

Searching and Finding

RESIDENCY – ASHLEY HOWARD admires Kyra Cane's new pots.

PHOTOGRAPHY - MIKE SIMMONS, SEQUENCE BY ASHLEY HOWARD

Kyra Cane's pots are 'complete', resolved in both form and decoration. She is an assured thrower whose confident technique is underpinned by a sound understanding of raw materials. The satisfying harmony evident in her work derives from the celebration of soft clay, which seems almost to own a separate existence, yet provides the perfect vehicle for Cane's instantly recognisable brushwork. I visited towards the end of her time as Artist in Residence at Rufford Craft Centre, February 2000, and watched as she finished throwing some pieces, decorated others and prepared work for firings.

My first impression was the dramatic increase in the size of Cane's pots. Though the first examples were not yet finished, this did not in any way detract from their occupying presence. Certainly these were very large pots, but the impression of stature transcended the physical sense. Standing almost carelessly while awaiting further treatment, they represented an imposing collection which demanded a reverential focus of attention. At Rufford, Cane deliberately set out to investigate larger pots. This was integral to her application, as the ethos behind this residency system is to encourage artists to develop and foster new aspects to their work. Cane's pots realised the full potential of the large Stanton kiln installed at Rufford. The position offered another research opportunity: exploration of the potential of different clay bodies. For some time Cane had been keen to experiment with porcelain, which she had not used to any notable extent since her student days at Camberwell School of Art in the mid-1980s.

Though Cane still uses stoneware for her main body of work, for some time she had been experiencing occasional slight blistering with her usual St Thomas's body. After a little dissatisfaction with the white St Thomas's she took the opportunity to re-acquaint herself with porcelain, in this case Limoges. The particular attractions of porcelain for Cane lie in the 'wetness' of the clay in its workable state, and the smooth 'density' of the glaze-fired body at the end of the ceramic process. The reference to 'wetness' was readily located in the indents and dimples she had applied at various points on her pots: clearly a much-relished celebration of the clay in its soft state. Of the many glaze tests Cane had produced, those in porcelain revealed a more precise edge to the brushed pigments with fewer muted tones in the surrounding area. On porcelain, her decoration was more clearly defined, endorsing her observations on the 'density' of finished porcelain.

In preparation for the residency Cane produced a range of pots to serve as maquettes and points of reference, not only for form but also for decoration. Affectionately nicknamed 'small big pots', these were obviously thrown in one; the making of their far bigger brothers required a different approach. The technique she devised for this began with a base section thrown on a batt, but not undercut when removed from the wheel-head. The following section was



also thrown on a batt, but without a base, and the rim was compressed causing it to flare slightly. The base section, now beginning to dry, was returned to the wheel and matched rim to rim with the inverted additional section.

After removing the batt from the additional section, throwing continued. This process was repeated until the desired height was reached. The base section was then undercut and trimmed and in some cases a footring added. This was accomplished by throwing the footring and leaving it to harden, joining it at the appropriate time simply by sitting the pot on top of the footring. The next stage was firm joining and smoothing-in of the outside profile. Finally, the complete vessel was laid on its side on a large cushion of sponge to tidy the underside of the foot.

Watching Cane at work provided an insight into some of the potential problems involved in such a startling jump in scale. Glazes, for example, normally achieved by dipping and pouring, now required spraying. The spray-booth at Rufford was too small for her large-scale work; the solution was to place the pot in front of the booth, aim the gun at the section of pot, raising and lowering the vessel so that every area could be covered. A good mask should be worn. Even the operation of moving the pots to and from the kiln required the development of a 'bear hug' grip technique involving the whole body. Pressure had to be spread evenly

THIS PAGE: Kyra Cane – Vessels H61cm and 63cm | OPPOSITE PAGE: A collection of tall vessels H61 – 93cm |

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but not too tightly, especially handling the greenware. The increased physical contact, Cane felt, served to build up a close personal relationship with this particular group of pots, a relationship enhanced by the fact that she was working in a new environment.

Attempts to 'scale-up' work, while proving successful in more modest dimensions, do not always have a satisfactory outcome. For example, a glaze melt which has appealing qualities on a small pot might well appear as a vast, lifeless plain of little interest on pots with a larger format. This

was a problem Cane resolved in the quality of her decoration which brought together the many aspects of her work.

Even the most cursory glance at Cane's drawings flags up her tremendous skills as a draughtsperson and mark maker. Her brushwork gives the pots their most recognisable qualities, and to see her decorating is entrancing as the observer is drawn in to appreciate the depths and subtle layers of tone and line in the finished articles. Cane admits to feelings of trepidation before decorating, but I suspect that such apprehension is immensely valuable in

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that it serves to focus the mind.

Cane's technique reveals an admirable balance between contrivance and spontaneity. After planning the intended route of the brush, she loads it with underglaze pigment and relaxes into uninhibited, free and lively execution.

The marks were often sponged back after initial application. Working in and out of the colours in this way gives the finished surface its trademark sweeping swirls and cloudy background tones. More defined lines, splashes and other marks are introduced on top. The result seems to suggest that her pots have passed through a much larger composition of her drawing and picked up elements in the process. They begin to take on a terpsichorean quality enhanced by the balletic, almost-skittish application of the final brush marks made before glazing and firing.

Cane clearly benefited enormously from the residency,

but equally the residency gained immeasurably from Cane. For two hours each day, the Rufford studio was open to allow the public to see her at work and ask questions. As a necessary ingredient for good teaching, Geoffrey Whiting cited enthusiasm for the subject. Cane has plenty of this and is able to communicate her ideas and methods.

Cane viewed her time and her works at Rufford as a challenge. It is clear that she relishes both challenge and the exploration of uncharted territory with which it is inextricably linked. The conceptual proposition of making bigger pieces would have been adventurous even had Cane not chosen simultaneously to investigate the use of an unfamiliar material. That she rose to the challenges presented by both new landscapes of enquiry shows the strength of her commitment to her chosen medium.

In an extract from an interview with Marius de Zayas in 1923, Picasso said: 'To search means nothing in painting. To find is the thing...' For Cane the act of searching has resulted in a truly spectacular find. **CR**

Stockists:

Contemporary Ceramics, 7 Marshall Street, London. W1. Hart Gallery, 113 Upper Street, London. N1. Bettles Gallery, 80 Christchurch Road, Ringwood BH24 1DR. The Harley Gallery, Welbeck Centre for the Visual Arts, Notts. Details of the Artist in Residence scheme can be obtained from Peter Dworok, Director, Rufford Craft Centre, Rufford Country Park, near Ollerton, Nottinghamshire NG22 9DF Tel 01623 822944.

ABOVE LEFT: Kyra Cane – Vessels H88cm and 90cm

Technical Notes

All work is thrown primarily on a wheel, in one or more pieces as the pot necessitates. I use either a kickwheel or a slowly revolving shippo wheel for the much longer pieces, and I currently use Valentine's Earthstone Original or Limoges porcelain clay.

The interplay of form and surface are an important element of my work, layers of oxide, stain and glaze are applied on top of a base glaze until the surface is animated by a series of marks which are partly a response to the form of the pot itself and also influenced by drawings distilled from observations of landscape and environment. Base glazes are poured and dipped, and brushes and sponges are used to build the surface up further. I collect glazes like a magpie, and although I adapt recipes I primarily concentrate on developing the use of them, I have a very narrow palette within which I find inexhaustible variety.

Pieces are fired, either in a gentle reduction atmosphere in a gas kiln to between 1285°C and 1300°C (cone 10 down), or as was the case at Rufford, in an electric kiln cone 9-10. Pieces may have up to three glaze firings to achieve the desired results, adding and eliminating details as I feel appropriate, taking risks is an essential part of this process and the firings always have the last word.

GLAZES

GK2

Potash feldspar	48
Whiting	20
China clay	22
Flint	10
Titanium dioxide	8

This is the glaze I have been working with for years, and still reveals surprises depending on the exact thickness of all ingredients and layers, combined with particular firing temperatures and firing cycles.

Matt White

Potash feldspar	50
Whiting	3
Dolomite	22
China clay	25

This is the result of experiments at Rufford.

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Kyra Cane – In Practice



Making surface indentations in the base section



Scoring the rim of the base for the next section



First pull of the second section



Second pull extends the height



A further pull completes the throwing



Finishing the form with a big rib



Trimming and undercutting the base



Considering the finished form



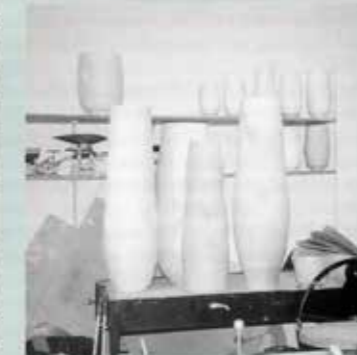
Painting – applying underglaze marks



Experimenting with sprayed glaze



The bear hug method of carrying large work



Collection of pots prior to glazing

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