19 November 2009 to 16 January 2010

Ken Eastman

Hands up: who still believes in the sculptural vessel? Ah. I see a few of you in the back.

I’m glad, because - with some trepidation - I want to lay claim to the continuing validity of this most well-travelled of ceramic art forms. My comments on the subject are prompted by the new work of Ken Eastman, one of the few acknowledged masters of the non-functional vessel in Britain. His works take some explaining, as they are the products of a lifetime of craft knowhow, and also a very intensive process of making. They are potter’s pots.

Eastman’s vessels are made in a unique combination of slab-building, modelling and coiling. After being rolled out and cut, thin sheets of white stoneware clay are textured by being pressed against lead plates. These are then given a shape by being draped over objects. Almost anything will do for this purpose - an old shoe, a flowerpot, bits of roofing material, pipe, stones, plastic bottles, logs. A sheet goes over this collection of stuff, making a topology, and the clay is then laid on top. Thus imbued with surface and form, the clay slabs are then assembled into undulating shapes. Close inspection of a finished pot reveals a spiral that curves around and around from foot to rim, showing where the irregular elements that compose the pot have been joined together. This is daredevil work - Eastman notes that the pieces are ‘on the point of chaos and collapse all the time’ as they are being made - and the process also affords a great deal of opportunity for individualization and experiment. Throughout, he tries to avoid handling the clay too much - fingerprints would ruin the texture he’s pressed into the surface at the beginning. Everything he does to it, post-assembly, is slowly and carefully judged.

Maybe we should stop there: just look, and describe, and look some more. After all, since one-off studio ceramics were first made in the late nineteenth century, the sculptural vessel has required no particular critical defence. Certainly there have been plaintive cries for more recognition from the ranks of ceramists and their supporters. In the UK alone, Alison Britton, Nicholas Rena, and Magdalene Odundo, in addition to Eastman, spring to mind as figures who might be ranked among the upper echelon of contemporary sculptors, if they weren’t potters. On their behalf a battle for recognition has been waged, by Marsden Woo Gallery itself, as well as other dealers (Garth Clark), curators (Oliver Watson), and writers (Tanya Harrod). The success of this campaign has been decidedly mixed, but even so, until recently, studio pottery was at least immune from charges of decadence and backwardness. There seemed to be certain essential variables - rim and foot, interior and exterior, body and glaze - that could sustain endless experiment and never get old. A sculptural vessel speaks for itself; and if it speaks beautifully, like Eastman’s, who wouldn’t want to listen?

Paradoxically, it is only in the context of an unexpected rise of interest in craft that people have stopped paying attention. In registers both ‘above’ and ‘below’ studio craft - contemporary art on the one hand, and the DIY craze on the other - craft has been widely embraced over the past few years. At the same time, the sculptural vessel has become a bit of a bore. It is a strange and in some ways frustrating situation. People who actually have committed to craft for their whole lives, who have it in their bones and brain, are felt to be missing out on what really matters. I myself have argued that craft is most interesting when used to think through the problems of contemporary art; I certainly haven’t written much about sculptural pots like Eastman’s. Young ‘crafters’, meanwhile, are more attuned to the communitarian ethos of the anti-globalism movement than they are to the hard-won skills of the studio.

The results of this tendency are plain to see. Some of the best potters, like Edmund De Waal, have turned to installation formats as a way to keep their work current. Others, like Clare Twomey, have left the studio behind altogether, while still others have explored sloppy provisoinality. Many have been rewarded amply for these schismatic impulses. At first, the nominations of Grayson Perry and then Rebecca Warren for the Turner Prize may have seemed like an aberration. But now, such heretics are perceived by many observers as defining the state of contemporary ceramics.
In this context, it’s as if Eastman is playing defence. He prides himself on not following the dictates of fashion (he notes that, as ceramics courses close at universities across the UK, his pieces seem ‘even more ceramic than they did before.’) Despite his intensely adaptive working methods, his practice weirdly takes on the appearance of a regressive, rather than developmental, character. But I would insist on the value of what he is doing. More than that, I want to argue that the validity of the finely crafted pot - for that is what he is making - is more vital now than it was before we entered the confusing postdisciplinarity of the present.

One of the great things about operating in the visual arts in the twenty-first century is that we don’t need to think in terms of movements. Currency is not decided by a cabal of museums and gallerists in New York and Paris; it is established in microclimates of relevancy, in any geography you can manage to get to. What is really outdated, today, is the presumption that art only goes in one direction at a time - as if the militaristic metaphor of ‘the avant garde’ meant that everyone has to march forward in step, or be left behind. What we have instead is a situation of true diversity, in which practitioners relate to one another in overlapping but total circles of discussion. Craft has an advantage here, because it has always been a layered affair. In contemporary art, they say you’re only as good as your last show, but craft practice is more like an Indonesian gamelan. Different processes occur in rhythms and cycles, sometimes interlocking and sometimes drifting apart.

Eastman is a perfect case in point. At first his sustained endeavours give the impression of repetitive solidity: a basso continuo that provides the dependable underpinning to the more attention-grabbing displays that artists create in higher registers. But once you are inside the logic of these pots, you sense the richness and texture of a whole world of nested temporalities. If you know how to look, you can feel in Eastman’s pots his many ways of handling time: the painstaking preparatory stages; the quick, reactive manoeuvres of assembly; the steady accumulation of colour; the effects of depth achieved through multiple firings. You might even get a sense of Eastman’s own eyes, flickering over the pots over weeks and months as he wonders whether they need just a touch more. As he puts it, ‘I spend a lot of time looking hard and doing little.’ Is that a traditional, even a recondite attitude? For sure. But you know what? It’s one we could all stand to spend some time with.

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