Ken Eastman’s abstract vessels engage mind and eye. Outcomes of an intensive process of thought and inspiration, bursts of activity followed by periods of appraisal, taking place over a space of weeks and months, they are fed equally by the need to think things through and the motivating desire, as he puts it, ‘... to go places that I’ve never been and to make things I’ve never seen before.’

‘Ru-h ru-h-h-h-h. Poeoeoeoe. Tiki-tik-tik. Pre. R-r-r-r-uh-h. Huh! Pang. Su-su-su-su-ur. Boe-a-ah-ah. R-r-r-r. Foeh … a multiplicity of sounds, interpenetrating.’ wrote Piet Mondrian in a 1920 Dada-inspired experiment with verbal collage, in which he aimed to capture ‘a multitude of images and all sorts of ideas’ about the experience of life on the boulevards of modern Paris. Art historian Briony Fer points out that, unlike mainstream Dada’s concerns to upset the prevailing order, Mondrian was writing with a characteristic concern to find a resolution between inward and outward, believing that the ‘outwardness’ of city life had to be ‘brought to rest aesthetically’ in order to be made into art.

Eastman’s pots are similarly about the resolution of ideas and experience, a search for the means to accommodate dissonant and disparate matter, to identify and clarify assorted thoughts and bring them into a harmonious whole. They are amalgamations of his moods and meditations, various interests and passions (that include music, poetry, prose and architecture), distant places and his immediate environment, thus giving cohesive shape to the different elements that make up his world.

He describes each work as beginning with a series of ‘experiments, strategies, plans and plots’ until he establishes a dialogue with the piece and arrives at an acceptance of what it is about. The initial stages of making are particularly precarious as he struggles against gravity to join thin slabs of soft, wet clay to dryer firmer ones, some flat, some with the imprints of objects-to-hand, such as stones, lumps of lead or shoes over which he has draped the clay.

These are the basic components of the collaged forms with their contrasting rigid and softly billowing shapes, their exaggerated planes, crumples and gentle undulations, their soft pools of light and shadow – the lexicon of his expressive language. He notes that in this series of works the surface skin of clay often seems to be vulnerably close to the bone. His evident facility of expression comes from an in-depth knowledge of his materials and methods. It allows him to assemble the elements of his vessel compositions at the necessary speed and to find boundaries of correspondence between the flowing edges of unruly twisted, shifting sections and apparently opposing concave and convex curving slabs. Each union is unique. It is impossible to apprehend the entire dynamic sequence of one of Eastman’s pots from a single perspective – as the viewer takes up another viewpoint any expectations they may have formed are immediately confounded. His approach can be likened to Mondrian’s dynamic equilibrium theory, where the active duality of opposites creates stability.

Colour is another important feature of the work and his task of discovering (his word) the colour combinations of the forms starts as soon as the clay is leather-hard. It then continues through multiple firings, during which time the colours and painted textures change or evolve as he paints and refines, repeating this process many times over. It is a matter of finding the authentic ‘voice’ for a specific piece, to state the nuances of its character as he has come to understand it. Through the dry matt hues of his current palette of slips and oxides, a range of cool blues, gentle greens, putty browns, metal greys and blacks – along with some fresh pastel hues and occasional unforeseen sharper notes – he finds aesthetic congruence between painting and sculptural form.
Eastman’s titles are always significant. His title for this exhibition, *The Shape of Things*, is a general clue to content, but the titles he provides for each of the pots signify the way he has come to understand their individual dispositions. Although he is aware that a work will ultimately find its own place in the world – that it will develop different resonances for different people – he nonetheless sees the titles as an opportunity to hint at the ‘difficult, dynamic and complex relationship between mud and words’. He will often think of a work in terms of words, tending to put a phrase with a form at an early stage of its life, sometimes revising it as the work develops and continuing until everything coheres.

The title *Body and Soul* comes from a jazz standard, a tune familiar to jazz musicians and which, in that context, provides the necessary foundations for flights of improvisation. It is not hard to grasp that these pots, like jazz, are full of dynamic tensions and juxtapositions - and he mentions how he has recently been wondering about what kinds of shapes, gestures and techniques might be recognised as the equivalents of jazz standards in the ceramic repertoire. However, the titles of further pieces refer to ideas about places that have emerged for him due to their colours, structures or attitudes. Thus there is Kecskemét (in which he recognises some of the visual characteristics of the Hungarian city) and Minster (encapsulating an impression of York). The titles of pots such as *The imminent days* and *Give it time* open up ideas of other kinds of subjective human experience. Indeed Eastman continues to make exceptional abstract vessels that are nothing less than profound and poetic reflections on life.

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