

# THE BODY IS EVIDENT

Anna Greer



The body is evident. You can imagine the weight of Michael Cardew's hands as they act against gravity to move the body of the bowl upward. The strength and tacit knowledge of the process and materials are as present today as they were in the late 1960s when this piece was created. There is an unmistakable assertiveness that characterizes all the works of Michael Cardew, including the *Green and Brown Bowl* present in *Portland Collects: British Ceramics*. Simply by looking at *Green and Brown Bowl* and examining the evidence of its creation and the nuanced details of its presence, you can understand the physical force employed by the maker in the studio, his insistence on balance, and decisiveness in form. The work is a microcosm of the craftsman, the malleable clay body reflecting the intricacies of the human body in motion and materializing the craftsman's longings and tastes through a methodical practice of refinement. The work additionally serves as an historical trace of each collector and the larger story of the studio pottery movement. These works give us an opportunity to connect to the maker, to see the physical manifestation of their life's works, and realize a critical relationship between object and maker, object and owner, and the potential for more meaningful connections to things and the people who make them.

The modest collections of works in the Collection Gallery at Museum of Contemporary Craft leave room for breath; the pillowy spaces between each case off-set by the glints of light reflecting off the vitrines, each piece resting comfortably in its own space, as owner of this small plot of land. The space is a meadow populated by these proud unique pots, each with their own history and social life. The assortment of dynamic aesthetics exemplify the vast methods and tastes by each maker represented in the exhibition: those by Lucie Rie display a delicate ornamental slowness in stark contrast to the works by her contemporary, Bernard Leach, whose seminal pottery exemplifies confident utilitarian form. Betty Blandino's *White Pinch Pot* in contrast to Gordon Baldwin's works could not appear more different, while Peter Hayes' *Black Bottle Form* and Poh Chap Yeap's *Double Gourd Vase with Tenmoku Glaze* imply how dramatic forms and unique surfaces can distinguish small black forms.

It is important while paying a visit to each of these pieces, to understand the work of the studio potter as a process of experiential refinement. Each piece of work is a condensed manifestation of the artist's longings, time, failures, efforts and beliefs. You can see this resilience crystalized in the smallest details: the delicate inlaid hand-drawn lines on the lip of Lucie Rie's *Tall Bottle* demonstrating her innate sensitivity to weight and surface, the swelling lip of Bryan Newman's *Large Bowl with Lip* recalling the precision of pressure by his confident hands on either side. This wise decisiveness echoes the artist's embodied

knowledge and the endless hours spent in the studio perfecting an idea of beauty, balance, or utility. The artist is present in work, as the work is a manifestation of the artists intentions. He or she becomes a part of the work, revealing the intricacies of their own bodies and hands in the work. The malleability of clay allows for the effortless translation of subtleties unique to the artist's body. Betty Blandino's *White Pinch Pot* has the presence of her own slow deliberate method of construction, her finger prints and the pressure of her palms are the surface, her concentrated focus filling the white orb to create the balance between surface and interior. The surface of Gordon Baldwin's bold *Black and White Two Piece Sculpture* reveals the activity of his hands while refining large slabs of clay, the stark edges wavering and puckering, the depressions alluding to the hollow form and the force of the hand, all illustrating the struggle and faculty of the maker in the challenging construction of this piece. Each maker's forcefulness and sensitivity is contained in their work, and these pots are both piece and portrait of the individuals who made them.

While each pot has a unique presence and history, the group as a whole presents the story of the revival of the studio pottery movement in the age of mass-production and manufacture, a new method to approaching the creation of objects through methodical refinement. How do these works differ from manufactured ceramics? How is their meaning or value enhanced, visibly or ephemerally, by their origins in the studio? Consider Poh Chap Yeap's *Double Gourd Vase with Tenmoku Glaze*, a glossy black venus collecting every wavelength of light in the room, with a surface so impeccably smooth and form so symmetrical we are held in disbelief of its hand construction. There is little to no trace of the maker's hand on the pot, so we may wonder if this vase was machine made and could this vase be replicated through manufacturing processes? One could make a mold of such a vase and have 10,000 of the same form produced, however this specific vase exhibits a relationship to the hand, as the clay and the hand respond reciprocally. The top gourd form in this vase displays an eagerness toward the lip as the maker and the clay anticipate together the top of the vase, while the bottom gourd suggests a formidable patience and a slowness of form. The machine does not feel or respond to the clay, and simply acts upon it. The hand feels the clay, responds to the clay, works with and against the clay. This relationship between the hand and the clay is something we as viewers empathize with-- we also have hands; however, we are unable to empathize with machine processes. Thus handmade objects are warm with a familiarity or friendliness, where machined objects are static and cold.

The social lives lead by these pots further illustrate the friendliness present in these works. Each piece in the exhibition has been collected and cherished, traveled and passed down. The collectors' love and caring is the reason these works are before us, for it is this fondness that has preserved the loveliness of these works. Allowing the work to travel into the museum spaces for our enjoyment and appreciation enriches the social lives of the work and reciprocally offers us an opportunity to connect to all who have cared for and carefully considered the work.

With so much care and consideration contained in each object, these pots have a radiance of experience, the way a family heirloom feels heavy, the steering wheel of a classic car appears notably soft and worn, and the keys of a loved one jingle familiarly. We experience these objects within their contextual meaning; their history, creation, value, and narrative, as we come to understand it. These special pieces and the experiences they create offer us a potential for our own relationships with objects: what would our lives be like if we insisted upon this kind of *specialness* in the creation of objects and our relationships to them? Would we need as much? Would we feel more fulfilled? Would we desire less? Would we create less waste? How can this kind of methodical production and loving ownership influence the way we relate to objects, and to those who create?

Moving through the exhibition is like a spring tonic: each new encounter is fresh and surprising, yet warm and familiar. Each pot vastly different from its neighbors, emulating the dreams and determination of the artist and the love and care of the collector. However they may differ from one another, all works and makers are unified by the studio and the loving investment in each object. This investment obliges the viewer to meet these objects with a specific empathy, imbuing these objects with a palpable *specialness* which cannot be manufactured.

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