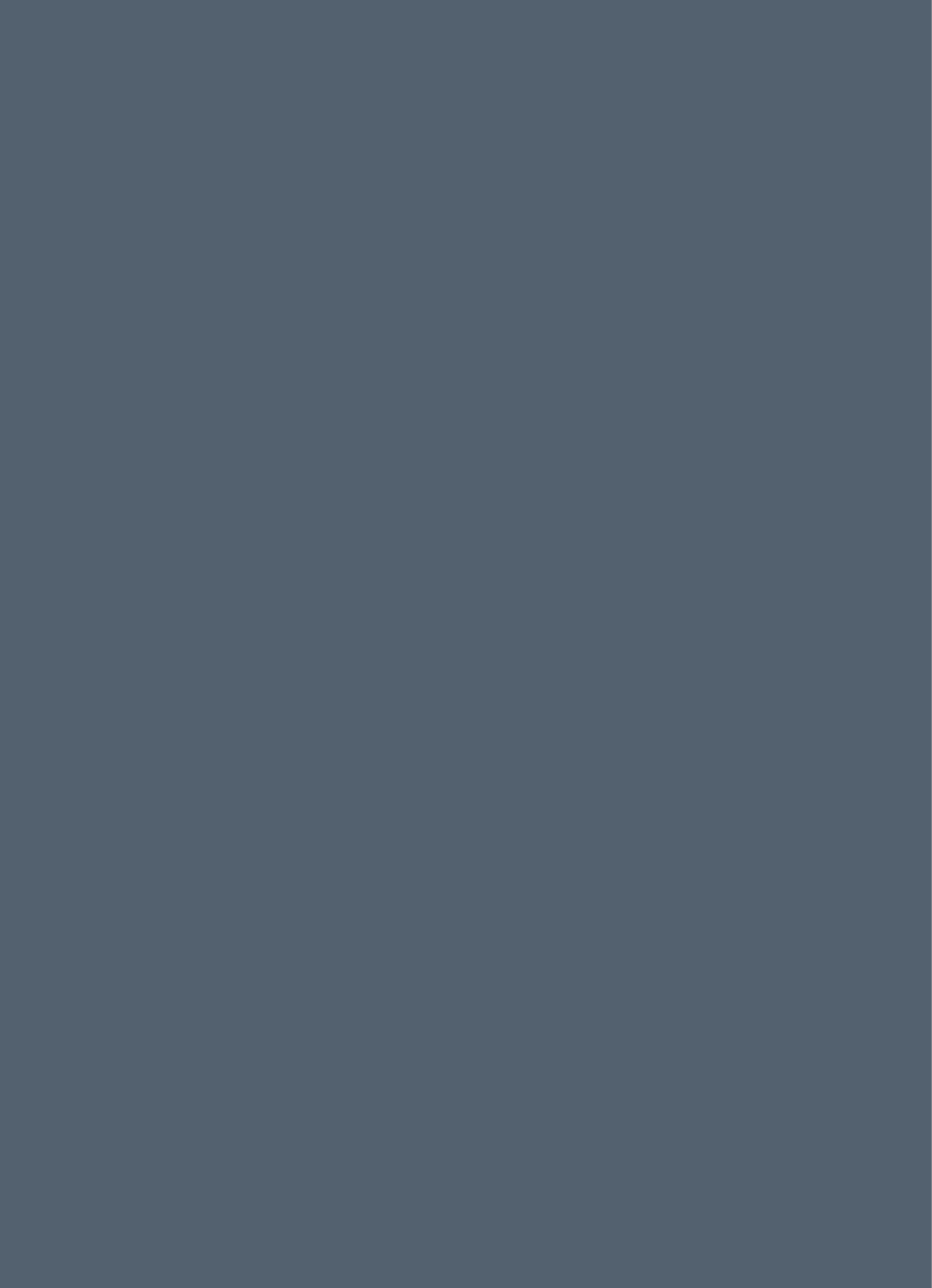


Julian Stair: *Quietus*

Julian Stair: *Quietus*

The vessel, death and the human body

milma



Floating Cinerary Jar VI, 2012
Reduced Etruria marl, Venetian plaster, 40 x 40 x 40 cm



Julian Stair: *Quietus*

The vessel, death and the human body

Curated by
James Beighton

Essays by
Glenn Adamson
Nigel Llewellyn

mima



Foreword

Since opening in 2007, mima has established a reputation for programming ambitious exhibitions of contemporary ceramics. These exhibitions have challenged our spaces, engaged our audiences and pushed at the understanding of what can be said by an artist working with ceramics today. No less so in the case of Julian Stair's *Quietus*. Our discussions with Julian started with mima's acquisition of *Monumental Jar V* in 2008, presented by the Art Fund through Art Fund Collect. It was clear with this work that Julian had made a step change in his practice and his thinking. Having been acclaimed for his contribution to the resurgence of thrown domestic ware in the 1990s the move to monumental ware was about much more than making work bigger. These new forms allowed Julian to explore the relationship between the vessel and the human body in a new way, expanding the content of his work just as he expanded the scale.

Quietus presents a deep and poetical investigation into a subject that has interested Julian for the best part of a decade. The ceremonies and artefacts surrounding death present a subject which, for all its personal significance for the artist, cannot fail to touch all of us as one of the few truly universal human experiences. It has been a privilege to work with Julian on delivering this, his first major museum exhibition. It is especially exciting to know that the work will tour beyond mima being re-interpreted by spaces as diverse as National Museum Wales and Winchester Cathedral. This tour has been made possible by generous funding from Arts Council England for which we are very grateful. Many individuals have helped to make this project happen and I would like to extend my thanks to colleagues at mima, in particular James Beighton, who has led on this project from the start, as well as at National Museum Wales and at Winchester Cathedral, for their work on this show; to Ibstock Brick Ltd and Petersen Tegl factories whose generosity and vision enabled Julian to make his monumental work; to the writers for their thoughtful contributions to this catalogue and to the photographers, AV technicians and designers who have come together in realising *Quietus*. Most particularly though I wish to extend my thanks to Julian and his studio team for investing so much into this project and for giving our audience such an immersive exhibition.

Kate Brindley

Director, *mima* Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art



Monumental work drying at Ibsstock Brick factory, Bristol.

Julian Stair: *Quietus*

James Beighton

*Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure!
She may detain, but not still keep, her treasure:
Her audit, though delay'd, answer'd must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.*

from *Sonnet 126* by William Shakespeare

The term 'quietus' refers to a final moment, a finishing point, be that in an exchange between individuals or the end of life itself. In this short extract from Shakespeare's sonnets he explores a concern that is both universal and human: the inevitable death of one who seems so beautiful, so precious and so full of life. This is the final act of nature, the 'her' that Shakespeare invokes with such a sense of fear. Julian Stair's work dwells upon this final moment: how we as humans face the inevitable in all our lives and try to understand that point which is the end of our conscious existence. He is interested in the rituals that have surrounded death across civilisations, both religious and secular.

Stair trained as a ceramicist and was one of the leading figures of a movement in the 1980s that saw ceramicists re-valuing everyday domestic ware: cups, bowls, plates... Whilst these simple forms had been ignored by a previous generation as being too simplistic and obvious: not enough like art perhaps, the potters of Stair's generation saw a potential in these everyday forms. They could communicate much of what was important to humans precisely because they were everyday, they were the things that we shared our lives with and created rituals around; be that the offering of wine as part of the Eucharist or the carving of a roast dinner at the head of the table every Sunday. Stair understood that there was an intimate relationship between the vessel or the pot and the human body: a relationship that developed through use and grew through a process of design, whereby the archetypal shape of a vessel evolved according to how comfortably we might engage with the object on a day to day basis. Whilst this relationship might start on the basis of ergonomics it quickly becomes strengthened through psychological associations and stories, attachments such as those we might have with the cup we use every morning, the dinner service we use at Christmas, the teapot belonging to our grandmother.

There is an immediacy to the beauty of Stair's vessels, the classical refinement of the form and the subtle details of the surface. There is also a focussed and ongoing investigation into a concern that touches humans from all backgrounds. These objects can be the most essential, the most precious and the most cherished forms that we engage with on a daily basis and for much of human history, the primary material for these forms has been clay. At the core of his diverse practice is the belief that pottery, as one of the simplest and most enduring crafts, can articulate the most complex of ideas.

Working through this understanding is what has led Stair to the current exhibition, the culmination of over a decade's worth of thinking and three years of making. For *Quietus* he has taken a reduced series of forms: large scale vertical jars, horizontal sarcophagi and smaller scale cinerary jars. With these, Stair reflects on how different cultures have

James Beighton is Senior Curator at mima Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.

Monumental Jar V
Etruria Marl
Coiled and thrown
ht: 1.74 m
Collection mima
Middlesbrough
Institute of Modern Art
Presented by the
Art Fund
Photograph:
Gilmar Ribeiro



developed vessel forms to actually contain the human body, after death. At the most monumental scale the large jars reference the idea of extreme inhumation, that is the containment of the human body in its fully extended forms. The lower, floor-based pots contain more recognisable references to Christian burial whereby the body is laid out horizontally in a coffin or sarcophagus prior to interment in a mausoleum or the ground. These vessels are on a human scale, either adult or child, whereas the cinerary jars, smaller in scale, are made for the containment of ashes.

At the conclusion of the exhibition we find one such vessel: a single small container. This is a direct tribute to an individual, Lesley Cox, Stair's uncle-in-law. It was his family's wish that after cremation, his remains be interred in one of Stair's cinerary jars and that a portion of the ashes be used to constitute the body of the clay itself. The result is a cinerary jar made from bone china, one of the earliest English forms of porcelain, which has traditionally used cow bone ash for its purity and low iron content. In contrast, Les' jar is speckled with character and individuality, perhaps better reflecting the man himself. This single vessel is displayed in respectful isolation from other works in the show, but in death Les is surrounded by evidence of his life. Projected photographs allow the visitor

to see Les grow from a child to an elderly man, whilst family footage, shot on Super 8 film, provides us with a glimpse of his family life and friendships. An audio interview provides us with an understanding of Les' intellectual life and development as he relates in his own words his childhood experiences and his growing sense of political consciousness. The ideas contained within a single vessel are unpacked so vividly, personally and affectingly.

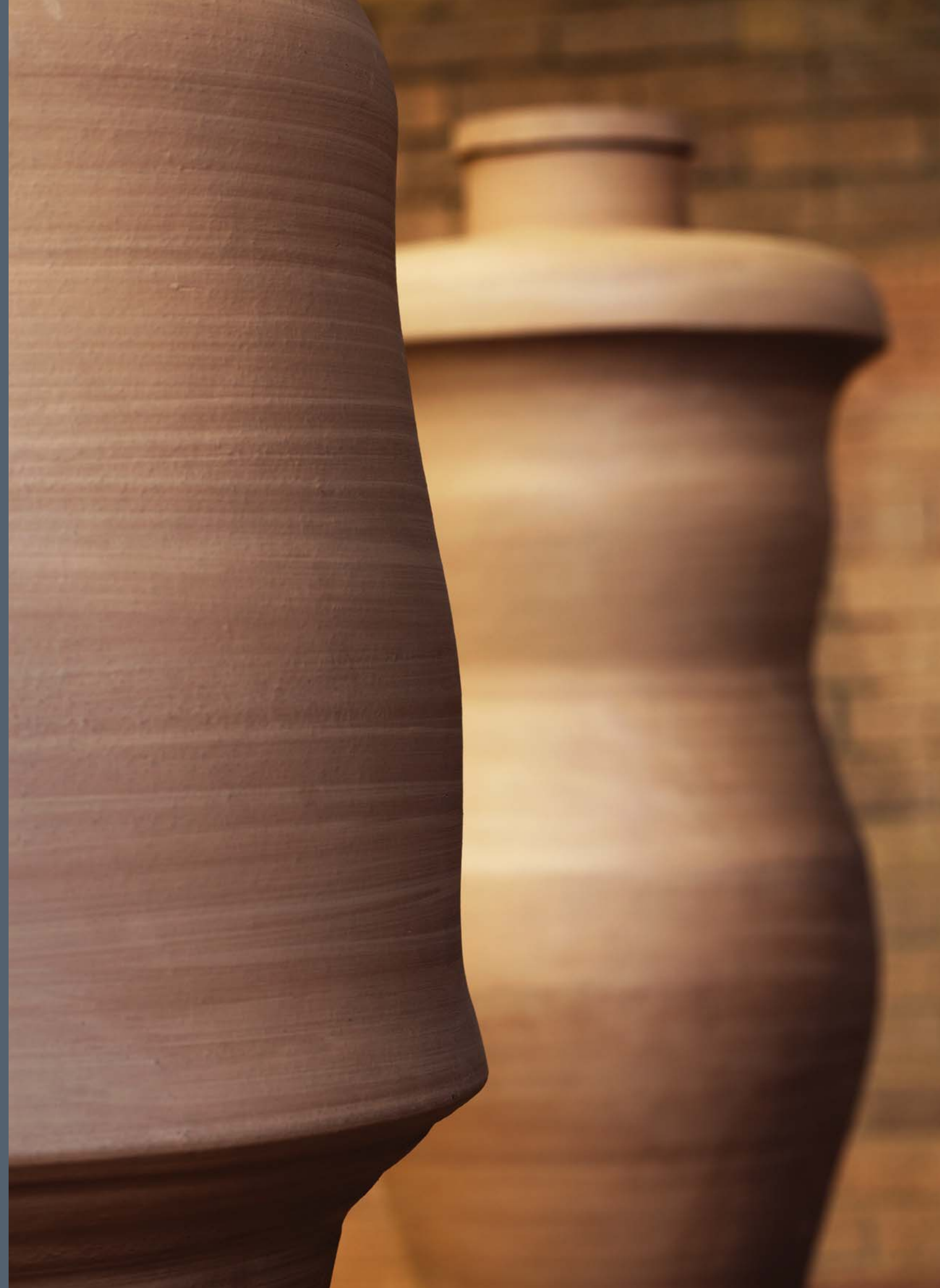
With this individual work at the end of the exhibition we are brought back full circle to the starting point. As displayed at mima the viewer is first confronted by a work called *Columbarium*. This tower of vessels stretches up from floor to ceiling in mima's cube gallery; almost 10 metres in height. Each compartment holds a single cinerary jar, 130 in total, thrown and constructed in a range of clays and finishes with a subtle beauty. Together though the impact is that of volume and the collective, as these jars tower above the heads of our visitors. To say that there is a severity to the work is untrue, but there is a sense of pure formalism through the repetition of shape in this regular structure. The viewer encounters it first of all perhaps as an abstract composition of colour and shape. Progressing through the exhibition there is a re-enforcement of this sense of individuality in repetition. The forms of the monumental jars might, ostensibly, be quite similar, but each bears the traces of its making. They may have required extended residencies in brick factories to make and industrial scale kilns to fire, but the artist's touch is highly apparent, creating a sensitivity to the surface of the vessel, unique in its detail. After encountering Les' jar, *Reliquary for a Common Man*, the viewer returns to the first room of the exhibition and this time encounters *Columbarium* with a very different realisation. Each of these 130 vessels echoes in its form the jar that contains Les' ashes. Whilst on first viewing these vessels might have been viewed abstractly, now we cannot help but view them with the realisation of what each one might contain. Their potential contents becomes all the kinds of stories that we have witnessed in the tribute to Les Cox, as we recognise most fully the individual amongst the collective. It is perhaps the fundamental dynamic of this exhibition and, I suggest, a very human concern.

Stair's exhibition has been launched at mima, a venue that has become noted for its programming of ceramic exhibitions. Here we encounter these works in the typical white cube spaces of a contemporary art gallery. Through its tour the work will be reconfigured for different spaces and given new context. mima's galleries may allow these works to be understood within the concerns of fine art in the early twenty-first century. At National Museum Wales we will be able to explore these ideas alongside historical collections of decorative arts, looking at what vessels and ceramics have meant to past civilisations. Perhaps most unconventionally, and intriguingly, the exhibition will also tour to Winchester Cathedral, providing a context that is resonant with history and tradition. It will offer a spiritual space in which we can witness how humans have related to the afterlife for over 1,000 years.



"There is something about clay that is elemental. Many creation myths refer to the forming of man from clay; it's the stuff of the world we live in, it's what we walk on. Taking that material which symbolises our origins and then making vessels to house the body to take it back into the ground creates a wonderful kind of circularity."

Julian Stair









"The concept of anthropomorphism is central to the identity of pottery. We use bodily terms such as neck, shoulder, hip and foot to describe the constituent parts of a pot. And the very nature of the vessel as a container, a holder of things, is analogous to the idea of the body as physical container for the soul or spirit."

Julian Stair

Matters of Fact

Glenn Adamson

'A prudent man,' wrote Cotton Mather in 1697, '*will die daily.*' This austere Puritan minister in seventeenth century New England advised his flock to meditate upon their own deaths at every turn. When they placed a sheet upon a bed, they should think of a funeral shroud. When they closed the lid on a wooden chest, they should think of a coffin. 'Let us look upon everything as a sort of Death's Head set before us,' he wrote, 'with a *Memento Mortis* written upon it.'¹ For Mather, the fact of death was not cause for dismay or fear. Rather, it was uplifting: the cure for worldly pride, and a way of coming closer to God.

In our secular age, however, Mather's advice is far from comforting. Few people today wish to contemplate their own mortality, much less have it ever-present before them. For those who are not religious, death may well be impossible to imagine except as an infinite expanse of nothingness. For Mather, the idea of death had been woven into the fabric of everyday life. Today it is something to forestall, to be put out of sight and out of mind. Certainly, death is still big business; everyone will be a customer someday. But for many who have lost a loved one, dealing with the funerary industry is a deeply unsatisfying experience, hushed and over-polite and deeply impersonal. Atheists get church services. Bereaved family members are presented with bewildering options – floral arrangements, coffins, headstones, black-bordered stationery. Each of these trappings, no matter how carefully chosen, may well seem equally meaningless.

Julian Stair wants to do something about all this. His project, *Quietus*, is about restoring to death its dignity, which for him means its centrality to human existence. He wants to give his audience – habituated to averting its gaze from death – a chance to look it in the face. The means by which he does this are matter-of-fact, solid rather than symbolic. For the most part the objects he has made are pots, variously scaled, and described as cinerary urns or burial jars. A few are caskets, more or less explicit in their anthropomorphism, but made like pots, coiled and thrown and slab-built. Each object in the exhibition has a palpable weight. Each stands its ground. And each has a definite thickness, a thick wall that shields the darkness within from the light without, and vice versa. The materials he works, lead and clay, are dense both physically and emotionally. They are not randomly chosen. Lead has long been used to line coffins, and clay of course is the very stuff of the burial ground. Yet Stair's use of these materials is not representational. These objects do not depict, or illustrate. Instead they enact, and embody.

On stepping into the inaugural installation of *Quietus* at mima, the viewer is immediately confronted with a great tower of 130 jars, a 'columbarium', twenty-six units high and five units wide. The colors, which run throughout this body of work (and most of Stair's previous output), are muted but rich: red, grey, terracotta. They are the colors of the brickyard. At the end of the exhibition one finds a single white jar, made of bone china. The constituent elements of its clay body include the remains of Lesley Cox, Julian's uncle, and the gallery is part shrine, part family slide show, a tribute in memory of an evidently wonderful man.

You might expect the experience of *Quietus* to be harrowing in its persistent exploration of death. Instead, it is cleansing and humbling.

Glenn Adamson is Head of Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

¹ Cotton Mather, *The Thoughts of a Dying Man* (Boston, 1697), pp 38–9. Quoted in David E Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.77.

When I re-emerged from the experience, coming full circle to the first gallery and that monumental wall of pots again, what had previously been an abstract idea had come to be fully individualized. Those 130 jars now seem to capture the presences of 130 people, any people at all, each as deeply loved as Uncle Les. So often we experience memorials *en masse*: names on a war monument, rows upon rows of grave markers, or indeed, the gridded boxes of a columbarium. At such times death comes to seem remote, something understood through statistics rather than intimate rituals. Stair's achievement in this cyclical exhibition is to have expressed both the universality and the specificity of death, each as an aspect of the other.

The great hand-thrown jars that stand at the heart of the exhibition exemplify this doubleness. Though completely abstract, they exist at the scale of the body. They are powerfully visual, staking out a composition of echoing masses in the white cube of the gallery; yet they invite a tactile response. Unsure of whether they are allowed to touch (they are), the museum's visitors might stroke the ridges circumscribing the jars, or tap them – to find that they ring like church bells – or even give them a gentle hug, in which case they may well feel as if they have received an answering embrace.

Given the elemental nature of this encounter, it is tempting to read Stair's project as turning away from the realities of the contemporary world and toward a more ancient set of truths. Indeed the artist has some leanings in this direction. He speaks of the deep cyclical relation of his pots to the earth from which they are made, and which will eventually contain them ('ashes to ashes, dust to dust'). And when asked about influences, he points to Neolithic burial jars seen in the back rooms of museums, ceramics that were originally made not to be appreciated by humans, but to fulfill a more eternal set of responsibilities. These 'essentialist' aspects of the project cannot be denied. But to overstress these qualities would be to miss the particular twenty-first century resonance of Stair's work.

One extraordinary object in the show is a simple tapered sarcophagus in red brick clay with a lead lid at one end – head at one end, feet at the other. Like many of the works in *Quietus* it calls a body to mind without actually depicting one. It also carries the echo of a simple pine box, in which a soldier or a pauper might have been buried in times past. And then again, it is like half a pot, thrown and then cut in two along its length. The power of the sarcophagus lies in its ability to call these other objects to mind without being reducible to them. For despite its archetypal nature, nothing quite like this has ever existed before. Stair, uniquely among contemporary artists, is enlarging our mental and aesthetic equipment for dealing directly with this most basic of human concerns.

Of course he is not alone in taking up death as a subject. Marina Abramovic has had a long career of trenchant ritualism, piling up bloody bones and adopting postures of self-sacrifice and crucifixion as a way of imaging the trauma of genocide. At the other end of the spectrum there is the inevitable figure of Damien Hirst, who treats death as a cheap shock tactic, something encountered in an amusement park thrill-ride or a horror film rather than real life. His infamous diamond-encrusted platinum skull, *For the Love of God*, is about as far from Stair's quiet meditations as the

contemporary art world offers. But there are more oblique works, too, which come closer in spirit. One is Charles Ray's *Ink Box* (1986). Though it initially looks like a cube of solid black metal, it turns out to be a hollow steel box, painted black and then filled to the brim with ink. Some viewers will get the inside joke about Minimalism (in 1962 Tony Smith designed a 6 x 6 oiled steel cube called *Die*). But the work is intense and multivalent – at once a Platonic solid, an allusion to the *Kaaba* in Mecca (the center of Islamic faith), and the dark pit of a grave.

As varied as these artists may be, all represent death as something that happens to other people, something generalized. Stair, by contrast, brings death home, where it is really encountered by families and friends. He deals with mortality not as a mediated or 'social' phenomenon, nor does he transmit his ideas via art historical references. Instead, his method is direct. This should not come as a surprise. Stair trained as a functional potter, and he spent years making wares for everyday domestic use. Even today, years after he has stepped up to the plate of installation art, he is comfortable speaking in the language of clay. His preoccupations remain tactility and domesticity, humility and honesty, and above all, the durability of ideas and forms. He is acutely aware that ceramics made thousands of years ago still survive, sometimes bearing the fingerprints of their prehistoric makers.

So, while Stair's objects do indeed feel timely, they are also made for the ages. Here again, his project stands apart from prevailing currents in art – a field with a notoriously short attention span – and perhaps even provides a quiet rebuke, suggesting that innovation is not the only value worth celebrating. For anyone following today's hectic itinerary of exhibitions, fairs and biennials, art is experienced as transient phenomena, flashes of aesthetic brilliance or intellectual insight. One might think back to a favorite painting or sculpture, or retrospectively ponder a work of conceptualism. But for the most part, art flickers in and out of our lives. *Quietus* is a different proposition altogether. Walking through this exhibition, you might well ask yourself not: which of these objects is your favorite? Or even: what is Stair trying to say? Rather, you may well find yourself wondering whether you would like to spend the rest of eternity in one of these vessels. That is a question few artists would dare invite, but it is Stair's chosen terrain. And it is a measure of his success that your answer might well be: yes.

Floating Cinerary Jar I, 2012
Oxidised Etruria marl, Venetian plaster, 40 x 40 x 40 cm





Columbarium, 2012
130 thrown and constructed cinerary jars
Stoneware, Etruria marl, red stoneware and porcelain
Photographed at mimma





Photograph: Julian Stair





Inhumation
Floating cinerary jar, crouch jars,
sarcophagi and drawings, clay on paper
Photographed at mimma





"There is an alchemy to making ceramics. We take an inert material, fashion it, dry it and expose it to heat and flame. The practice of cremation, of exposing the body to fire, going through an alchemical change, echoes and parallels the process of firing."

Julian Stair

Containment

Nigel Llewellyn

Chiddingly is best known amongst art historians for a visit paid there by Pablo Picasso to see his friend Roland Penrose in 1950. But it has another claim to fame. A small mural monument in the parish church of this quiet Downland village signals a new phase in the long history of containment as a key concern of the art of death. Although in the seventeenth-century, it was the Sackvilles, earls of Dorset, who were lords of the manor, they were buried at Withyham, some distance away, which left Chiddingly church available to commemorate another prominent local clan, the Jefferays. Of the four Jefferay tombs in the church, it is the monument to Margaret Jefferay (died 1618), erected by her husband Thomas in 1620, that connects in perhaps unexpected ways with Julian Stair's remarkable urn-like ceramic forms. Instead of placing a portrait bust or other figural representation of the dead woman in the centre of the small mural monument, an unknown, London-based sculptor has placed in a niche an urn in half relief, its top decorated with a wreath and bearing a Latin motto: 'MARGARITA FUI' ('I was Margaret') (fig. 1). Below, there are two slate inscription panels incised with tiny lettering. The one to the viewer's left, which is written in English, sets out Margaret's biography and ends with a conventional, instructive homily on the fragility of life and the inevitability of death:

*...Fflesh is but fflesh: the fairest flowers do fall:
the strongest stoope: Death is the end of all*

Latin is the language used in the inscription to the right and here the message is less ordinary and more intimate, including as it does a note telling us that the patron of the tomb was Margaret's bereaved husband and describing her as a gem – prudent, pious, beautiful and modest. She was taken too soon, the text says, and this urn has become the repository of her ashes.

This last claim is certainly false but is not unusual for that. Early modern monuments often address passers-by with misleading information about the whereabouts of the body. Margaret Jefferay was almost certainly not cremated into ashes but was probably shrouded, confined and buried in a family vault beneath the church floor. However, the urn's claim refers to a poetic convention that became ever more popular in English funeral monuments during the 1600s when philosophers such as Thomas Browne could be inspired by a chance unearthing of a set of ancient funerary urns to reflect on the human condition. For a few decades the urn became the focus of poetic attention as it was to become again towards 1800. Browne's *Hydrotaphia, Urne-Buriall* (1658) includes woodcut illustrations of the urns found (fig.2) and includes the wonderful line, '... man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes and pompous in the grave', sentiments that remind us that these crafted womb-like monumental urns speak to issues that lie at the heart of Julian Stair's exploration of ceramic vessels as part of the death ritual.

In many human cultures across history, urns and other vessels have been used as the repositories of cremated ashes and other bodily remains. As was the case with Margaret Jefferay, urn-shaped memorials have been designed to signal that they are containers of 'ashes' (cineres). As he points out, Stair's subject in *Quietus* is, 'the containment of the body in

Nigel Llewellyn is Head of Research at Tate.



fig 1: Anonymous tomb-maker, monument for Margaret Jefferay, died 1618, erected 1620, Chiddingly Parish Church, East Sussex.



fig 2: Illustration of Roman urns from Thomas Browne, *Hydrotaphia, Urne-Buriall*... (London 1658), the Latin inscription meaning, 'Look! I am become a burden that might be gathered with five fingers.'

death'; so, what precisely is the need for art to play a containing role in the human drama that is death and bereavement?

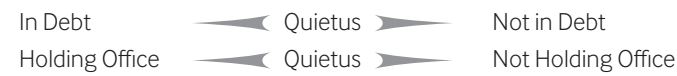
In the case of the tomb at Chiddingly, we have no means of knowing what Margaret Jefferay's funerary urn contains but its purpose was, and remains, to promote her memory. The human body is itself a container of its own vital contents and natural juices but its capacity to manage this function ends with death. As muscles slacken and jaws gape the cosmetic skills of the undertakers are required to maintain decorum and the social standing and integrity of the natural body which are so readily threatened by death. This beautifying work prevents the body's polluting, vital contents from spilling into the public arena and damaging the feelings of loved ones. The intervention of the undertaker's artifice reminds us that despite its universality and its unique capacity to define humankind, such is the challenge posed by bereavement that all human societies have created complex rituals and processes to deal with the situation and that art plays a role in these endeavours. The art of death helps survivors to manage the effects of loss and in its western traditions, the art of death works with multiple images of the human body, stage-by-stage, through the process of death. As the 'Natural Body' – the corpse – disappears into corruption, it is the 'Social Body' that replaces it in the form of memories, narratives, reputations, myths and idealised portrayals of all kinds. In its figured form on funeral monuments, this social body appears as the 'Monumental Body', the image of the lost individual standing as a perpetual replacement of the natural body, by now safely disposed of or contained. From the visual standpoint, the natural body has disappeared: it is the monumental body that remains visible. The rituals of death treat the natural body as a barrier. The vital contents contained by the corpse tend to be kept separate: questions of social and emotional engagement are the realm of the social and monumental body and of the art of death.

The body is also a container in another sense, a vessel for the eternal entity that in many Judeo-Christian creeds has temporarily made use of it, namely the soul, which at the moment of death seeks to escape the natural body. The title of Julian Stair's exhibition, *Quietus*, refers to the meaning of that word as describing the moment of release from life into death – a moment of transition – and the artist has claimed that objects including 'funerary ware can ease us on that journey'. But the word 'quietus' has rather a complicated set of meanings and there is a complication in Stair's choice of title in that 'quietus' might – albeit unintentionally – suggest a narrower understanding of the relationship between life and death than the extended processes that we have been considering and that I believe have to be understood to explain how death rituals function. To get to the bottom of the meaning of the word 'quietus' we need to think in English about 'quit' rather than about 'quiet'. The English word is a direct adoption from the mediaeval Latin and the core meaning of the Latin phrase *quietus est* is 'he is discharged', as from a debt or, by extension, from life. In former times one might be offered a quietus as a receipt when you settled a financial account or when you left office.

Indebtedness and office-holding are both everyday human conditions that can be described in diagrammatic form by means of a simple binary model:



The transition from one to the other complicates the model with the quietus occupying a pivotal or liminal point between the two states:



This fits with what we know about the working of the art of death which is that it functions in the space between the binary opposites of Life and Death and requires a tripartite structure to give due recognition, indeed priority, to the liminal stages that fall between such simple terminal points:



Throughout the extended process of dying, the art of death intervenes and supports the ritual on a number of functional or utilitarian levels addressing the shocking and damaging consequences for individuals, families and social groups that death represents. The art of death also helps individuals to prepare for the inevitability of death, it deepens the significance and efficacy of the ritual, it eases bereavement and it constructs a monumental body in perpetuity to stand in for the lost natural body, to offer comfort, preserve social structures and repair relations. The art of death is also concerned with the design of objects whose function is containment, the encasing of the natural body or corpse, as it descends into decomposition. Foremost amongst such objects is the urn, which across time and space has been used not only to contain cremated ashes but also for secondary or split burials. These require the evisceration of the corpse and separate treatments being accorded to the body shell and its contents (organs, entrails). Such rituals extended in time the liminal process of dying because the body shell could then be treated and managed, for example, when a monarch died and there had to be a long delay between death and burial as a vast congregation was informed and gathered for a state funeral. Because secondary or split burials required monuments to be erected in more than one place, they extended the geographical range of commemoration. The more burials and commemorations that were required, the broader the social and individual continuities that could be maintained by the ritual. For example, there are monuments both at Westminster Abbey and at Portsea, Hampshire, to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham (assassinated in 1628), both of which trumpeted the fame of the royal favourite, who had played a key role in the increasingly crisis-ridden early Stuart state: the centrepiece of the Portsea monument was not a figured effigy but an urn.

For some, the urn as a container of the ashes of the deceased comes to represent the monumental or social body of the deceased and indeed figures their corporeal substance. Juxtaposed with a mourning figure – often read by onlookers as representing the ‘widow’ – the wreathed or draped urn represents the couple united in an unreal liminal state between life (the widow) and death (the deceased spouse). Tableaux of this kind –

sentimental in the Enlightenment or Romantic senses – start to become familiar in British monumental art towards the end of the eighteenth century. This trend was perhaps encouraged by the popularity of Goethe’s tragic and influential prose composition *The Sufferings of Young Werther* (1774), which includes lengthy analyses of the emotions of bereavement. Despite these immediate poetic origins and the antique and even pagan connotations of the iconographic monumental type of the mourning figure at the urn it maintained its popularity well into the nineteenth century with examples abounding in parish churches and churchyards across the country. Indeed, variants can be found across Europe. Within a few miles of Margaret Jefferay’s urn at Chiddingfold, the mural monument to Thomas Baker (died June 1782, aged 53) at Mayfield, takes this form (fig.3). Although only one mourning figure is shown, two wives are, in fact, cited on the inscription: Marthanna, who died in November 1780, aged 59 and Ann, who died in December 1804, aged 81. The single figure of the Mayfield ‘widow’ is an allegory of mourning, widowhood and bereavement, not a representation of a particular individual. Furthermore, the mourner’s drapes virtually obscure not only the figure – confirming her idealised, personifying role, indeed, her lack of specificity – but also the urn itself. By now the urn has lost any gender specificity; it has become a universal sign of the demise of a human being especially when juxtaposed with the draped figure personifying the equally universal state of mourning.

The moment of *quietus* triggering the release of the soul is also referenced in the symbolism of the funerary urn in monumental art, especially in the seventeenth century when poets, theologians and other intellectuals reflected on the role of the funerary urn in relation to the Christian belief that the resurrection of the blessed is assured and earned. In 1631, in a brilliant *coup de theatre*, John Donne, realising that his final days were upon him, not only wrote and preached his final sermon, *Death’s Duel*, which took as its subject the resurrection, but also stage-managed his monument (fig.4). This survived the Great Fire of London and – admittedly, somewhat battered – is still extant in St Paul’s Cathedral. His biographer, Isaac Walton, recounts how the poet posed, entirely wrapped in a shroud – except for his exposed face – standing on a small urn, gazing out at the spectator. All this was captured by an artist, in a painting or in a drawn sketch, and passed to the leading London tomb-maker of the day, Nicholas Stone, to turn into a carved monument of black and white marble. Donne has invented a monumental scene that parallels the belief in the soul’s quietus. This is not the soul escaping the body but an image that promotes Donne’s belief in the central Christian mystery of the resurrection.

Julian Stair has written that his preference for ceramics over sculpture is that it engages with us on a great number of levels – visually, conceptually and through touch (and the implication in Stair’s thesis is that the number of those levels is greater than it would be for sculpture). What I have tried to show in this short essay is that even within the history of British art, a number of media and types can contribute to the theme of containment within the art of death, with ceramics, and historically, sculpture prominent amongst them.

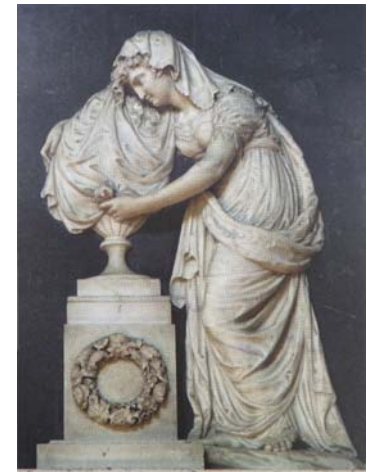


fig 3: Anonymous tomb-maker, monument for Thomas Baker, died 1782, and his wives, probably erected post-1804, St Dunstan, Mayfield, East Sussex.



fig 4: Nicholas Stone, monument for John Donne, died 1631, erected in that year in Old St Paul’s, damaged in 1666 and subsequently conserved and re-erected in St Paul’s Cathedral, City of London.



Corpus
Figural jars, monumental and crouch jars,
floating cinerary jar and drawing, clay on paper
Photographed at mimma





The Firing

Tamar Joseloff

"If I had any chance of recovery, this passion would kill me ...
I have coals of fire in my breast."

John Keats

- Our bodies, ignited by touch; however light, flesh can singe with pleasure, the heart can burn itself to cinder.

We leave relics in the sheets,
our sweat and skin, what's dead of us.
In the half dark I listen

for the shuttle of my heart.
Blood wells up through a cut
to taste the world.

I am a vessel, open
to your body. If only you could
move through me, enter

the spleen, the coiled intestine.
You are already in
my eye, my brain.

- Fire takes the manshape
like a lover: the clumsy arsonist,
the heroic father, the monk

in saffron robes. No matter
what they believed,
how they lived, in the end

reduced to this: a ribcage
forged in flame, curving
like the branches of a tree.

- In the story my mother read me,
the tin soldier burned for love,
reduced to a molten heart,

the dancer's tinsel rose
shrivelled to a dark fist.
I longed for the happy ending.

Strange shapes would form
in darkness as I lay in my bed
at night, wondering

what it was like to die.
I found a bird's skull in the yard,
ran my finger over the beak,

the eyeless hole,
the smooth cranium,
then buried it in the ground.

- A man stands before a wall
of fire, holding a cross
on a chain against his heart.

His likeness is on ivory
and although so small,
I think I see the flicker

in his eyes as he beholds
the woman who held
this image to her heart

four hundred years ago.
To think of the flame
he burned for her

snuffed out, four hundred
years in his grave, his love
reduced from flesh to bone

to soot; but flesh remains
in memory, the feel of her skin
beneath his fingers, like fine clay.

- Coal and ironstone, silica, bole,
sea earth, marl, the soil yields
hard treasures, breaks down matter.

In the hill top cemetery the graves
fall in on themselves,
marble crumbles to dust,

loved ones tumble
into each others arms, their bones
knit and form a whole.

- Gold fillings, titanium,
a wedding ring, calcium.
What doesn't burn

is sifted out. A light package
without heavy limbs
and troublesome heart.

When I die, scatter my ash
on water, so I curl the waves
on a cloud of dust,

each particle of me alive
to sunlight, floating,
a little boat of myself.



Photograph: Julian Stair



Memorium
Reliquary for a Common Man, 2012
Bone china, lead-covered plinth, video and spoken word
In memory of Lesley James Cox
Film and audio edited by Mark Wilcox
Photographed at mima

Biography

Julian Stair was born in Bristol in 1955 to a family of artists and writers. He took up pottery at 16 and went on to study at Camberwell School of Art and the Royal College of Art, graduating in 1981. During this time he was assistant to Scott Marshall in St Just, Cornwall, one of Bernard Leach's last apprentices. He has always balanced studio practice with writing and in 2002 completed a PhD researching the origins of studio pottery and its relationship to modernism, *Critical Writing on English Studio Pottery: 1910–1940*. He is currently Principal Research Fellow at the University of Westminster and a co-investigator for the AHRC funded project *Ceramics in the Expanded Field: Behind the Scenes in the Museum*. He is also an artistic contributor to the HERA funded project, *Creativity and Craft Production in Middle and Late Bronze Age Europe* (CinBA). Julian has exhibited internationally over the last 30 years and has work in numerous public collections. In 2004 he was awarded the European Achievement Award by the World Crafts Council for his monumental work, first shown at the launch of *Collect: The International Art Fair for Contemporary Objects* held at the V&A. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and was Deputy Chair of the Crafts Council. He lives and works in South London.

Public collections

Abingdon Museum
Arkansas Decorative Arts Museum, USA
British Council
Crafts Council
Fitzwilliam Museum
Gallery Oldham
Glynn Vivian Art Gallery
Hong Kong Museum of Art
Hove Museum
mima Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Netherlands
Museum of Arts & Design, New York, USA
National Museum Wales, Cardiff
Paisley Museum and Art Galleries
Rhode Island School of Design Museum, USA
Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts
Shipleigh Art Gallery
The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery
Ulster Museum
Aberystwyth University Gallery and Museum
Victoria & Albert Museum
York City Art Gallery



Acknowledgements

So many people have helped to make *Quietus* possible, but I would particularly like to thank past and present studio assistants for their help in realising this project: Ninna Gøtzsche, Emily Hall, Billy Lloyd, Jan Kåre Mykelbust, Matthew Warner and Siukwan Wong. Thanks also to students from the University of the West of England and Bath Spa: Sonny Lightfoot, Klaudia Palásti, Abby Ducharme and Rob Martin, and also Nicole Mueller. To Stephanie Benjamin and Nicola Probert, thank you for helping to keep me sane.

I would also like to thank Pierre Beaudry for his friendship and support, Alex Goacher for his all-round skill and good sense, Mick Garnett for the superb lead work and Nigel Wood for generously sharing his technical expertise.

It would have been impossible to make monumental work without the support of the brick industry. Profound thanks go to Andrew Halstead-Smith and Shaun Engert of Ibstock Brick Limited and the staff at the Atlas and Cattybrook factories for their patience and good humour, especially Brian Huddleston, Nigel Turner, Malcolm Robinson and Ian Downie. I am also grateful to Christian Petersen for his generosity in allowing me to work at the Broager factory in Jutland, Denmark and for the help of Eric Mick and Kim Reinecker.

I am indebted to Mark Wilcox for his sensitivity and commitment to the project, for making his family archive accessible, and producing the audio visual material and the factory documentary which make the exhibition complete. I would particularly like to thank Sydney and Jean Wilcox for their selfless support and for so generously allowing me to use the ashes of Lesley James Cox, Sydney's late brother, in the making of *Reliquary for a Common Man*.

As always, thanks to Jan Baldwin for her exceptional photography, and to authors Glenn Adamson and Nigel Llewellyn for their insightful essays, Tamar Yoseloff for her remarkable poem and Geoffrey Winston for his meticulous and elegant catalogue design.

To Mike Tooby, many thanks for the inspirational conversations which helped to shape the project early on. I thank Kate Brindley for commissioning the exhibition and James Beighton for his visionary approach to curation, and for the many hours we spent discussing *Quietus*. Additionally, thanks are due to Alix Collingwood and the technical staff at mima for their help in delivering the exhibition. The generous financial support given by Arts Council England made this exhibition possible.

Finally, special thanks to my daughters Rose and Hattie who put up with my long absences, and to my life-long interlocutor, Claire Wilcox.

Julian Stair
2012

First published in 2012 by mima / Museums & Galleries,
Middlesbrough

Published to accompany the exhibition at mima,
Julian Stair – Quietus: The vessel, death and the human body,
13 July – 11 November 2012
and the subsequent tour to National Museum Wales, Cardiff
and Winchester Cathedral

© 2012 mima, the artists and authors

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A British Library CIP record is available

ISBN 0-86083-094-2

Editors: James Beighton and Julian Stair

Design: Geoffrey Winston, www.graphicswithart.com

Photography: Jan Baldwin (unless otherwise credited)

Printing: Streamline Press, Leicester

Distributed by mima

mima, Centre Square, Middlesbrough TS1 2AZ

+44 (0) 1642 726720

www.visitmima.com