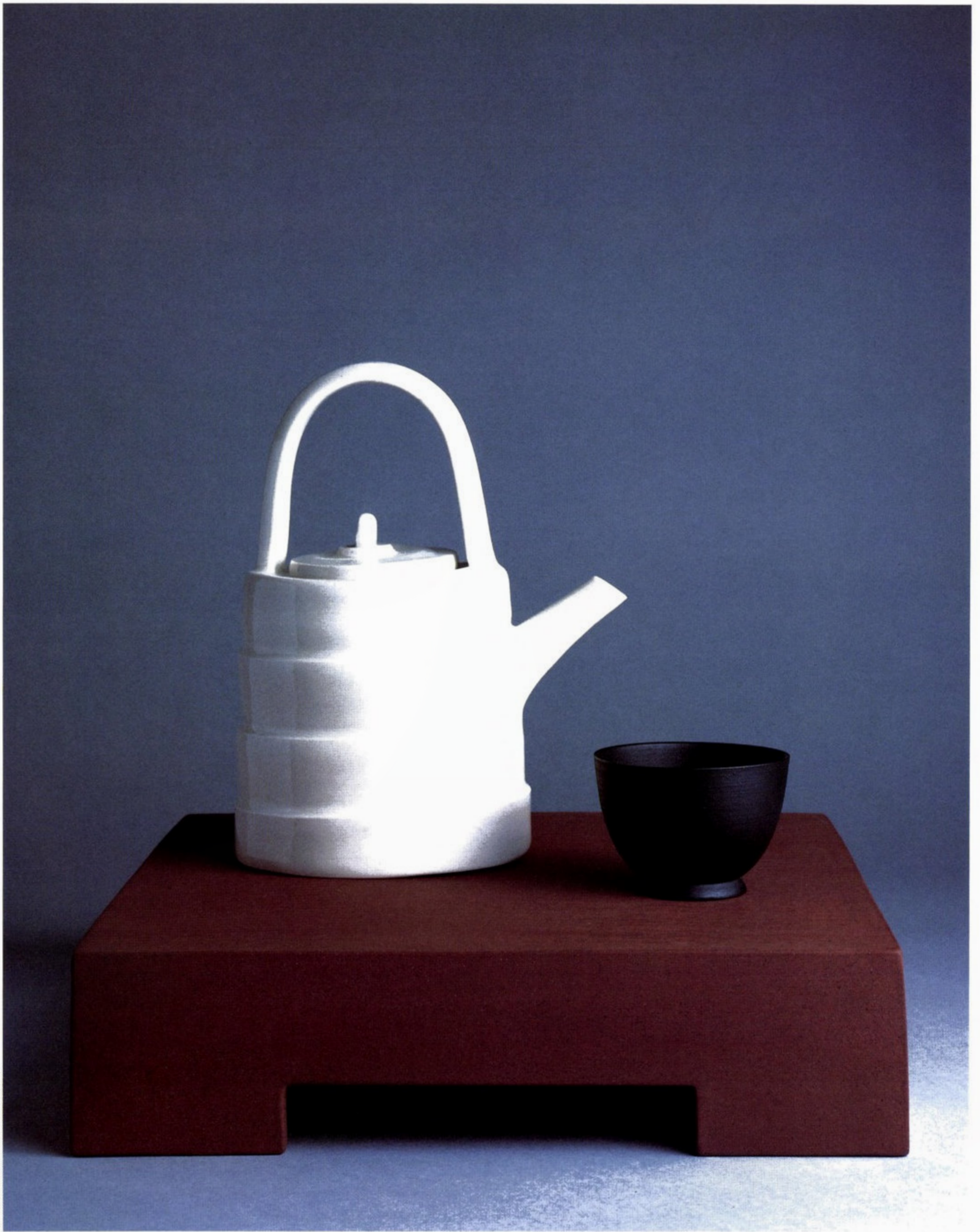


CRAFTS

NEW WORK BY JULIAN STAIR

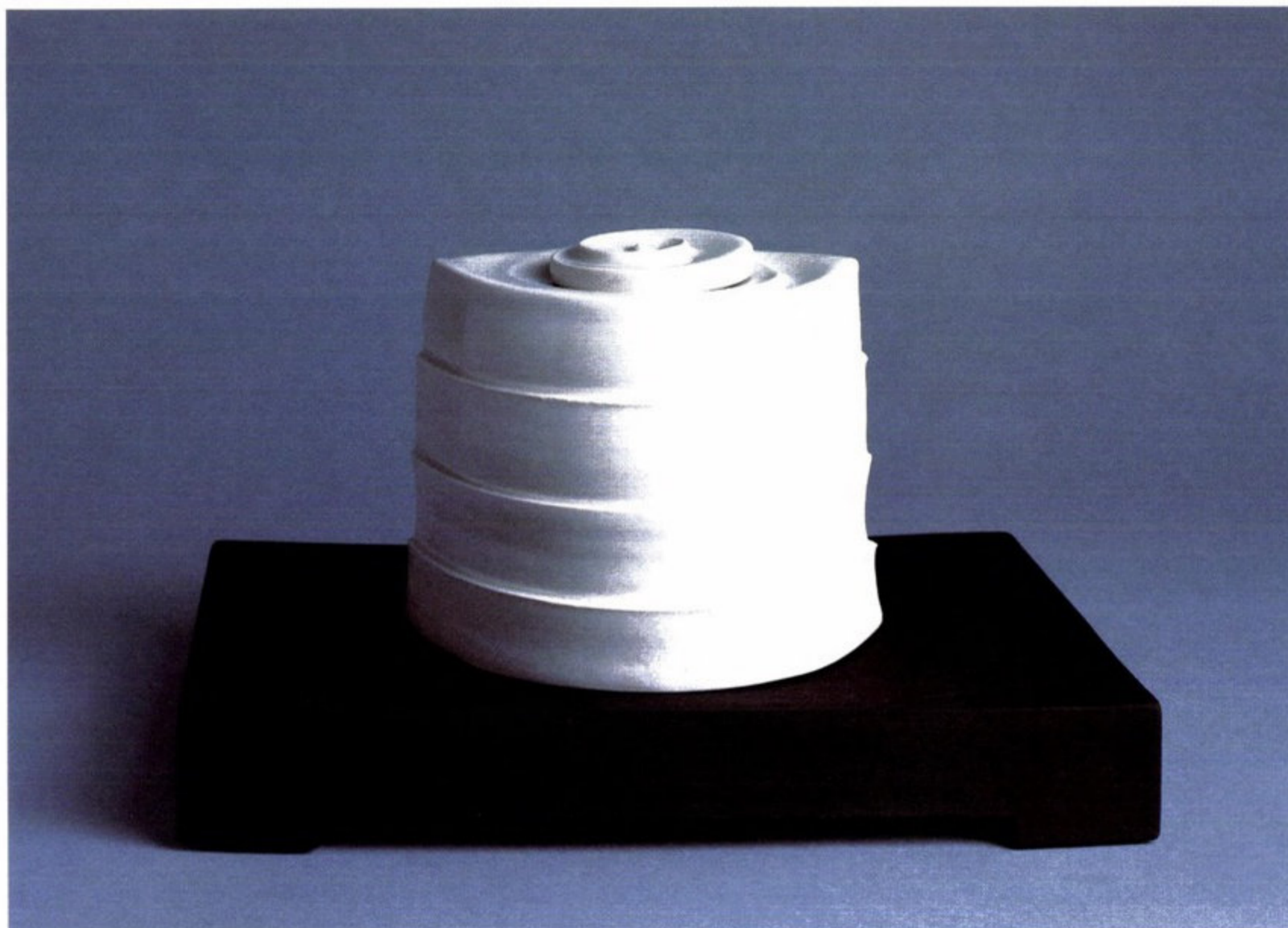
HOUSE FOR AN ART LOVER:
BAILLIE SCOTT'S
BLACKWELL RESTORED
HOT GLASS:
DALE CHIHULY SHOWS
IN LONDON





MOVABLE FEASTS

Julian Stair's latest work takes the functional to new levels of conceptual and aesthetic richness, as David Whiting reveals



RIGHT: Teapot and cup, thrown and constructed porcelain, red stoneware, 24 x 27 cm, 2001
ABOVE: Elliptical caddy, thrown and constructed porcelain, basalt, 17 x 27 cm, 2001

It is hard to think of a potter more committed to the possibilities of thrown functional ware than Julian Stair. He speaks with passion and a wry smile about the mid-80s, when he began concentrating on the personally more fertile world of domestic ceramics – just when the potter's wheel was *démodé* and ceramic sculpture reigned in college and critical circles. Yet he stuck to it, and with a few others helped pave the way for the current throwing renaissance. Recently he was delighted to hear the phrase 'gentle empiricism', certainly the hands-on philosophy that has informed his whole making approach and his beliefs about the pot's multi-sensory significance in our everyday lives.

I went to see Stair in his large and lofty studio in Camberwell – in a secluded mews which has become

a hive of varied artistic activity in recent years. Relaxed and articulate, Stair talks persuasively about his craft and its possibilities for the future. At my request, he brought a couple of his early sculptural pieces to the studio. These small-standing reliefs made in the late 70s at Camberwell School of Art – as it then was – explored concerns of space, perspective and distortion, but, intriguingly, they stood next to his latest work with ease. All the objects showed a clarity and apparent simplicity of conception. But the new pots demonstrated how he has opened up his dialogue with the material over the last 20 years to address functionality at every level, not just in terms of utility, but as a visual and tactile enrichment of our space. He quickly became aware as a student that he

was working with an innately physical medium – a feeling confirmed by the refreshingly pragmatic teaching of Philip Rawson at the Royal College of Art, an academic whose work as an artist gave him a multi-faceted insight into ceramics: 'Philip's experience as a sculptor instilled a strong visual and plastic appreciation of three-dimensional things.'

After the RCA Stair began to make individual thrown porcelain, but these pieces were still, despite their discussion of form and volume, essentially about surface – canvasses for decoration playing on light, texture and shadow. Nonetheless, he was moving towards the functional, an epiphany that happened 'when I sent myself back to foundation.' This was in America, a sabbatical in which he hid himself away,



**Pair of teapots,
thrown and
constructed
porcelain
and basalt,
24 x 40 cm,
2001**

experimented and developed his tablewares, finding that far from being restrictive, they allowed a new understanding of throwing and structure. These new shapes were a far cry from Bernard Leach's Anglo-Orientalism. Their roots lay in a European Modernist sensibility and were as much indebted to the history of industrial ceramics as to earlier exemplars.

Stair has long admired, for instance, Minoan, Mycenaean and Cycladic work and the teapots of Yi-hsing, but although his elegant porcelain teacups and saucers draw inevitable comparison with Rie and Coper's early domestic wares, Stair is philosophically a very different potter. He pointed out that Rie and Coper moved away from domestic wares in favour of individual work, while Stair has continued to see the 'useful pot' as the essential key

to the infinite aesthetic and operational richness of ceramics. Its ramifications are endless as a medium that engages the eye and the hand in a way no other art can. It occupies the 'real' space of the home, regardless of any initial placement in a gallery context. He is fond of quoting Herbert Read's dictum: 'Art must be intimate if it is to be a personal possession. It belongs to a private world' (*A Coat of Many Colours*, 1945, p.3). Stair loves porcelain for its qualities of touch, 'and its whiteness is the fabric of the pot'. His use of broad faceting and cutting, although clearly architectural, also frees up the control of his throwing, resulting in a robust generosity.

Such modifications demonstrate how Stair has increasingly dealt with structure – a concern developed in his red stoneware, which he began to use in

the early 90s. Its colour and surface directness proved an interesting foil to his softer glazed porcelain, allowing an appreciation of the raw character of clay – expressed in crisp delineations, with strong ellipses and accents that can add fluidity to a more geometric conception. The red ware has always seemed to me quite Brutalist, just as Brutalist design has been about bold articulation and material expression. Though the work appears as non-precious as the Pyrex dishes he admires, Stair isn't simply getting back to ceramic basics. On the contrary, like Walter Keeler, he offers an intelligent highly crafted and original reappraisal of what the wheel can offer – his engineering getting more complex as extraneous decoration falls away.

Now Stair is planning work for a major new exhibition at Contemporary Applied Arts in September.



**Pair of cups,
porcelain,
basalt, left:
9 x 12 cm,
right: 8 x
12 cm, 2001**

There will be a range of thrown, faceted and constructed pieces – tablewares, big caddies and dishes – but presented in quite a new way. In what might at first look like a contradictory move toward precocity, he will show these pots in different formal combinations – including new work in black basalt – on a series of constructed clay stands. Though he dislikes the overly conceptual connotations of ‘installation’, this is an ambitious project about the ritual and ceremony of ceramics in our houses. By ‘framing’ these pots he hopes to address that vexing question ‘How do you get over familiarity breeding invisibility?’ He denies any charge that he is making an iconic statement. He points out that the gallery setting does this anyway, and that these are objects to pick up and use. Such a display raises many ques-

tions about the different worlds through which a pot passes, but Stair is uninterested in the conceptual and metaphorical as ends in themselves. These are not still lifes, static and fixed, but movable feasts. The stands ‘specify place’ – to where a pot will return after use – and they connect it to the rest of the furniture, a means of underlining the relationship between the haptic architecture of ceramics within their space and environment.

Stair is fascinated by the various contexts through which we appreciate pottery. His own valuable research into its history and criticism has been a personal step towards widening the crafts debate and jettisoning the insular world of woolly mediation, of ‘innuendo, vested interest and Chinese Whispers’. He wants to re-discover his own roots.

For Julian Stair, pottery has a deep anthropomorphic value – a signifier of our lives and bodies that goes beyond ergonomics. It is this concern that led to the conception of his funerary wares – initially the making of caddies that could theoretically contain ashes. The pot, both alluding to the constituent parts of the body, and being used by it in life, was now finally containing it in death. This is a project in progress, but already we see how his functional construct has released the ‘profound somatic characteristic of clay’, increasing awareness of our physical and imaginative worlds.

Julian Stair shows at Contemporary Applied Arts, 2 Percy Street, London W1P 9FA, (020) 7436 2344, from 14 September–27 October.

For stockists, see Calendar.