

Ceramics

MONTHLY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1999 \$5.00



English Urban, American Rural

by Claire Wilcox

In 1935, art critic Herbert Read wrote in *What Is Revolutionary Art?* that “architecture is a necessary art.” Is pottery a necessary art? Both have been constants in human life since ancient times. Both buildings and pottery endorse and contain space. Both share the same means by which they are understood and become familiar to us.

In the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin’s words from *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, “Buildings are appropriated in a two-fold manner: by use and by perception—or rather, by touch and sight.” Even more importantly, pottery and architecture share the same method of being known. As Benjamin states, “tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit.”

Architecture is about people and use, and pots are about people and use. Domestically, they stand in opposite ratio and scale to the human form, architecture dwarfing it and at times acquiring a “canonical value.” Pots, however, are subjugated to the human form, at its service. As domestic objects within the domestic scale of rooms, pots simply provide smaller, differentiated interiors for that which we value.

Clay vessels are to hand scale and, like the imprint of the potter that clings to them, receive their benediction and rebirth in the hands of the user. What is left of all the movement and motion of their making is still, patient, reanimated only with drinking and pouring, washing and emptying, breaking and burying. The degeneration of craft work and

plurality of mass-produced objects is rarely seen, however, as a failing, or lack in our lives. The loss of the unique and handmade is not grieved for, nor is the lost dynamic between interior and object in what potter and writer Edmund de Waal describes as “the gap of understanding between makers and architects” in the postwar craft world.

The experience of architecture is a simultaneous, collective one, from both outside and in. The building is actually entered into. The private, domestic space experienced from within by habit, routine, is an incubator for personal lives, thought, isolation. When it succeeds, architectural space and its decoration reinforce our sense of ourselves; it disturbs only when it jars, or brutally impacts upon us. Pottery, too, reinforces



“Triangular Dish,” 16 inches in height, wheel thrown and assembled red stoneware, fired to Orton Cone 7, £400 (approximately US\$644), by Julian Stair, London.



“Rounded Dish,” 23 inches wide, wheel thrown and assembled red stoneware, fired to Orton Cone 7, £550 (approximately US\$886), by Julian Stair.

PHOTOS: HUBERT GENTRY, BILL ROBERTSON



"Hexagonal Caddy," 6 inches in height, wheel-thrown and assembled red stoneware, fired to Orton Cone 7, £350 (approximately US\$564), by Julian Stair.

our sense of ourselves. Handmade or not, it possesses a familiarity, even a reassuring lack of novelty—a pot is felt to be known, even before it is held or used. It exists in multiples, there will be more, there have been more.

The space in which it is contained, however, the architecture of room, building, is singular, at least from the outside. If a furnished building is a series of interiors within interiors, the smallest and the last a cup to hold liquid or a pot to hold flowers, then this cup or pot is the most intimate of contacts. The impact of such an object and its potential

significance diminishes with its reduced scale, down to the size of an egg cup, which would be thought ludicrous if it had aspirations of great solemnity.

It's hard for a cup to be epic. And yet our experience of living is felt through our daily physical contact with artifacts. Each component in our daily lives creates a fragment of our whole experience of existence; grit in the eye, a flower in the hand, to be reassembled as the sum of our reality. A careful, beautiful cup has social significance; it clarifies our sensations of experience and re-experience until it breaks or is put away.

Pottery, like architecture, has a metaphysical capacity, and when a pot is good, this matters more than its usefulness. Esther Leslie observed in a lecture given at the University of East Anglia, "Crafted objects, specifically the pot, provide a model of authentic experience, the experience of a person imprinted onto the objects that he or she brings into being."

Pottery is tangible and hard, but also, as a mode of expression, powerful. As Herbert Read wrote in *The Meaning of Art*, it is "at once the simplest and the most difficult of all arts. It is the sim-



Covered jar, 8½ inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, with white slip and clear glaze, wood fired in an anagama, £400 (approximately \$644), by Rob Barnard, Timberville, Virginia.

plest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract.”

The Pots

The works shown by American potter Rob Barnard and British potter Julian Stair at Shillam + Smith 3 in London are satisfying, desirable, sure. They also chart thought—through the sensory, collective means of physical touch, sight, use—about human aspirations, their own and a collective idea of the potential of human beings. In Barnard’s case, this might be said to be about humanity, frailty, asymmetry, expressed by

“unfinished” edges, pocked surfaces, images not necessarily of the edifice of culture, order, discipline, but the darker side of life.

He quoted D. T. Suzuki, “hoping that people might realize that there was a philosophy behind my ‘sloppy’ technique.” Suzuki wrote, “Disregard of form results when too much attention or emphasis is given to the all importance of the spirit. When you would ordinarily expect a line or a mass or a balancing element, you miss it, and yet this very thing awakens in you an unexpected feeling of pleasure. In spite of shortcomings or deficiencies that no doubt are appar-

ent, you do not feel them so; indeed, this imperfection itself becomes a form of perfection. Beauty does not necessarily spell perfection of form.”

Barnard’s pots are also sensuous, plastic, statuesque, have delicacy, a pottery not so much of reason but of compassion for fallibility. He reminds us of the real state of human affairs, not the image we construct of ourselves, and he takes, in part, responsibility for it.

In contrast, Stair’s pottery is a pottery of reason. It possesses a formal coherence, structural vividness, clarity of function. His pots are about aspirations to the ideal, what humans can be, that

they are worthwhile. His interest in formal issues, elegance and balance has as its ideal the balance of the emotion with the intellect. His work is that of an idealist in pursuit of the unattainable, and therefore engaged in the most human of all activities, to reason, apply logic, build and construct in a conscious state of human awareness.

The writer and dealer in cubist art, Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, suggested that "architecture and applied art realize in space these basic forms (cube, sphere and cylinder), which we always demand in vain of the natural world." But Stair's surfaces are not straight lines, his planes and angles not engineered. There is a residue, an element that reinforces the tremulousness of the human form, appreciated by touch.

Urban and Rural

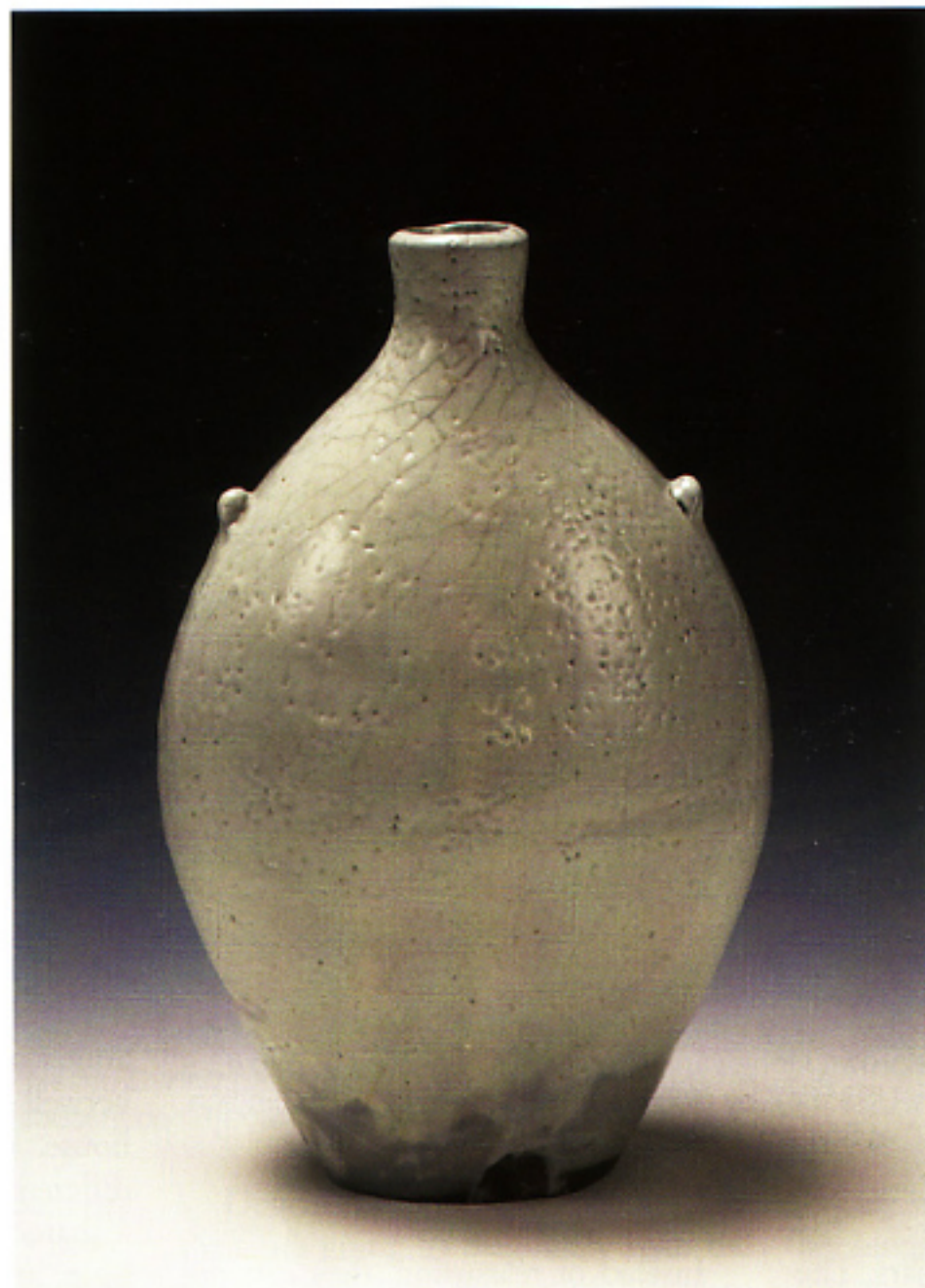
"A rationalist to his London fingertips," as reviewer Margot Coatts once described Julian Stair, he has lived all his life in cities—in Bristol, Los Angeles and London for the last 20 years, with studios in Brixton and now Camberwell. The son of parents who were both painters, he was imbued with an atmosphere of critical discourse from the cradle. His father was part of the St. Ives community in Cornwall in the 1950s and '60s, and mixed with such artists as Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton and Bernard Leach.

In contrast, Rob Barnard was brought up in Kentucky, and ran away from school to the marines, and to Vietnam. His subsequent ceramics education took place in college in Japan, where he remained for several years. An amalgam of American and Japanese culture, "between points," as he described it, his work is appreciated in Japan in a way in which it perhaps can never be elsewhere.

Why did Barnard return to rural America and build a cabin in the middle of the woods in Virginia? The struggle

to establish work that was thrown, wood fired, rough to the touch and darkly obscure in an American ceramics scene that was celebrating glaze and funk must have been a hard one. Even his newer white work is hardly more accessible, despite the sensuality of its glaze.

Similarly, why did Stair push away a successful career in porcelain pots and bowls to make domestic wheel-thrown stoneware—a radical move at a time



Bottle, 10 inches high, stoneware with white slip and clear glaze, wood fired, £300 (approximately US\$483), by Rob Barnard.

when the nonfunctional vessel and ceramic sculpture were dominant?

From urban, complex London, Stair went to the middle of rural Virginia, renting a gray washed wooden house. Knowing hardly anyone apart from Rob Barnard, he began producing a range of tableware with a unity of intent and of process. Lying behind the repetition of cup after cup lay a deeper sense of a connection between past form, rational thought and the modern condition.

Shattered Traditions

In his first public lecture in London in 1877, William Morris expressed his utopian vision of the regenerative and nurturing powers of decorative arts to "make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountainsides; it will be a pleasure and a rest, and not a weight upon the spirit to come from the open country into a town; every man's house will be fair and decent, soothing to his mind and helpful to his work; all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful: yet all will be simple and inspiring."

Morris looked to the decorative arts to provide solace to the inhabitants of an increasingly industrialized landscape. Despite modernism, this concept of the power of the decorative arts to calm and inspire, and bring people closer to creative beauty is something that remains with us in our dreams of craft, evening classes and interiors, particularly in relation to pottery. The 19th-century idea of retreat from the harshness of the industrialized environment and the alienation of city dwellers, into an idealized preindustrial past, with dignity of labor and unself-consciousness, created a melancholy litany for the 20th century.

Barnard and Stair do nothing to console this litany. Unique, distinct, difficult, they challenge the reassuring aura of William Morris' idealistic vision, and have no relationship to the unknown, humble potter of Bernard Leach, the dominant figure of studio pottery, and Soetsu Yanagi, the leader of the Japanese folk craft movement. Theirs is a pursuit based on a material consciousness: the hand's experience of raw matter. Their work has purposefulness, discipline and of course beauty, and it remains within the "known" forms of historic pottery,



Vase, 9 inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware with white slip and clear glaze, wood fired, £350 (approximately US\$564), by Rob Barnard; shown in the exhibition "English Urban, American Rural" at Shillam + Smith 3 in London.

from bowls to jugs to lidded jars. The certainty of their pot-throwing is the starting point from which they take off into the uncertainty of intellectual inquiry.

Can their work profoundly influence our lives? Surely this is something more than familiarity, is simply another route for questioning ourselves, like any other art form. To Walter Benjamin, the hand was an essential metaphor. "Salvation includes the firm, apparently brutal grip." The handmade in Stair and Barnard's work is fluent, unique, the antithesis of the mass-produced object, but "brutal," radical in its content, uncompromising for the receiver who expects pots' tradition, convention, attractiveness, reassurance.

Instead of reassuring, they can disturb. Their beauty is often a severe one. A plate that scrapes, a dark form, an austerity and blinding purity, a swelling form with tiny budlike arms, a cup and saucer so deep and dark it seems like a pool of bitterness itself. Salvation from modern alienation may come from craft, but even craft can shock; these pots express gloom and uncertainty, as well as celebration and exultation.

Pottery translates their understanding of experience, as solace, and its counterpart, despair. Their work is informed by darker sources, from the experience of war and the anguish of a first child's death in a series of dark funerary jars, unembellished and final.

Stair and Barnard's argument for pottery is not only made in their work, but is spoken for in their writing. Each taught himself to write, another struggle by lamplight, with the darkness of the critical consensus outside. They argue that pottery has the capacity to express humanity through sight, touch, thought. Nostalgia and reassurance are their last priorities.

Their pots speak to us in a form and shape that we can understand, but make us question the nature of art and pottery itself. To own a pot is not necessarily to understand it. The dialectic of pots is a complex one, their very familiarity, which we know by "habit," lulls us into an affirmation of regeneration, that we are at one with the spirit of the potter, and our own pasts, by their connection to the earth, which they are a conduit of.

Today, Morris' ideal does not exist, if it ever did. Making pottery is difficult enough, in the wake of such impossible idealism and the corollary of the potter as a modern anachronism. Both potters believe that theirs is in fact a living, evolving language, as they need to in order to make their preoccupations worthwhile.

As individuals, Julian Stair and Rob Barnard share a profound isolation, whether that of the wood dweller, working in silence, miles from the nearest mall, or the urban dweller, cycling amidst the fumes and grime of Camberwell to a cavernous Victorian warehouse. From different locations, with different nationalities, lives, they found a shared strength and tenacity of purpose, and some of the same faiths, in the past forms of pottery and the means of making work, even a shared language between the divide of 4000 miles, urban London and rural Virginia, a European modernism and a Japanese/American aesthetic. Differentiated and isolated by a shared purpose in something so particular and exotic, they are determined to prove that pottery, like architecture, to return to Herbert Read, is a necessary art.

The author A graduate of the ceramics program at Camberwell School of Art, Claire Wilcox is the assistant curator for 20th Century Dress at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London.