You know the sort of place. It’s out there, just past the interesting part of town. It was built at some indeterminate point in the postwar era, when the still-new ideas of modernism were having their way with the British countryside. The architecture tends toward the rectilinear, the rational. Yet there is also a degree of traditional (and perhaps cloying) romanticism in the air: the flowerbeds; the shingles; the cheery nameplate hanging on the front door; the cozy décor visible through the windows as you drive by.

This is Middle Britain. And while you would never know it if you spend all your time traveling the London gallery circuit, this is where the majority of people in this country make their homes. Such tracts are traditionally the object of condescension by city dwellers, who may well adopt a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I attitude to them. But as a person who grew up in a suburb myself (albeit one in the United States) I can attest to its homely charms. Good for kids, is the conventional wisdom, and for me maybe it was.

James Rigler feels similarly. ‘I used to be very dismissive, but I think it’s sweet now,’ he says. ‘I have a lot of sympathy for the desires that are prompting that kind of architecture.’ All the more so given his recent move to Glasgow, where ‘several waves of failed utopianism’ have made for a fragmentary and windswept cityscape. Before committing himself to ceramic sculpture Rigler began his career in architecture, and he is still a keen student of the history of compromised modernity. He has for example pored over home magazines of the 1950s and 60s, attending to the particular qualities of the material culture they represent: the faux finish, the tidy kitchen, the stuck-on ‘feature wall’ made of local stone. And so, for this foray into the aforementioned London gallery circuit, he has summoned up that uncertain legacy of yesteryear, when the grandiose and epic conception of the modern collided headlong with what people actually want.

The key compositional principle that Rigler derives from this source material is that of the ‘clip on.’ It’s a mentality of making that I associate strongly with the façade-ism of Postmodernist architecture, which had a similarly sympathetic relation to the supposed ‘failures’ of suburbia. Each object is set in the gallery without fanfare, leant casually against a wall or plonked down without a plinth. It is as if each work were one of those old Isotype symbols in a sociology diagram, or a prototype awaiting remanufacture in some other, more industrial material. The images are clear, simplified, and rendered in clay and other stuff rather directly, without any technical pyrotechnics or loud colours. The overall effect is at once bland and heroic, permanent and happenstance, optimistic and wistful.

Rigler has close ties to other young ceramic artists who have shown at Marsden Woo – he now shares a studio with one of them, Dawn Youll, and before that had a similar arrangement with another, Nao Matsunaga. In the 21st century we hear a lot about the infinite connectivity made
possible by digital social networks. So it’s salutary to note that this matter of sharing a space of making, with all the personal and physical closeness that implies, has had an important influence on Rigler’s work. Like Youll he is attentive to the little details of public space, and like Matsunaga he responds much more to the architectural tradition within ceramics rather than the more often-discussed lineage of pottery.

It would be wrong to describe these three up-and-coming makers as part of a ‘movement’ in the old avant garde sense of that term. But they certainly do share a sensibility. Collectively, does their work add up to a ‘project’ in a larger sense – with a social and political, as well as an aesthetic, dimension? Rigler would not want to insist on that, I think. Yet his work does contest the feeling that is abroad in Britain at the moment, no doubt exacerbated by the recession, that (as he puts it) ‘the best you can hope for, is for everything not to be terrible.’ By finding interest in places and things normally disregarded, Rigler does point to a new and hopeful set of possibilities. One thing is for sure: once you have seen his work, your next trip to Middle Britain won’t feel quite the same.

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