Invention and investigation, form and surface, in four strands.

Rhythms and series are consistently found in exhibitions of work made by Martin Smith. A sense of mathematical beauty, structures and geometries, underlies his pursuit of new forms and variations, in doubles and triples and multiples. Evidence of his train of thought, his mental plan, is visually traceable as you move among the work that reveals his current focus, seen in the various classes or types of object or form that engage him at one time. In this show he has played with four kinds of discussion, through geometry and archetypal form, contending with the vase, the cup, the bowl, and the plate.

The vase is one of those curious archetypes that are fundamental to the history of ceramic production. Usually domestic in scale, the vase form makes reference to many utilitarian functions; the containment of wine or oil, or cremation ashes, or indeed flowers. The vase can act as a sign for other, often celebratory, concerns related to human emotions and narratives. Frequently such forms come to occupy positions of display, their function having shifted from the physical to the metaphysical.

These new tripartite vases are improvisations and deconstructions of a number of vase types, built around a basic square grid and grouped in threes, consisting of a pair framing a single form. Although only three black ceramic objects are there in front of you, there could be seen to be two other more elusive ones, implied by the spaces in between them. These forms are tightly grouped on shelves at such a height that their top surfaces are just out of sight – they could from this viewpoint therefore be hollow perhaps, or solid.

The surface overall is dense and black with a dull metallic sheen. This has been cut back on all the edges and corners in order to reveal fine lines of the deep red terracotta body from which they are made. Deliberate reference is made here to the vases that Josiah Wedgwood produced in the second half of the 18th century, and in particular the group of six ‘First Day’s Vases’ thrown by Josiah in black basalt clay in 1769 to celebrate the opening of the new Etruria factory. They were painted at Wedgwood decorating workshops in London using the encaustic technique, in red, in reference to classical black wares with red figure painting, (his encaustic technique was patented in the same year).

Martin’s new vases evoke a comparable spirit of innovatory improvisation around the form of the vase from Greek and Roman antiquity.

The cup is a theme that Smith has returned to from time to time throughout his career. The scale is small and intimate, like sculpture for the palm of the hand. In the current series the vertical axis, so definitively associated with the potter’s wheel, is flipped on its side to tip over the conventions, and the ground red lines at all the edges and corners can be perceived as an outline drawing that reveals the underlying geometry of each piece.

In the Black and Red Bowl series two bowl forms extend some of the themes and preoccupations of the vase series. Here, though, instead of the idea of a vase forming the outside profile of the piece, it is seen to be shaping the horizontal, interior and contained surface of the monolithic forms.
Plates have had more than one purpose throughout the history of ceramics. They are both functional and visual, and exist as horizontal forms in the everyday realm of serving and eating, and verticals when they are displayed on shelves and dressers. Throughout their history they have been taken out of use sometimes to be hung on the wall, or embedded into the walls of sacred buildings. We use plates daily and perpetually to hold food, and yet, the plate being in essence a near-flat ceramic surface, it has fruitfully become the substrate for imagery, pattern and narrative and can take its place in the domain of painting.

In two of his previous exhibitions with Marsden Woo, Smith has shown several versions of his plate pieces. These consist of multiple plates, either grouped and hung directly on the wall, or resting in wooden frames that contain one or two shelves. The pattern runs across the surfaces of the plates uninterruptedly - a single geometric construction of fine cobalt blue lines fills their combined surfaces to suggest one unified surface. Like the vase pieces the plate works have become progressively more complex through Martin’s developing investigation into interference patterns and moiré effects that generate a sense of visual movement, a rippling effect as you walk past them.

The three works exhibited here move these concerns to another level. Working with Dr Steve Brown at the RCA, Martin Smith is researching the unrealised potential of the digitally printed ceramic surface for larger scales of production. Some of the early results of this project are exploited here in Martin’s new work, with the introduction of more colours comprising blue, yellow, black and red. The inquiry has extended beyond the interference of monochrome lines, to include the interference of colours with each other. Red and black interfere on a white ground to give the impression of metallic copper. Red and blue interfere on a yellow ground to give the impression of a range of greens, purples and oranges. The collaborative research project will run for the next two years, so this is just the beginning. The art works that Martin may derive from new findings and perceptions of colour and print cannot be foreseen, but he posits through this exhibition that there is a new space to watch in the long trajectory of his innovating work.

Alison Britton and Martin Smith [2015]