

Review

EXHIBITIONS



ALISON BRITTON: LIFE AND STILL LIFE

CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, FARNHAM
16 OCTOBER-15 DECEMBER 2012

Our love of craft, according to David Pye, owes much to the risky processes of their making, producing that much-admired quality in an object: diversity.¹ The works in Alison Britton's exhibition clearly possess this attribute, to the extent that three different orders of risk can be identified.

First, in her new work the renowned potter uses red earthenware, after learning about the material at a workshop in Shigaraki, Japan, in 2010. Overlaid with yellow slip and a transparent manganese glaze (a reference to traditions in stained glass), the combination demonstrates the merits of material experimentation.

Then there is the risk of directly pouring glazes and slips on to the earthenware bodies – vases with errant spouts and tubes, and low horizontal dishes, too large to be defined as domestic. The risk here is less about primal danger, more a consideration of the tension between control and 'letting go' communicated through tool use.

However, the most significant risk was not in the material processes, but in placing the new work alongside objects from Britton's own study collection. It's risky because this strategy can be tantamount to celebrating an artist's biography, subjectivity, and celebrity. Here, Britton's contextual milieu is reflected in works by Richard Slee, Carol McNicoll, and Jacqueline Poncelet, but these share the space with seemingly mundane, everyday objects. The line of cutlery, the high-fired white porcelain collected from trips abroad, the brown glazed stoneware, and range of small glasses seem unspectacular at first glance, but a closer look yields much more.

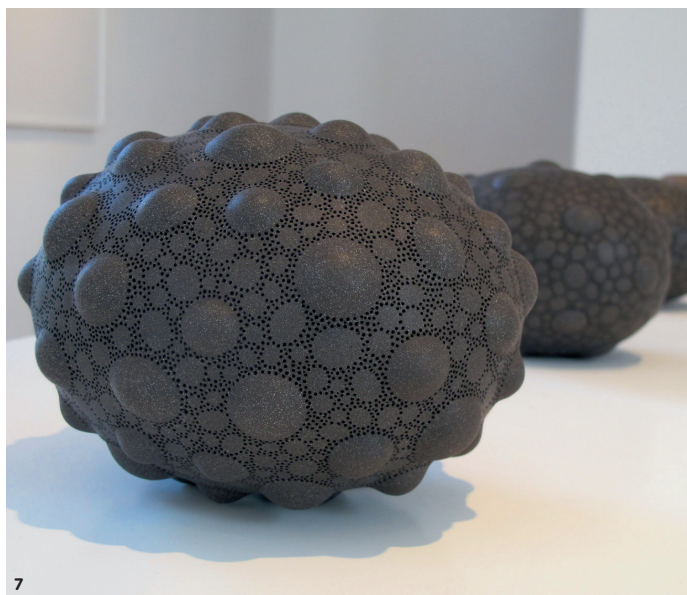
There is the knee-jerk ingenuity of the everyday. An oil lamp made with re-used tin cans, a loaf tin pencil box, and a bowl woven from South African telephone wiring reference the pliability of our surroundings through the lens of the global bricoleur. Also, the stark power of a red cabbage, plantain, and a deflated balloon photographed by Andrew Greaves in black and white references long-standing traditions of still life.

And finally, the diversity, so manifest in Britton's new work, is mirrored by the glitches of the industrially produced objects on show. A mis-registered woodblock print in a Japanese kitchen utensil trade catalogue, and the unfinished bird decoration on a Stoke-on-Trent Minton porcelain cup are evidence of risk in places where you would not expect it. This treasure trove of material culture, selected with care, is the unpredictable conversation partner to Britton's intelligent new work.

Stephen Knott

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¹ David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, in Glenn Adamson ed., *The Craft Reader*, (Oxford: Berg, 2010), p345



OUT OF THE MARVELLOUS

NATIONAL CRAFT GALLERY, KILKENNY, IRELAND
2 NOVEMBER 2012-16 JANUARY 2013

There can be something disquieting about silence. As suggested recently on Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*, 'Silence is never simply absence. It's always contextual. It always means something.' At the National Craft Gallery in Kilkenny, it is silence that enriches our experience. The gallery feels like a reading room, with long, light-filled spaces that are solemn and still. The current exhibition, *Out of the Marvellous*, focuses on the expressive nature of poetry and making, two art forms that are contemplative and evoke a profound response. Here, the quietness is redolent of history, of technique, of the careful study needed to master any craft – be it poetry or pottery; and it is as suggestive of sound, texture, and sensation as it is silent.

Out of the Marvellous features the work of five pairings of Ireland's craftsmen and poets: some are long established friends; others provide the starting point for new work. Yet in each, there is a sense of equivalence. The outcomes of these collaborations are exhibited together; poems, presented as large text panels, and objects sit side by side, seamlessly meshed together. There is the option to engage more directly with the material; discreetly placed headphones reveal the poets' own voices, or hidden triggers reward the curious with snippets of poetry that are activated by touch.

For Dutch artist Sonja Landweer, Seamus Heaney 'is simply inspiring to be with'. Her dense black vessels are exacting, and yet they ping with liveliness when read alongside Heaney's poems. 'Grey-blue, dull-shining, scentless, touchable – Like the earth's old ointment box, sticky and cool.'¹ Similarly, Gerard Smyth's poem, 'A Decorative Art', skilfully articulates the fluency and scope of Angela O'Kelly's work. Like the collections of a discerning magpie, her jewellery – made from printed text, paper, felt, and yarn – 'coil and stretch, flex and clench'² in lyrical fashion.

Yet it is Frances Lambe's ceramic sculptures that, for me, provide the most meaningful connection. Formed from a variety of different clays from terracotta to white stoneware, her *Sequence (6 Parts)* evokes a gently evolving narrative, each piece becoming worn, smooth, and small. Juxtaposed with Derek Mahon's beautifully detailed 'Sand and Stars', her *Structure #1 and #2* are stanzas made material, a disclosure of the shape of poetry – with its rhythm, pattern, and pause – in clay form.

Out of the Marvellous quietly asserts the eloquence of craft in both artforms. Just as a poem can provide texture, there is some essential quality in material that speaks to us, be it the curvature of woven basket forms, the lull of copper, or the warmth of sculpted clay.

Kimberley Chandler

¹ Seamus Heaney, 'To a Dutch Potter in Ireland: For Sonja Landweer'

² Gerard Smyth, 'A Decorative Art: for Angela O'Kelly'