A conversation between Sara Radstone and Amanda Fielding, October 2010.

AMANDA: You’ve called your latest show Promised Land. Can you define what you mean by that? Are you being ironic?

SARA: No, I am definitely not being ironic. The show’s title is taken from that of a trilogy of wall mounted pieces in the exhibition, in which very small ceramic elements hang from sections of twisted wire. It came initially from finding the first wire in a remote area of Scotland – ‘across the borderline’ – and evolved in associations until it suited the ideas behind the three. It then seemed fitting as an overall title as it captured something of the spirit in which all the work in the show was made: wrestling with ideas and means, trying to reach a better place, the scraps and residues left behind in that quest, their fragility. I like the fact that it is a phrase that is both emotive and abstract, hinting at the constant struggle of the artist, trying to get at something, to get somewhere, beyond language.

A: When you first mentioned to me that you intended to hang a row of fragile ceramic sheets from a wire, it triggered in my mind a raft of terms – ‘hang from a thread’, ‘hang in the balance’, ‘high-wire act’ – concerned with risk, precariousness and uncertainty.

Would you say that these works reflect some kind of danger or peril? And how might those dangers be related to the title Forgotten?

S: The initial idea came into my mind complete with its title. While the making of it has been an uncertain and risky process, and the display will certainly be precarious, I think the root of the idea came from a different place. I was thinking of unrecorded lives, the hidden stuff beneath the skin, lines of forgotten women trailing through history. The forms are papery and frail and warped by the firing, and some have colour inside which can just be glimpsed at.

A: I’m interested in the appearance of wire in your work, as far as I’m aware you’ve never used it - or indeed any found materials – before. I’m reminded of the metallic glints that occasionally caught the light in your 1980s pots and Oliver Watson’s remarks that your surfaces recalled ‘weathered sheet steel’.

How did this recent appropriation come about? Did you simply stumble across an intriguing section of wire that prompted you to incorporate it in some way? Or was the decision to use wire part of a conscious strategy to forge a new direction?

S: The use of wire has grown out of the initial vision of Forgotten. When I saw it in my mind’s eye I felt it might be the answer to several issues: display – I needed a new method to extend wall work, one that was straightforward and with an aspect of casualness; content and space – a good way to suspend and separate works in a series, a simple solution which also offered a collaborative material, like a drawn line; and a way of hanging many pieces at once, with the potential for more three-dimensional display, rather than my usual method of using nails and hanging individually against the wall.

Coming across an exciting length of wire in the Scottish wilderness inspired me to consider using it as an element even more integral to the sculpture.

A: Today the use of found materials and objects in ceramics is familiar practice, with artists manipulating them to varying degrees, some barely changing them, others radically altering them. Do you allow the existing shape of the wire to dictate the object’s form or do you work the wire into a shape that you want?

S: This is a very tentative beginning of this way of working, and I will probably only have three pieces in the show which are as much about wire as clay. In these the wire is old, weathered and already shaped. I’m just looking at what’s there and finding the best way to use it.

A: Your new-found use of wire enables you to explore the relationship between drawing and sculpture. Could you elaborate on this recent development? What part does drawing / work on paper play in your practice?

S: Wire can clearly be seen as a drawn line in space, and that is really interesting and an aspect I want to explore further. Most of the drawing I do, which is not a lot, is functional: rough sketches of ideas, plans for installation in the gallery etc. Some drawing takes the form of colour and surface tests on clay, and my sketchbook is a jumble of thumbnails, writing, technical notes, thoughts jotted down, vague outlines.
A: The book as sculptural object in clay has been a consistent theme in your work for several years now. I particularly recall *Corpus* (2002) – some forty open book forms presented on the wall and *Ghost IV* (2007) – a vulnerable tower of seemingly petrified books that rise up from the floor and lightly touch the wall. In *Promised Land* a torn, slightly open book form - its interior dramatically streaked with colour - appears unsteady and frail, while another appears robust and enduring. I enjoy the ambiguity of these books, but I am also interested to know how you would like us to 'read' them.

S: The book theme developed after I made a piece called *Little Volumes* which was in my first exhibition at Barrett Marsden Gallery (1998). This was a series of tiny, black, 'burnt' bookish forms lined up on the wall, with surfaces suggestive of incised writing. I was interested in a play on the word volume, which so frequently crops up in relation to ceramic form, and the crossover with its literary associations; also the idea of the inner volume of books, their content, being compressed and hidden between the covers. Many of the thoughts behind what I make concern things buried or overlooked, and using the book as a starting point for other work, such as *Corpus*, has continued to help give form to new ideas. Having explored the book as a strong and enclosed image with a skin-like exterior, I wanted my new work to look deeper: to break it open, expose the inside, further abstract the form. This has led on to much of the experimental work I have been making for *Promised Land*.

A: I'm intrigued by the open and closed structures in the *Mirrors* series. Could you explain your thinking behind them?

S: I had three small sherds of clay left from a piece of work and was exploring how they could be formed into a new piece without adding anything else. This became the first ‘mirror’, because the form immediately reminded me of a three-part mirror with hinged side sections. I remembered an old one I had when I was young, and the fascination of being able to see profiles going into infinity. The form also echoes classic triptych paintings. ‘Mirror’ worked as an enigmatic title for my forms as they have non-reflective surfaces, like ancient mirrors made of polished stone, and invite the viewer to look inside to varying degrees while suggesting a certain fragility. To me, these are multi-layered objects which at first sight appear very simple and self-effacing.

A: I sense that your work has become increasingly autobiographical over the years. Would you like to comment further on this observation?

S: ‘Autobiographical’ is rather too definite an idea, and I probably wouldn’t use it in reference to my work. I am certainly always looking for starting points for new work, and personal history and memories can provide a source or add a layer to help push work along – but the finished piece must move beyond this, reach out, and evolve as its own thing. Obviously, the fact that my mother was a bookseller, immersed in the world of poetry and poets, and home was full of books - shelves and stacks in every room - makes the book image especially relevant, and a fitting memorial when she died during the making of *Corpus*.

There are other personal references, but I would not describe these as autobiographical. A piece of work may grow out of something I have been reading, or an object I have seen in passing. But I am aware of a kind of ‘transubstantiation’ of clay, as an idea that may start as something quite vague, ethereal and abstract gradually lends shape to the material.

A: The surfaces of your ceramics have always been compelling - in the 1980s, for example, they were often seen to allude to man-made structures and objects that had been eroded by time and people. Tell me about your interest in surface today.

S: I have always loved the fact that the hand’s imprint on clay can exist for as long as the work survives. I often make such marks part of the surface language of a piece of work, and deliberately avoid tidying up the surface: the marks of the making process add immediacy, an added fractal dimension to draw the viewer in. Most pieces are made of fairly thin clay, either stretched by hand or pressed into a mould, and colour or glaze is also used thinly to expose details of surface.

A: Fragility has been a recurring idea in your work for many years. Would you say that fragility has taken on a new significance in *Promised Land*?

S: Yes, I think it has. One of the aims I had for this exhibition from the start, was to make work with a light footprint. I was interested in how slight an object could be while retaining impact, and the first pieces I made were the ‘folder’ forms which I saw as almost two-dimensional. For years I had been making rather solid, enclosed forms, and wanted to question my habits of working and, literally, break them open. It immediately felt exciting to allow the air in, make visible the enclosed space and access a new and richer emotional dimension. This evolved into a series of increasingly frail pieces, and then to using wire to support torn fragments of clay.