Gordon Baldwin delves deeply into his subconscious in ‘Dark Water and Boulders Shouting’.

The ‘Water Vessels’ that course through his memories first evolved from his acutely emotive charcoal collages. These drawings offer the first discerning insight into the artist’s inner self. The intensely black, irregularly shaped vessels that came after these drawings are flat at the top, sealed entirely apart from a small, round hole in the centre. Scored circles of increasing size ripple outward from this opening, and the surface is water-like in its subtly shiny patination. Baldwin explains ‘I did not know they would be water vessels, I only knew in the beginning how to proceed.’

As well as the drawings and ‘Water Vessels’, other works in the show include undulating ‘White Vessel Studies’, a captivating pair of deeply coloured ‘Wide Open Blue’ bowls, the ominously dark ‘Boulder Shouting’ vessels, and the positively beguiling ‘Untitled Grey’ pieces.

This is a dark show, as stated in the title, but it is far from cold and unwelcoming. One is drawn in to the darkness of Baldwin’s black pieces, and the layering of surface in his coloured work is warm and inviting. In the ‘Untitled Grey’ pieces this feeling of warmth is enhanced by the soft matt texture of the surface itself. The same intrigue evoked here runs through each piece in this exhibition. Of these simultaneously soft, yet boulder like grey works Baldwin says,

‘I love that grey so hard won...When they were fired for the first time they were black. The greyness was developed out of the black beginning, even when they were black they were going to be grey. They were developed over four firings. The grey had to be found.’

It is this intuitive exploration that characterizes his work. Baldwin describes these profoundly expressive abstract forms as ‘a continuation of my journey, new pieces developing from old memories...the water vessels probed deeply into my past’. During, and through, the creation of these dark vessels, memories from Baldwin’s youth emerged.

‘The water vessels became involved in memories of the wild and overgrown ponds amongst the trees by a river near my home in Lincoln. I spent a long time amongst the trees, in view of the ponds, when I first joined Lincoln Art School. I was 17 or 18. I read there and I spun words there, always alone.... It was making the vessels and the way they evolved that brought to mind the ponds.’

This is far from a nostalgic memory, more of an evocation of a sensation felt in the past, revealed and relived through Baldwin’s subconscious. It exposes an ongoing, instinctual fascination with water – ‘Lakes, ponds, cisterns and sea have a powerful attraction for me, even though there is an element of menace in water’. Traditionally, art historically, water has associations with light and purity, of cleansing and baptismal holy water, but this is not Baldwin’s view, as he says, ‘water has never for me been symbolic of light and purity’.

It is not only Baldwin’s water vessels that are dark, but the boulders are too. Their interiors are ‘black and visceral’, glazed with a deep shine which contrasts their exterior. He describes the openings that transform these pieces into vessels as ‘irregular mouthings’. These are the ‘boulders shouting’. He imagines these boulders as ‘shouting, though quite silent in a desolate watery place. Perhaps by (the) dark waters lapping in WB Yeats’ The Lake Isle of Innisfree.’

* 23 June - 30 July 2011
Baldwin’s work often concerns or involves sounds, both during the making process and in the contemplation of a finished piece. These sounds have usually been quiet and haunting, for example ‘A Vessel in the form of the Ancient Voices of Children’. This implies sonic distance, like an echo resounding over time, rather than through space. He often references music and rhythm, for example the ‘Vessel from a Black Quartet’ series, or in particular the ‘Great Cup’ series, which feature holes, regularly and rhythmically pierced by Baldwin partly as a response to the minimalist music of American composer John Adams.

Rather than the careful thought and consideration that went into these earlier, more musically influenced works, the ‘shout’ of Baldwin’s newest ceramics implies frustration, anger, urgency or desperation. It also suggests volume. Alison Britton, in her 2003 essay on Baldwin’s work, states that he ‘cherishes the silence’ of his work. Baldwin explains that this is still true in ‘Dark Water and Boulders Shouting’. To him, silence is still a sound, and can still be heard, albeit absent of volume. ‘We listen to many forms of silence. Some of the forms are in my works.’

It is this relationship between silence and noise that creates an unmistakable tension in the ‘shouting boulders’. The title is itself a contradiction, after all boulders by their very nature are silent and still, they do not ‘shout’ in the conventional notion of the word. But in their shape and appearance they do speak of their own long, infinitely layered history. ‘Boulders are ancient things. Dark inside and mysterious in their own histories. Why I imagine a silent shout is a mystery, a shout reverberates and if you hear a shout in the night or in a wild and empty place it creates anxiety’.

Yet Baldwin has given his boulders a voice in this latest work, and indeed, allowed them to shout. Like all of the vessels in this exhibition, they are metaphorical of his own personal history, symbolic of his subconscious and deeply embedded memories from the past. ‘Perhaps all that I do now are metaphors. I try to make sense of the whisperings in my deep self.’

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* The Lake Isle of Innisfree, William Butler Yeats, 1888

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core