



Appropriately enough, the road down to the brick works is paved with red bricks. It heads off at right angles from the ridge overlooking the Severn Estuary near Bristol, and swerves around a steep hillside tangled with greenery to the quarry, a deep brown gash opening amid the saplings and brambles. One more turn and you arrive at Ibstock Brick Ltd, the largest brick manufacturer in Britain and current proprietor of the Cattybrook Works. For the uninitiated, this approach is a vivid reminder of how intimately even our 21st century lives are bound to the earth. Here, in the woods, is the Bristol clay that made the city behind us.

At the door to the works this early spring morning is studio potter Julian Stair, an unlikely figure – with clay dust in his hair, wearing a yellow fluorescent jacket – but a master of refined displays of unglazed tea wares. We enter a din of machinery and pop music: here fresh clay is churned in vats before being squeezed and shaped into bricks, then lifted by robots onto trolleys to enter the vast kilns, roaring with heat, the

flames visible as the kiln doors open and close. ‘The industrial environment is an incredibly exciting environment to work in,’ Stair shouts. ‘There is no limit to what you can do in many ways. You can make things that cannot be picked up by hand, but only by fork-lift truck; you can fire things in kilns you can usually only dream about.’

Cattybrook Works is one of three brick factories where Stair has been in residency, making monumental ceramic pieces for perhaps his most significant exhibition to date, the three-venue solo show that opens at mima on 13 July, before touring to the National Museum of Wales next year, then Winchester Cathedral. But it is here near his hometown of Bristol, that the most ambitious pieces will be created, much-dreamed-of works that arise from long-held preoccupations and give the show its sense of purpose. The show is called *Quietus*, meaning the release from life into death, and the objects on display will all be the funerary ware that ease us on that journey. ‘My subject is the containment of the body in death,’ Stair puts it unflinchingly,

‘working from the scale of cinerary jars for the cremated body, the ashes, through to trying to contain the body fully extended in burial. That lovely archaeological term “extended inhumation”.’

We move to a back shed at Ibstock: here the specialised bricks are formed, and beyond the stacks of angle and cant bricks, the plinth, sill and coping bricks, half the floor is laid out with what resemble coffins or ancient sarcophagi. It is quite a shock, this mass of body-shaped vessels laid out, some with the outline of the body vividly delineated, others as variations on the archetypal forms of wooden coffins and stone sarcophagi, one more like a chimney or burial mound than an open coffin.

At first glance it all looks like a funeral parlour from some archaic culture where joinery is unknown. But look more closely at these drying and as-yet unfired forms, with their sophisticated play of curves and straight lines and the subtle variations on the anthropomorphic rhythm of head-shoulders-feet, and you recognise these vessels to be above all an intense and prolonged interroga-

STAIR'S WAY TO HEAVEN

Personal tragedy has led Julian Stair into making some of the most ambitious and challenging work of his career, says Emma Crichton-Miller. Photography by Jan Baldwin



Right: *Adult Sarcophagus*, slab-built black shale, 2.02 m long, 2012

tion through clay of our most fundamental feelings about the human body, alive and dead, as well as of a history of the making of funerary ware as ancient as human culture. Stair explains as he replaces the plastic sheets covering the vessels: 'What I am trying to do is take the idea of the body on a formal level, playing with the idea of positive and negative space, but keep this connection between the body and the vessel uppermost.'

On a technical level, he adds, this has been the most challenging episode in his entire career: 'These are hand-built, they are incredibly difficult to make – they take weeks and weeks and I had all sorts of problems even working out how to do them. So while it has been very exciting it has also been very testing.'

Julian Stair first began to make vessels on a monumental scale in 2004. With the help of a Queen Elizabeth Scholarship, he researched their being made at Wienerberger's UK brick factory, and in 2008, mima (funded by Art Fund Collect) purchased *Monumental Vase V*, an austere beauty-

ful vast beaker-shaped vessel, the height of a man, in the deep dark matt grey of reduction fired Etruria marl. Since then these upright vases have become a consistent preoccupation of Stair's alongside his exquisite domestic ware: they share a precisely articulated vocabulary of forms and a repertoire of naturally coloured clay bodies.

Over bacon sandwiches in the works canteen, Stair explains: 'I think underpinning it all is my interest in ceramics. Why pots interest me, as opposed to let's say sculpture, is that one engages with it on a multitude of levels: visually, conceptually, through touch, and the idea of touch is reinforcing the physical nature of us as human beings, as material.' In addition, while ceramics are partly about touch, 'they are also about art which engages within social life.'

He takes issue with the Modernist idea that 'utility is a brake or constraint on artistic freedom... When art engages it means that you are opening up avenues to extra dimensions of interest, of possibility.' In this light, making funerary

ware is just dealing with a different area of human interaction. There is, however, another more personal spur as well. Stair's first child died very suddenly: 'And while I don't want these to be seen as confessional, the funeral became terribly important, a way of us coming to terms with and marking this passage.' And somehow, because they were still in shock and despite meticulous planning, the coffin he and his wife chose was 'absolutely at odds with everything that I value in my life... it was chipboard, covered with white acrylic paint, with a shiny brass plaque and it was a kind of pastiche, a cliché of the worst kind.'

Many of the most beautiful and significant objects in museums are ritual funerary ware – but it wasn't till much later that Stair recognised that, while marking death, they also celebrated life. 'In our secular culture we often struggle to deal with death. I think it is an interesting area for artists to tap.'

The coming together of art and grief has undoubtedly inspired an astonishingly creative



Opposite: three *Adult Sarcophagi*, detail, hand-built black shale, 2012
Left: *Adult Sarcophagus*, detail, slab-built black shale, 2012





period for Stair. The sarcophagi represent perhaps the most direct confrontation with death. As he jokes, 'I tried not to let on when I started making the first sarcophagi, but because it's such an emblematic shape everyone on the factory floor cottoned on, so here I have been very upfront and I said, "Oh yes, I'm an artist, this is a kind of temporary take on Egyptian sarcophagi." And then someone walked past and said "Are you making canopic jars as well?"'

He has continued to make monumental upright vases, and even, more recently, highly anthropomorphic turned vessels, like spinning dolls, their shapes created from full body profiles of people: 'I want these pieces to have a presence like the body that could be inside them, so that they are of the human scale, they are something that we can hug. This idea of the body as a physical container for something, of domestic vessels as containers, of funerary wares as containers for the body, these are the themes that I have wanted to pick up and expand on.'

In the show there will also be a number of cinerary jars: 'Here I am taking clay from the ground and then exposing that to heat, and it becomes this different stuff, there is a kind of alchemical cycle, and that is what happens to the body through cremation. These cycles are so bound up with our cultural sense of ourselves and our relationship to the ground.' Stair has even been entrusted with his father-in-law's brother's ashes, some of which will form the cinerary jar that holds the residue: 'Both a monument to Les, and Les himself.'

Back on the factory floor, Stair bangs the side of one of his giant doll-like vessels, recently fired: it rings like a sonorous bell in some East Asian monastery. Another has cracked and responds dully. Beyond the uncertainties of firing, and the critical task of editing his show, Stair still has more pots to make, this time in the Petersen brickworks in Denmark, where he will have access to another range of beautiful clays. As he explains: 'I work in brick factories because I choose to work with naturally occurring ceramic

colours, creating tensions and resonances between cools and warm – by using, for instance, a pale grey or blue in opposition to a warm Indian red.' This is particularly important because so much of the discreet eloquence of his pots derives from their unglazed bodies: 'Clay has such a subtle texture and quality that it is very alive to me. There is something very beautiful about the way unglazed clay soaks up light, it just gives such a beautiful quality to the form.'

In his 1971 book *Ceramics*, Philip Rawson wrote: 'A pot thus "contains" both the reality of materials and process, and the inner realities of man's sense of identity in relation to his own world of meaning.' The book has been a tremendous influence on Stair. In this exhibition, a landmark in his career, I think we will see most purely the realisation of Stair's world of meaning. *'Quietus' is at mima from 13 July 2012; for details see Crafts Guide. Philip Rawson's 'Ceramics' is published by University of Pennsylvania Press, price £25. www.visitmima.com*



Opposite and right:
Figural and Monumental Jars, thrown and coiled black shale, 1.27-1.88 m high, 2012. (All pieces pictured in this feature are works in progress.)