

Potters on Pots:

Ashley Howard



Ashley Howard shares the influences that have shaped his practice and in particular the impact Colin Pearson has had on his approach to clay

My first encounter with clay was at secondary school in Maidstone in the 1970s. I remember feeling enthused by clay, but it was not until I attended private classes, run by local potter Gill Brown, that I became energised by it. Gill gave me a glimpse into the possibilities of the material and as a result I took myself off to study at Medway College of Art and Design; this was in the 1980s and in the early 2000s I studied for an MA at the Royal College of Art.

I make pots using the wheel, sometimes I will bring in some handbuilding techniques to augment what I am up to, but primarily it is the wheel for me. The process of throwing provides me with a level of intimacy and engagement in which I can become totally absorbed. It was the experience of touch and sensation that snared me all those years ago.

For some time now I have used porcelain. Porcelain offers me a lot; its softness and fluidity marries harmoniously with my deep desire for asymmetry and

ABOVE: Porcelain *font*, 2009, thrown and altered, *Ritual and Setting*, Winchester Cathedral

to explore the plasticity of the material. It is also an appropriate surface for the enamel work I do. Conversely, disharmony appeals a lot too, wedging large chunks of dried porcelain into the wet body, plus paper pulp and molochite. I will often treat the porcelain as though it is the least precious of materials, slinging it about with near disregard for its history of finesse and wealth. The porcelain *fonts* I made for my 2009 exhibition *Ritual and Setting*, Winchester Cathedral's first contemporary ceramics exhibition, display this kind of approach and indeed, challenging preconceptions of porcelain was part of the intention behind that project.

IMPORTANT INFLUENCES

Writing this requires me to reflect upon key pieces or traditions that have inspired me. It has been a useful exercise as I felt the only way to approach it was to go back to the early years and look for those triggers of excitement and stimulation. Before I became familiar with clay, as a youngster, I was always fascinated by museums and ancient objects. It had to be ancient objects. I would wonder at and try to imagine the stories behind these things. Of course, what better material than clay was there to record life across millennia. The Church also played

a significant role in my early life. I was a reluctant customer, I didn't like going, but what it did was expose me to ritual, ceremony, specific objects of focus and certain spaces that affected my conduct and demeanour.

When it comes to ceramics, I recall a very real draw towards certain types of Japanese pottery. At the time I wasn't fully aware of the link between our two countries in this field. I felt intensely moved by examples of Oribe ware, the caddies, the bowls, and water jars. The decorative marks, be they brushed or scratched through. How the space of a piece was addressed with glazes, colours and tones; the unctuous drip of glaze here and there all touched something inside me that woke up and came to life.

It might be worth mentioning here that my grandfather spent many years during the 1920s and 1930s in China and

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BELOW LEFT, FROM LEFT: *Chalice form, 2022, thrown and altered porcelain, H22 x Dia16cm; Chalice form, 2022, thrown and altered porcelain with enamels, H22 x Dia16cm*

RIGHT: Colin Pearson, thrown stoneware, H22 x Dia21cm



Japan, and he would tell me hundreds of stories as a child. I always had a great appetite to hear more and was captivated by his tales. I have a wonderful photograph he took of an orange blossom festival in Kobe, Japan, in May 1936. Perhaps this is why, unlike any other places I have visited, I felt immediately at home in Japan. I have been quite a few times now and been privileged enough to work quite closely within that environment. This can be seen through my 2014/15 collaborative project and exhibition *Shima Kara Shima E* where interpretation not replication guided the approach.

THE MISSING LINK

Getting back to the feel of clay on the wheel brings me to the main purpose of this article; that is the influence Colin Pearson has had on me and my approach to clay and in particular, throwing. The piece I have chosen to look at is, I am sure you will agree, very intriguing. I refer to it as the missing link, because after all where are the wings? The wings that became so much part of the Pearson signature. This piece is part of my own collection and was given to me by the artist himself.

Pearson found himself in Aylesford, Kent, in 1956, where he took over the running of the Aylesford Priory Pottery that had been set up by David Leach a little earlier. After a while he left there and operated from his own studio, The Quay Pottery at the family house in Aylesford. Around 1981 the Pearsons moved to London. The Quay studio still needed clearing out and it was in 1984 when he took me and few other Medway students over there to have a clear out. It was then, by way of a thank you, that Pearson handed me this piece. It is thrown stoneware and fired in a reduction atmosphere. The clay body is substantially grogged and was dipped in a chun-like glaze that reminds me of the sumptuous icing on a cake. It was made around the early to mid 1970s.

The more I look at this piece the more I see in it. For many years Pearson produced a range of tableware, a characteristic of which was the presence of the unglazed surface. His mugs and cups, for example, would have a glazed interior that also came a third of the way down the outside. The rest of the piece was unglazed and given over to fine traces left behind from the throwing, as though to remind us of the primal intimacy of process that the glaze had covered to meet the requirements of utility.

This piece, like most of Pearson's later works has a firm sense of intention, it is psychically and metaphorically grounded, it stands firm, it is assured, it has a presence

and makes a statement. It is loud? No, it is more quietly assured, the subtlety of the maker's hands facilitating the clay rather than shaping the clay on the wheel; this is especially the case as we near the top. Pearson would slow the wheel right down and let the ribs and blades he would use record the process of revolution.

ASSESSING RELATIONSHIPS

Pearson would talk to me about the *architecture* of a vessel. We would discuss the idea that as we make, we are constantly assessing the relationships between proportion, balance, form, and the like. I find this tremendously appealing that one has all this going on without a ruler, pair of compasses, set square or protractor in sight. If there was ever a potter who had an inbuilt intuitive sense of form, balance, and harmony it was Pearson. That said he did bring a sense of the mathematical into his work. Once he was attaching appendages to his pieces, he would often place the main vessel on a grid and line up the attachments according to sets of measurements he had devised. This form indeed fits snugly into a square framework.

There was stately quality that evolved in Pearson's work and its emergence is captured in this piece. This was later enhanced by the elaborate handles that began to appear. Drawing on those wonderful ancient Chinese bronzes, Pearson, too, created stand-alone objects that commanded a reverence that was beautifully comfortable to comply with.

This is a very important piece. It doesn't bridge a gap as such, it more provides a link between the production wares and the works we all came to know Pearson by. For me and my work I can see the ties between the themes I mention about ritual, ceremony, and the spaces such objects occupy. The presence of Pearson is, and always has been, with me, he looks over my shoulder as it were. I can still hear his voice today. I am sure I am not alone there. 

For more information visit ashleyhoward.co.uk

Images: courtesy of the artist; David Westwood