Clive Bowen: a world of pots

St Ives, Cornwall, 2nd July 2018

I am standing in the entrance lobby of The Leach Pottery, St Ives, looking at Bernard Leach’s commanding slipware charger ‘Mountain Landscape’. Leach painted this work at the pottery in around 1929. It was most likely thrown for him by Shoji Hamada. Although it is warped and a little battered, the dish still has a vital energy. Leach, like Hamada and Michael Cardew, were ‘rescuing’ slipware, casting their minds back to the great chargers of the late 17th century, most especially the named examples by Ralph and Thomas Toft. Leach is also thinking about his formative years as a potter in Japan, and he notes that ‘I made a number of such decorative plates suggested, in the first place, by English Toft ware’.

The plate therefore connects to and reinvigorates a ceramic tradition.

By coincidence I am at The Leach Pottery at the same time as Clive and Rosie Bowen, who arrive as I am in the middle of my reflective viewing. This is propitious, as it gives me the chance to let Clive know personally how delighted I have been to place a fine, tall vase of his in an exhibition I have been co-curating. This slipware vase and lid (in the collection of the Crafts Study Centre) connects Bowen to Leach, too. On its side is a sprightly, leaping fish, jumping for the angler’s mayfly. The design relates, in my mind at least, to the famous ‘Fish Bottle’ made by Leach in 1931, where a leaping salmon rises to fall into a choppy stream.

Leach used this fish design on over fifty vases throughout his career. Bowen returns to his sprightly fish, too (as much a trout as a salmon). It has the flash of the moment and the deep call to the past.

Gallery St Ives, Tokyo, 29th January 2019.

I am standing in the entrance room of Koichiro Isaka’s enterprising and finely-curated ceramics gallery in a suburb deep in Tokyo. Clive Bowen’s work is on a shelf in front of me. There is one particularly telling juxtaposition of pots. A plate with a deep-brown surface, where the glaze enriches the earthenware body with a treacly-sheen, contrasting the golden-yellow-slip lines of a simply sketched fish. To the right is a handsome jug. The decoration is entirely abstract, and rather sparing. The foot is combed in a pattern that could have been taken from a plate made by Michael Cardew at the Winchcombe Pottery in the late 1920’s. Across the body of the jug are a few dots and languid lines. But they bring energy and pace to the vessel and its soft round body, like the pace of the water or beer when the pot is at work. Here are twin ways of looking at the surface of a pot: abstract markings; the deft lines that depict the essence of a living creature. Clive Bowen works in this wide creative space. He, too, has reinvigorated the slipware tradition, and for that reason his command and his aptitude are revered in Japan as much as in England. He makes a tradition of slipware sing for the present.

Kawai Kanjiro’s house-museum, Kyoto, 31st January 2019.

I am looking at a showcase of work by the great Mingei-potter and artist Kawai Kanjiro. Although he stretched the vocabulary of ceramics away from its sometimes overly-rigorous obeisance to ancient Chinese and Korean pots, there are moments when he is commenting directly on older wares. This is true, I think, in the case of the slipware vase and lid I am looking at. It dates, I would imagine, from the 1920’s. Around a chubby bowl are repeated patterns of slip: a thick short brush stroke and two drip-lines. Kawai is referencing 19th century Japanese slipware here, giving it an abstract, contemporary twist. When I visit Clive’s studio, tucked away on a shelf, far from public view, I come across a similar vase and lid, with a not dissimilar pattern; an interconnected, swoopy, curve of slip painting. One pot seems to call to the other, across 6000 miles and 100 years.

Shebbear Pottery, Devon, 9th February 2019.

The idea of time lapse is, I think, important in the evaluation of Clive Bowen’s pots. Some of his slipware seems deeply rooted in his observation of English medieval ceramics. It wasn’t by chance, I believe, that a copy of Bernard Rackham’s classic Medieval English Pottery rests on a library pile on a piano stool in one working room in the studio. His tall, etiolated jugs bear comparison with their 13th and 14th century Baluster jug counterparts. Yet they are contemporary as much as ancient. They are certainly not copies. They observe a medieval starting-point, but then in Bowen’s hands, the jugs are transformed. They soar upwards, become more elongated, as if they might sit in Giacometti’s hands. They uplift with a slender elegance. This uplift and its resonance, recalls, I think, the towering vases of R.J. Washington, and the elongated, stretchy vases of Robin Welch. One such jug, waiting on the floor of the studio by the kiln, looks as if it might rise forever, its trajectory curtailed only by its softly swollen body. The markings on it accentuate the idea of movement: perhaps a cipher for the act of pouring.

Activity and calm seem to reside in the new works Bowen has made for this important Goldmark Gallery exhibition. The calm comes from the settled distinction of his forms, always apt for the particular purpose. The activity derives from the gestural slip-trails, the finger marks and the loving brushy strokes, as well as the plashy coverings of slip. Squiggles, be they calligraphic or naturalistic (like a blade of grass or a plant shoot) are located on many works, done in a flash, risky and inventive, with a courage borne of long doing, as courageous as the watercolour mark, for once placed, it cannot be changed.

There is a deep range here, too. New ‘whisky cups’ have been created for the show; little sauce boats are on trend. Teapots are adorned by cane handles purchased from a Japanese shop. Repeat-pattern dinner plates remind us that Bowen can be exacting as well as impetuous with his design when the occasion demands. There are jugs and vases of all sizes, some an electric copper-green, some marked with the red ochre clay from the field next to the studio. Pots cannot get much more local, and their deep presence from the earth lends them serenity. It makes the location have a symbolic purpose, as there is a direct line, more or less from Cardew at Wenford Bridge, passing through Shebbear and on twenty miles north to Fremington, the country pottery where W. Fishley Holland worked, ‘the last place’ he wistfully observed, ‘where the true Devonshire traditions were carried on’.

There is scale, as well. Central to the exhibition is a commanding series of vast rounded-edged rectangular platters, freely and generously marked. Some of these hark back to the 17th century slipware tradition. But the lines have a liberal freedom now, one more associated with Shoji Hamada than any Staffordshire decorator. They are both Western and Eastern. The pattern is more akin to Abstract expressionism and contemporary calligraphy. Risk and adventure in explicit in them, for so much might go wrong in the frail second of the mark-making. As Yuko Matsuzaki says, ‘the speed at which each step in the process is performed influences the effect of the work as a whole’. They are pots made by a potter with a painter’s disposition. They are, it seems to me, the pots of a strong young man, unafraid of scale; and of an elder, who knows what to do with such an expansive canvas of clay.

And, standing majestically, are the great vases of the exhibition. These works, large because they need to be (and not just for the show of it), demonstrate the expertise of throwing. In his hands – and this is not true of every studio potter – Bowen makes his massive vases seem graceful, almost light. There is heft in them, of course, but it is just enough to ground the pots, just enough to enable the decoration to swoop and curl, settle and fly.

Two such vases seem to me to be especially important and may indicate a new phase of making. The marks are akin to drawing on paper. They are no longer vertical, but they read across the body of the vases. In these two pots, Bowen is engaged in the act of ‘reading music’. He is ‘drawing music in my head’. Specifically, he is giving the imaginative notation to Duke Ellington’s ‘Take the A Train’. The melody, so to speak, at the end of his fingers.

Classic American music and North Devon traditional slipware, are, thus, conjoined. Perhaps we should think of what Bowen does as a form of improvised jazz?

He has made a long and remarkable career out of re-imagining English slipware, finding in it the forceful echoes of tradition and the template for action painting. He has given impetus to the local tradition of North Devon slipware; but eschewed its more conventional imageries (of the harvest and sailing ships and mementos) for a strong graphic style. The tradition gets bent to his own expressive lines and the confident swerve of his palette. The leaping fish is a direct image from the past, as if to say that Leach and Cardew and Fishley Holland are powerful antecedents; but like any artist, he must make his own way.

This exhibition shows him to be in command and on the very top of his form.

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