Just suppose that you paint a picture of some place near you in the form of an abstract landscape of green swirls. And then, when the paint has dried, you write your name right over the top of it in swiftly cursive lettering in brown paint. And then suppose that you fold up the material it’s painted on into the shape of a box. Next, you make an impossible push into the box from a new dimension somewhere beside it. So that finally when you see you have made, it’s a box that’s been pushed into some space, and has taken with it your name, and with that your feelings about the place that you live in. And then, additionally, suppose you had decided to make the whole thing out of fired clay, so you had to do all fabrication and planning in reverse, and even put on the colours with a glaze whose colour would change, as would the colour of the clay, so that time ran backwards in the process of making. Both place and now time will have been inverted, doubled, and stretched into the unperceivable, and yet there it is before your eyes, cheerful and confident, the object in clay.

It’s very edgy to make things that can’t be described in words. Making betwixt the categories requires an odd co-ordination of mind and eye, like finding the poetic meanings of words that are within some extensions beyond the dictionary. You have to know the rules. A Mobius Strip turns two dimensions into three in a way that confounds the notions of inside and outside, but it wouldn’t interest a dog, as certain visual habits are needed to start with, just to feel the frisson of these surfaces no longer making sense.

The dictionary of shapes would be extraordinarily large and various. Few have names, as it is written in shape-language, which can only be proffered or approximated. Shapes are irresistibly associated with the human body and with ordinary domestic use, and of course, this is the language of sculpture. These two types, of body and of usefulness, relate at their point of balance to some key sculptures by Hepworth and Moore which are touchstones for modern sculpture still, although made so long ago, and remain lodged in the mind like founding objects of language.

But to make shapes out of clay in the ways of Alison Britton and her familiars is a process of modelling, and so pitches their product with the tradition of terracotta and bronze. This massive category, ancient as much as contemporary, includes in London whole sections of the displays at the BM, V&A and Tate Modern. Much of this stuff has an erotic of ritual function, whether in such diverse masters in small dimensions as Clodion and Kaendler or as the opposite and more relevant example of Pre-Columbian art. Through these links her work drags with it a deluge of meanings, none of them specific, and the older the object of association the less likely it is that anyone today can know what it is, or was, about. If a clay sculpture now can achieve the self-confidence to exist independently in this same arena, then the associations can be remarkable.

Britton’s newest pots have a startling éclat. To engage with them is a notable meeting, and the start of a long conversation. Each has an assertive and uncompromising existence which looks as if it has some botanical-utensil-constructive context (and suggests that science fiction should make more use of contemporary ceramics). You could describe each of these objects in several different ways – a fruit platter or an African head-rest or a palette, an old enamel milk jug or a pissing putto or an army tank – for any number of personal reasons, which don’t much matter in themselves except that it has to be possible for such connections to exist, and be felt in an adult and effective way. These links can never be more than an association, as always, but Britton’s sculptures undoubtedly possess, beside a personality and wit, a cultural reference.
Their shapes are simple and massive, of just a few ideas played off against each other. They might all be an argument about the visibility of heaviness – the clay is self-evidently massive, and some have handles as some means of being grabbed and tilted, and they look lumpy. But then they are painted. The ground colour is the reddish terracotta stuff they are made of. The applied colour is like the earthy and vegetable materials of Etruscan tombs. The splashed shapes are like a weathering or washing, or look like fragments of something larger that goes on and on. Maybe they are scale representations of something of huge dimensions. There is a formal coherence in shapes that can only be learnt from the experience of art – by looking at it to recognise it, or in making it for the making.

There is a sense in many of Britton's recent ceramics of several incompatible shapes being conjoined by some fluke of man or nature to become something else, and gaining the caress of painting in their new status. This twinning is foreshadowed in two exhibitions which she curated in 2008 and 2012, in which she pushed a visual association onto a variety of different objects – a row of coloured spoons together, or differing pots on transparent shelves that made a single group – and which were photographed like that for the catalogue. Her own conglomerations become naturalised phantoms from the imagination, perhaps a new race seen through a microscope.

And do they not come to represent the objects of the mind, the things that exist before words and images, from which arise our senses of visual and verbal categorisation that we know as perception? That is merely to propose, but if the answer is No, then look at them for longer, and just see how they exist so confidently yet resist all coercion into commonplace. The have no natural height, on a table or a shelf; their colours are not quite commercial or natural; they might be models of something as large as a factory or as small as the spoons of a fern. This lifts the gorgeous colours of their painting to the worlds not just of the Cornish abstractions by Hilton and Lanyon with their hidden landscape and figures, but to the poured paintings of American artists, as her colour makes its measured fall between unfamiliar dimensions in an unnatural gravity.

And these gremlins have their own beauty and wit. They are of a size up to the most that can be lifted by one person (and fit into a kiln) and yet they are monumental. Perhaps they are some of the largest-looking ceramics ever made, the Ayer’s Rocks of table-top excrescence. They have none of the mincing delicacy of Ben Nicholson’s still lives, but look further backward, to Picasso and those odd looking pots and pans that began life in some cases as Three Musicians, that is to say, as people. Both artists were conjurers, voracious for a total range of visual triggers, from children’s toys to famous art. Britton’s whole race of objects might just as well have started with the grandchildren’s presents, so accounting for their initial playfulness. But their heaviness is another matter, a feeling of gravity and the ultimate dispersion of the clay back into the earth.