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**CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CERAMICS:
STATUS AND ASPIRATIONS**

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I intend to look at the world of British studio ceramics. In order to explore attitudes to this world I interviewed three practitioners: David Rees, Grayson Perry and Svend Beyer. We spoke about their work and how they saw themselves in relation to the current situation of studio ceramics. I deliberately chose three very different and extreme figures.

David Rees is a recent MA graduate of the Royal College of Art. He makes ceramic objects that are metaphors for people and situations within the London Gay scene, of which he is a part. He is concerned with causing a stir and challenging the complacency of other ceramics practitioners by introducing both unfamiliar themes and non-ceramic materials.

Grayson Perry is a Fine Art graduate for Portsmouth Polytechnic. He learned to make ceramic pots in night classes a few years after he left college. He coil-builds traditionally shaped pots and decorates the surfaces with often shocking images. He has no loyalty to ceramics. He makes his work for the Fine Art audience and is playing with their prejudice against kitsch pottery.

Svend Beyer is a potter working with Michael Cardew. He makes and fires his pots using methods taken from traditional Asian pottery. He has not been through the Art College system and has a different frame of reference as a result. He desires his pots to be unpretentious and suitable for use, with a pure aesthetic integrity to them.

In Chapter Four of this thesis I will look at the work of Anthony Gormley, as an artist who has used a variety of materials, including clay. The materials that he uses are central to the meaning and impact of his work.

I will compare the use of clay by these four practitioners. From this I hope to draw some conclusions about the situation of the medium of clay.

CHAPTER ONE

SVEND BEYER

His Background and Context

In the world of British Studio ceramics no shadow looms larger than that of Bernard Leach. His ideas, formulated in *A Potter's Book*, published in 1940, influenced subsequent generations of potters, encouraging purist aesthetics and good living.

Leach had trained as a potter in Japan. While he was there he met with Soetsu Yanagi. Yanagi was a Japanese intellectual who led the Mingei movement, which sought to revive the status of Japanese crafts. He became Leach's mentor, and educated him in the appreciation of Asian art and in Zen concepts of beauty. He had a belief in the integrity of the "*unknown craftsman*" (Beyer Interview, 1995). Unselfconscious, humble craftsmen, he believed could make the best work. They were free from the influence of intellect and ego which, according to Zen teaching, lead to moral and aesthetic confusion.

Leach took these values to England. In the early 1920s he established a pottery at St Ives in Cornwall. The craft of pottery had previously had a very low status in England. The artist-potters of the nineteenth century had designed forms and decorated them. The execution of a form on the wheel was not considered to be a creative activity and was carried out by artisans. In the 1920s William Staite Murray had been throwing and decorating his own pots. He did not ally himself to craft notions of utility, nor did he

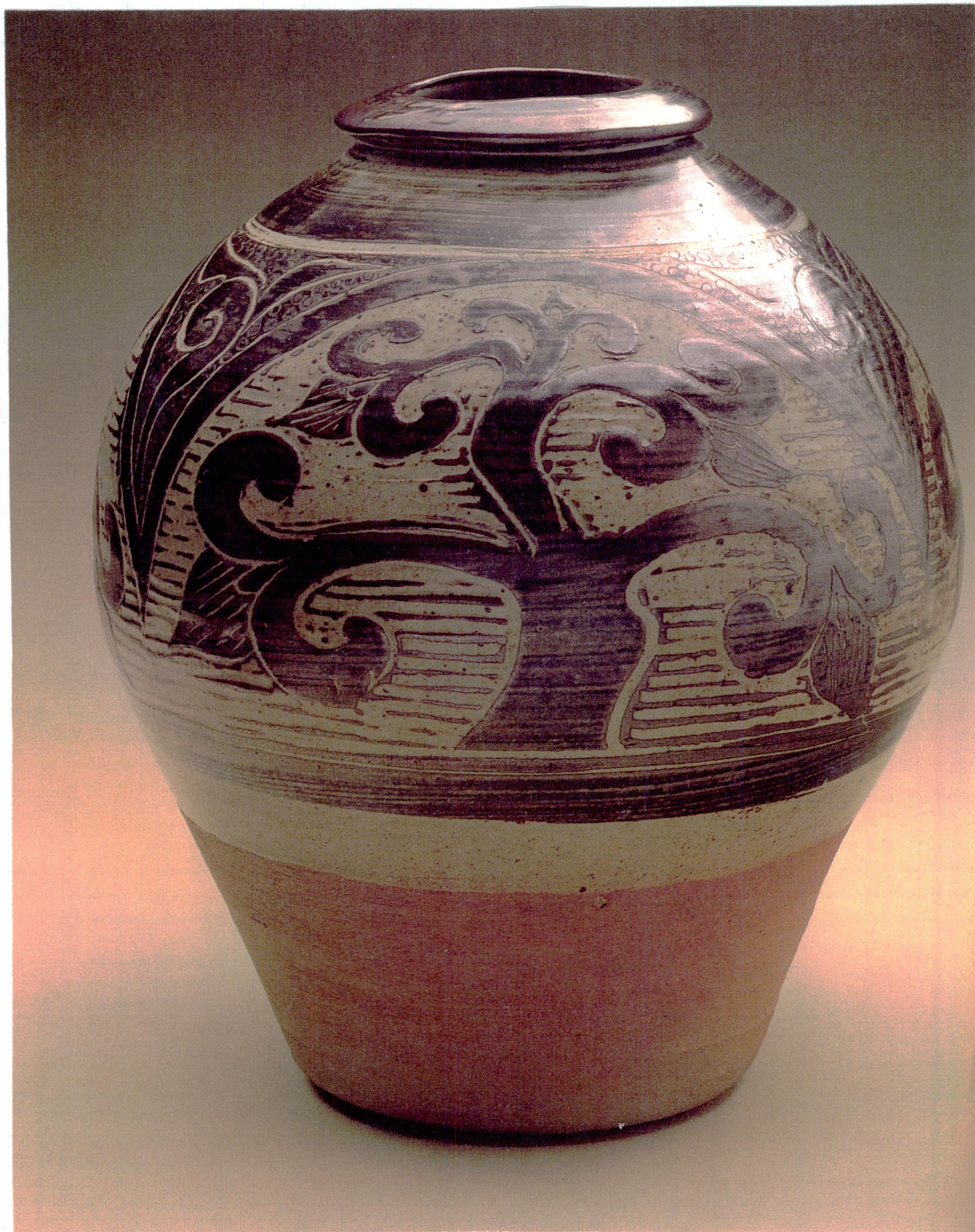


Figure 1

Tree of Life Vase, 1957, glazed stoneware, 12 inches high, by Bernard Leach

consider himself an artisan. In fact, he made a practise of showing in respected fine arts galleries, where he received critical acclaim and prices of up to 160 guineas per pot.

Leach considered Murray's work to be somewhat unethical and decadent:

What have the artist potters been doing all this while?... Working by hand to please ourselves as artists first and therefore producing only limited and expensive pieces, we have been supported by collectors, purists, cranks or "arty" people, rather than by the normal man or woman... consequently most of our pots have been still-born. They have not a breath of reality in them; it has been a game. (Clark, 1994, p150)

Michael Cardew came to work and learn at St Ives in 1923. More than any other of Leach's students, Cardew carried on his ideological tradition. Both men's work is sensuous and physical, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. They speak out against the sanitised, straight-lined, clinical qualities of industrially manufactured ware. While Leach extolled the virtues of the contemplative approach of Japanese potters, Michael Cardew had more sympathy with the directness of African ware.

Michael Cardew set up a pottery at Wenford Bridge. Svend Beyer worked with him from 1969 to 1973. Beyer had just graduated from an Economics course in Exeter University. Economics was not a career that Beyer had any desire to pursue: *"I went there [Wenford Bridge] like a deprived person, with all this education which I didn't really want"* (Beyer Interview, 1995).

He brought an enormous energy to his work at the pottery. His teacher, Michael Cardew, held him in very high regard. *"Affection? No, I speak of him with awe and fear. He is*



Figure 2
Glazed stoneware vase, 1960, by Michael Cardew.

more than just a potter, he is a force of nature. He is easily my best pupil" (Clarke, 1978, p81).

For ceramicists who have come through the art college system, the idea of ceramic tradition is often a useful reference point. It gives a context and depth of meaning to their work. David rees, for example, finds it important to root his work in Greek red and black figure ware. Neither the forms nor surfaces of his work bear any resemblance to Greek pottery. Indeed, he consciously pushes against the perceived limits of ceramic tradition. To maximise the impact and meaning of his pieces he must intellectually position them inside tradition. Tradition is a dancing partner for him.

Having tried to make a living working for a traditional pottery, Svend Beyer has a different understanding of the concept: "*When I think of tradition I see that as almost like a prison*" (Beyer Interview, 1995).

Beyer does not attempt to wilfully overturn what has gone before him. He does not intellectually conceptualise his place in ceramic tradition. It is not an issue for him. What is important for Beyer is a dance not with concepts, but with his materials and forms. He works at the limits of what both he and his materials can stand, and in that way arrives at an integrity or truth about himself and the clay.

His Work

I went to interview Svend Beyer full of the preconceptions of an Art College education. I had little respect for rustic looking pots, which I believed to be symptoms of a sentimental rural fantasy that English consumers were happy to buy into.

When I spoke to Beyer, I realised that many of the concerns of the ceramics student were irrelevant to him and his work.

Beyer's kiln, studio and house were beautiful and sparse. His kiln was like an enormous clay igloo. The arches were all catenaries made out of fire-bricks. There was no need for buttressing. Like his pots, the kiln was efficiently formed and self-contained. He chose this kiln design for its beauty.

This kiln is based on one which I saw in Thailand. I just like the shape. Its like a pear shape sliced in half. It's full of curves. In fact to me it looks quite beautiful and that's more important than whether it works or not. There are lots of really functional kilns which are held together by angle iron and look a little like very cruel chastity belts or something. (Beyer Interview, 1995)

The studio was exemplary of good working practices. It was very clean and tidy, making excellent use of space. There were enormous pots and smaller lidded vessels sitting about in various stages of drying. Beyer was working to fill his enormous kiln.

The rhythms that his work practices give to his life seem to be important to him. Beyer does not feel the need to intellectually justify himself, rather he sees himself "like being

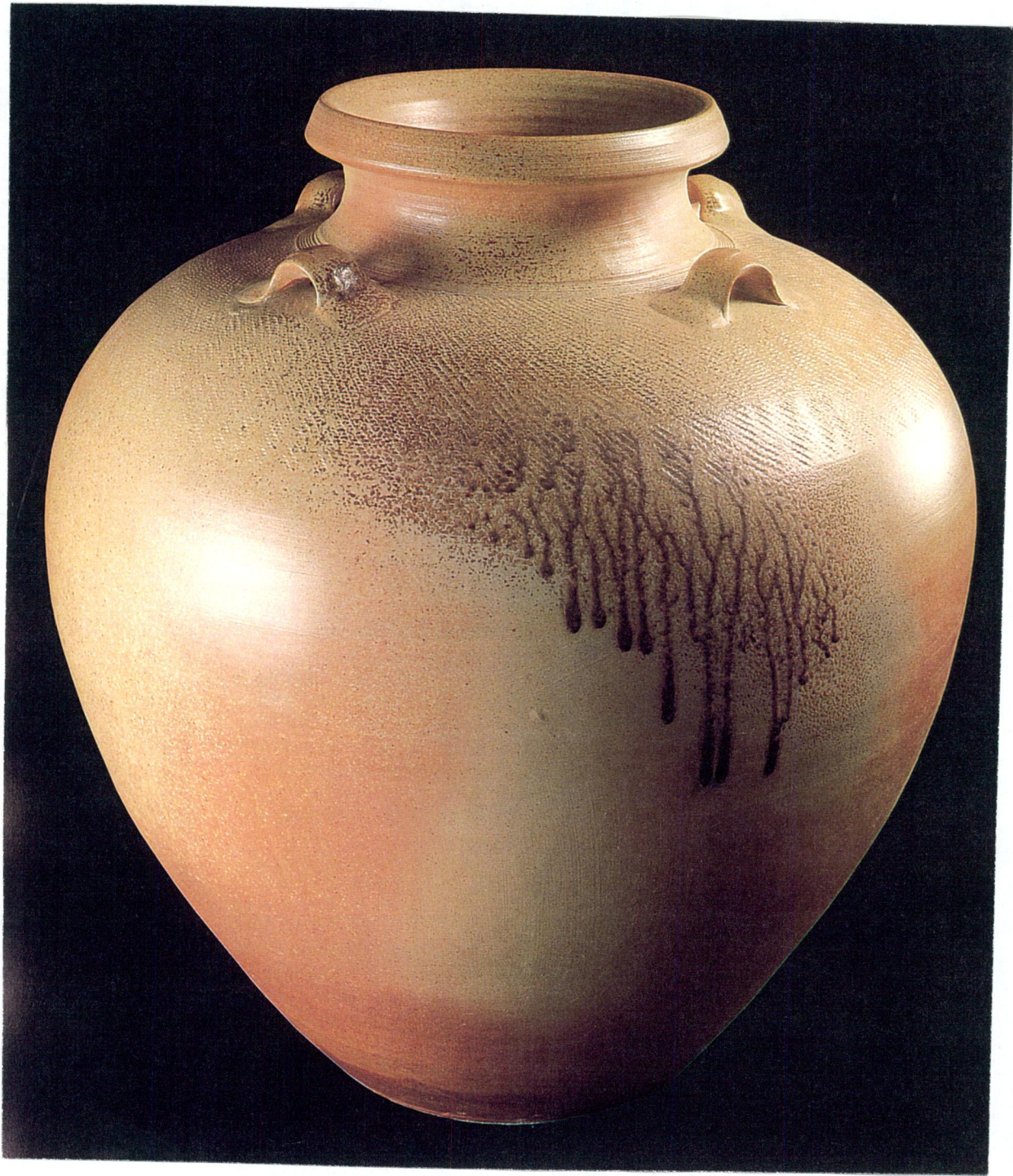


Figure 3
Woodfired stoneware vessel, 1989, 12inches high, by Svend Beyer

involved in a long term therapy" (Beyer Interview, 1995). He likened the repetition of activities in his own life to rocking back and forth of children.

Yanagi, Bernard Leach's Japanese mentor had a thing about the "unknown craftsman". I still do believe that those are the people that make the best things, the least self-conscious. The only way that someone of my upbringing in the modern world can attain that is to stop being intellectual about it. Just make them again and again and again. Then maybe at some stage they'll begin to ~~pot~~ out as good pots. (Beyer Interview, 1995)

~~PLOP~~

There is a consistent stark austerity about Beyer's kiln, his habits, his house and his pots. In a way similar to automatic writing, some truths about himself are reflected in his work. I asked him if he thought that his customers appreciated his work in the way that he intended.

I don't really know why people are buying it. I say in a slightly cynical kind of way that they're buying a dream or something. But I don't know, maybe they're buying little bits of me. All of us have parts of us that are really good, worthwhile things, and we also have a lot of shit. Maybe people recognise something, I don't know. (Beyer Interview, 1995)

Beyer comes from a world very different to the traditional art college ceramics course.

~~VALUES~~

The qualities that he ~~pursues~~ in his own works are not often discussed in art colleges. In evaluating a pot, Beyer looks for "life". It is important that, although many of his pots are enormous and heavy, they do not look "earthbound".

The pot shown in Figure 3 has a certain serene beauty about it. It is much sharper than the looser work of Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew. It has a full, weighty belly, yet

it doesn't bulge. There is a sense of tension, like the skin of a ripe fruit, stretched but not overstretched.

It is important to Beyer that he pushes his clay, but is sensitive to its limits. He has a great respect for his materials, born of a lasting relationship with them. It is quite an achievement to throw pots that are over three feet tall. At that size it is impossible to force your will on the material. If you do not pay attention to the clay it will collapse.

"For me, that's exciting. For me, coming from the other end where you actually almost ignore the materials, you are scornful or dismissive of them, that's a very strange thing" (Beyer Interview, 1995).

His Attitude To The Market

Svend Beyer has come to pottery through an independent apprenticeship. He has no formal education in cultural studies, contemporary critical debates or the current expectations of the art or craft markets.

Students in ceramics courses are encouraged to remain abreast of current developments in the crafts. Both David Rees and Grayson Perry call for ceramic work to come into the mainstream of artistic production. Coming from this background, I asked Beyer about the place that his pots occupy in the marketplace. His reaction was very straightforward: *"I make these things because I enjoy making them. As you say, when they leave here they*

become commodities. It's really none of my business any more. I've had my fun yet again, I got away with it" (Beyer Interview. 1995).

Pottery has enabled Beyer to support himself and raise a family while living a relatively uncompromised life on his own terms. For him, that is justification enough for his work. At the same time he is very aware of the unsavoury nature of the market place. He distances himself from it. Selling for him is a problematic link between production and the necessities of living. *"You've got to promote yourself, promote an image. If you're not careful you can begin to believe that image. Round the whole selling thing - there are lots of sharks swimming around in that sea"* (Beyer Interview, 1995).



Figure 4

The Bather, 1930, 28.5 inches high, by William Staite Murray

CHAPTER TWO

DAVID REES

His Background and Context

If Svend Beyer is a part of Bernard Leach's tradition, David Rees is part of the self-conscious tradition of London Art schools, with all of the attendant ambitions to take a place in the contemporary art scene.

Rees' work is closer in spirit to William Staite Murray's than to that of his contemporary, Bernard Leach. Murray received unprecedented prices for his pots which he sold through Fine Arts Galleries. Further distancing his pots from ordinary considerations of utility, Murray titled his pieces, claiming for them the status of art objects.

Figure 4 shows Murray's pot from 1930, called *The Bather*. This piece does not take its form from any historical prototype. It is a modern work in that it seeks to be new. The pot is intended to suggest a human bather, clad in the striped costume of the time. This piece is not just decorative. It seeks to communicate in a novel and abstract way.

Millar Robins, speaking of Murray's work of the 1920s and 1930s, said that it demonstrated that "*the most ancient of forms [the pot] should be elastic enough to hold modernism*" (Clark, 1994, p147).



Figure 5
Vase by Lucie Rie

Hans Coper, Lucie Rie and Ruth Duckworth were the most influential figures in British ceramics since the 1920s. All three had come to Britain as refugees from the Nazis in Germany.

Rie, having developed in Vienna at the time of the Wiener Werkstätte brought a stark modernist European aesthetic to British ceramics. She exploited her glaze materials masterfully and produced sensuous pitted and volcanic surfaces on her well considered forms (Figure 5).

Hans Coper learned ceramic technique from Lucie Rie. While he used the potter's wheel, his forms did not suggest themselves there. In order to push the forms in the vocabulary of pottery, Coper assembled and altered thrown forms in new ways with a keen sense of line and volume (Figure 6).

David Rees gives much credit for the development of his work process to his time at Central St Martins, where he studied between 1989 and 1992 for his BA. Historically this college offered an alternative to the Leachian approach to clay. There was a belief that all materials, including clay, were valid media for the production of art. Sculptors such as Edouardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull were invited to teach in the ceramics course, encouraging a rejection of the quietly traditional approach to clay.

David Rees was a part of the last group of students to be educated in this progressive tradition. This meant that his year were encouraged, even more than previous years, to take risks and be experimental.



Figure 6
Pilgrim Flasks, 1969, 13.5 inches and 10 inches high, by
Hans Coper

Quality of thought and being rigorous about the reasons for making a piece were important at Central St Martins. The students were encouraged to use paint, photography, print and whatever means they saw fit to explore their ideas. Making a piece in clay can mean that one is committed to a single idea for a number of weeks. There is a danger of creative stagnation in this situation. At Central St Martin's the students were pushed to keep their ideas alive and changing in other, more direct media.

This approach was helpful to Rees. His work is urban, glitzy and very much of London. Asian philosophies of contemplative pottery would have had nothing to do with his life, or what he had to say.

In his desires to challenge the status quo of the ceramics establishment, David Rees is very much a part of the London art school tradition. His work has very little to do with pottery, nothing to do with utility, and a lot to do with expressing ideas using clay as a sculptural medium. Being inside the ceramics establishment gives him something to define himself against, something to push against. Within ceramics he is noticeable, a revolutionary. He might not appear so extreme in the mainstream of art production.

His Work

For his MA show at the Royal College of Art in 1994, David Rees produced a series of paired forms. The pieces were made of slab built clay, but looked like upholstered foam. The forms in each pair lay on top of each other (Figure 7), others stood facing one

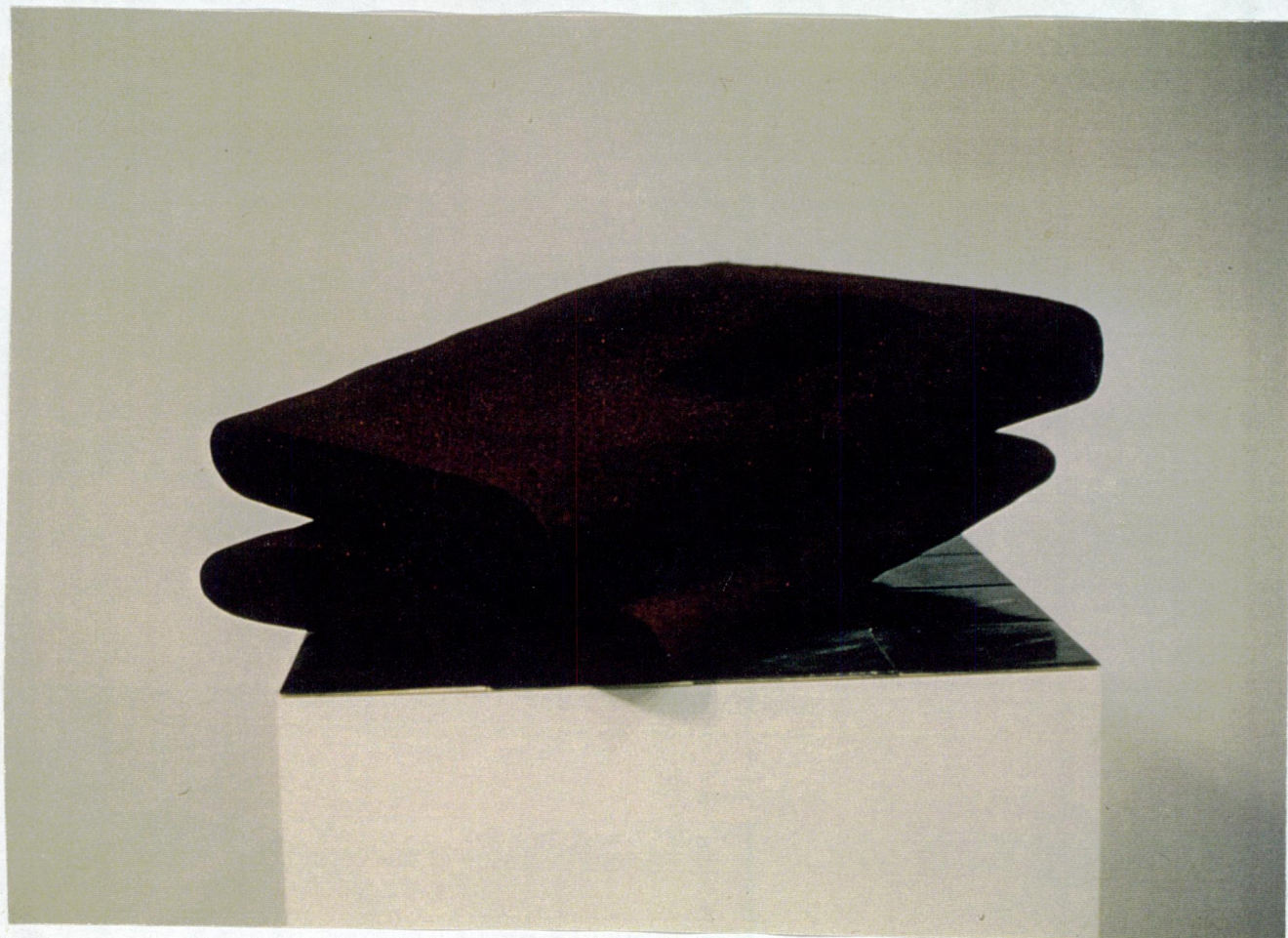


Figure 7

Fired and sprayed stoneware piece, 1994, by David Rees

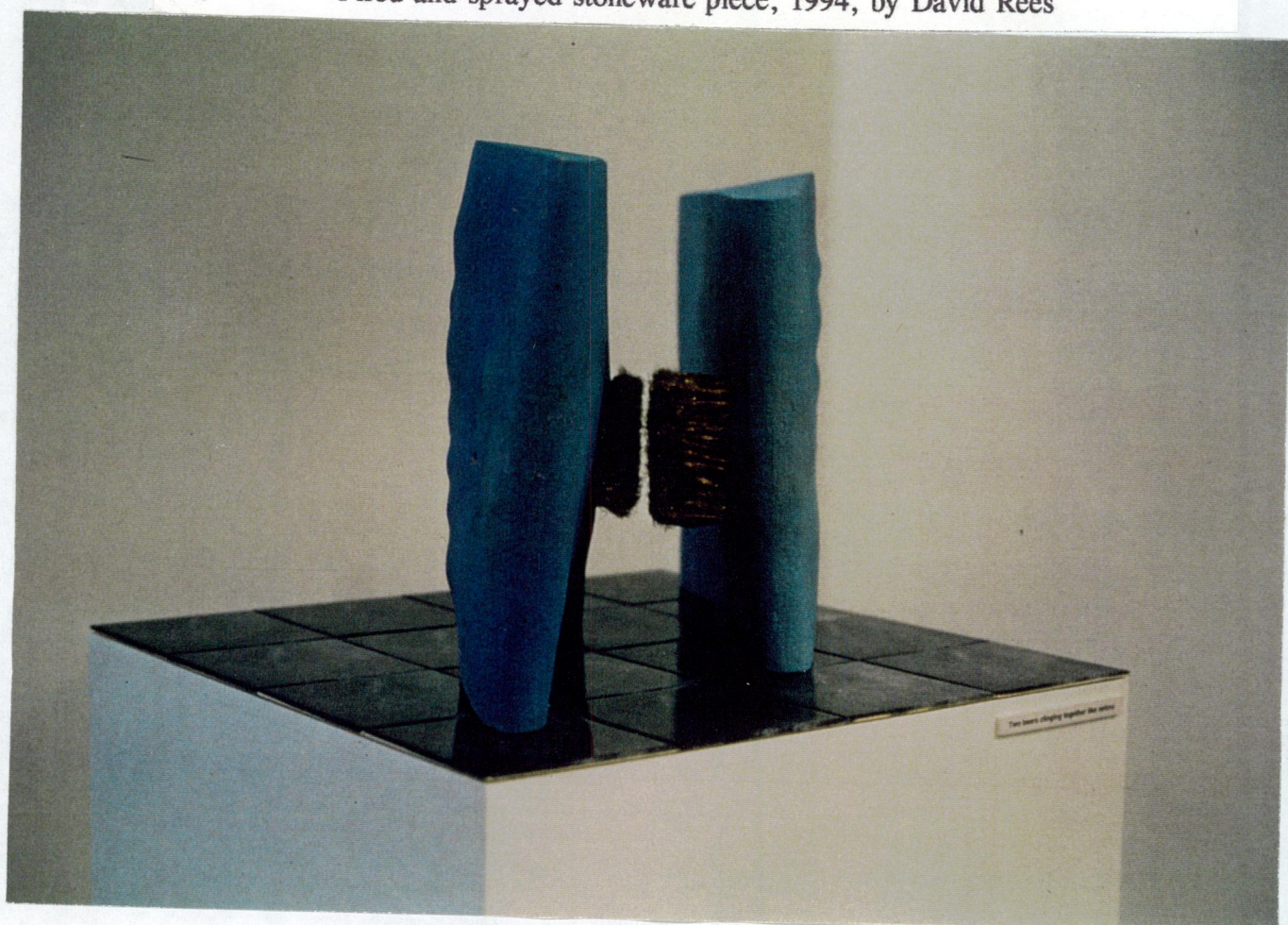


Figure 8

Two Bears Clinging Together Like Velcro, ceramic & copper, 1994, by David Rees

another, reaching out with patches of copper pubic hair (Figure 8), others lay together (Figure 9) and some appeared to be dancing with one another on furniture castors (Figure 10).

The pieces represent gay couples that Rees knows in London. It is an important motivation for these pieces that homosexual relationships are presented in an attractive, humorous way. He shows couples that are made up of two elements that are the same, yet complement each other. Figure 8 shows a work called *Two Bears Clinging Together Like Velcro*. The two pieces are slender and desirable. There is a row of bumps along the back of each piece signifying a spine. At the middle point from top to bottom, the pieces reach out and almost touch each other with patches of stiff, dense copper wire: two pubic areas that are the same, extended with connotations of electrical attraction towards one another. They stand on ceramic bathroom tiles that have been printed with a pattern made up of hair. There is a disquieting reference to hairs found in the bathroom, pubic hairs again no doubt. This image is doubly loaded for the craft ceramics audience, as the use of clay in the industrial manufacture of bathroom furniture and tiling is not an association often pointed at.

Figure 9 shows a piece called *Blue and Green Should Never be Seen Unless There's Lots of Hair In-Between*. It consists of two elements, each about 90 centimetres in length. Apart from a small black area with a suggested spine, the pieces are covered in glitter spray paint. The piece closest in the picture is blue and the other is green. The surfaces on both of these pieces are sumptuous and deep and penetrable. The forms, as they lie together, are restful and beautiful. This piece caused quite an extreme reaction from one viewer in particular: "There was one guy came in and he was absolutely insulted. I had

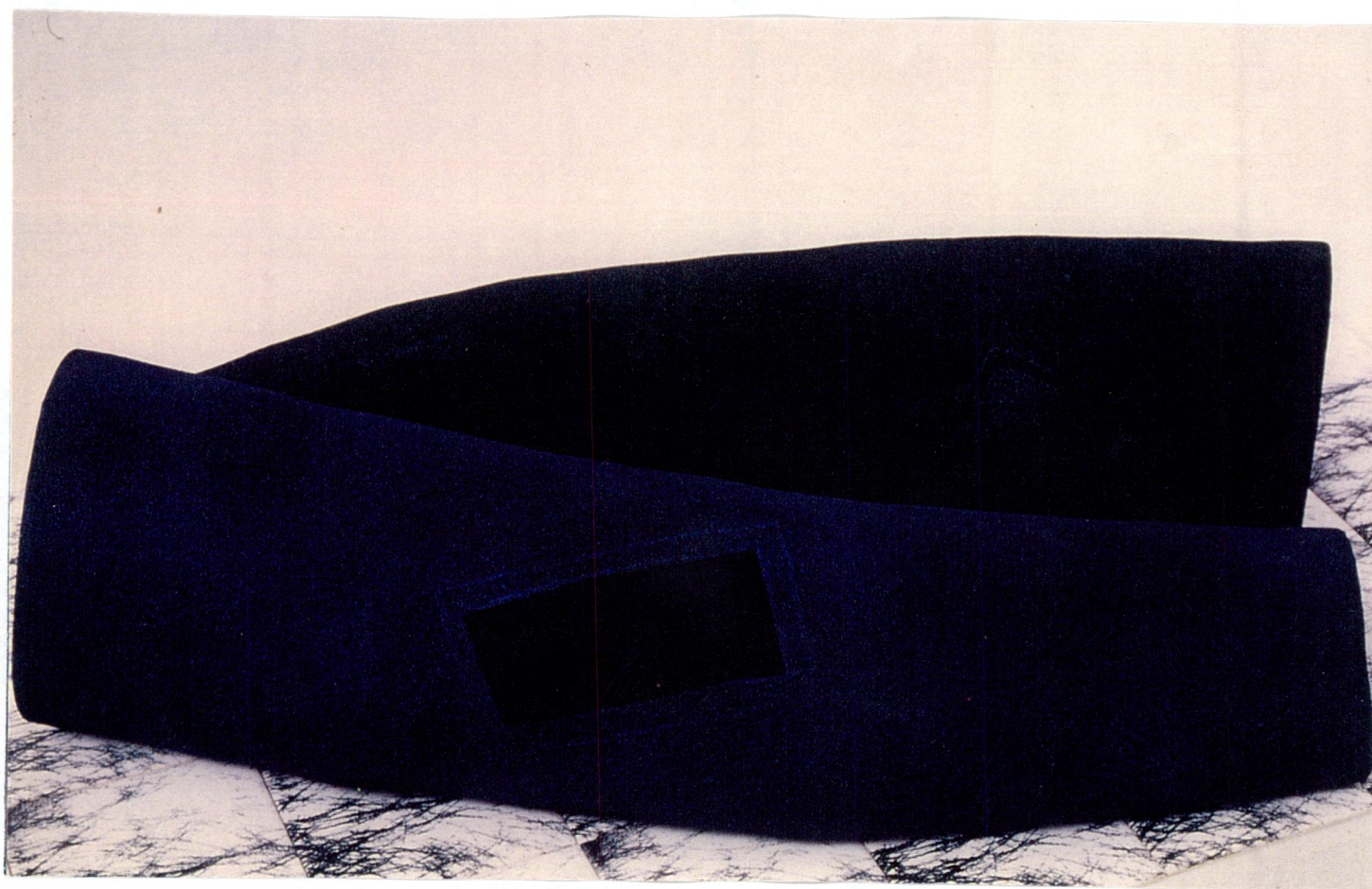


Figure 9

Blue and Green Should Never Be Seen Unless There's Lots of Hair in Between,
ceramic & glitter, 1994, by David Rees

covered two pieces in glitter spray and he was just so angry. 'But it's foam, not ceramic!' He just couldn't accept that I was using another material on the surfaces" (Rees Interview, 1995).

Notwithstanding, or perhaps because of such reactions, Rees is keen to situate himself within ceramic tradition. He is a craftsman and takes pride in the quality of his making. It is important to him to point out that the glitter spray does not disguise a bad glaze. *"I didn't just spray the piece with glitter. I had to create a glaze that would accept this glitter so it looked like another material"* (Rees Interview, 1995).

A belief that clay objects can humbly capture the essence of the human that made them is a central one to an understanding of much work in clay. Hans Coper described his encounter with an ancient piece of Egyptian pottery:

A pre-dynastic Egyptian pot, roughly egg-shaped, the size of my hand, made thousands of years ago, possibly by a slave, it has survived in more than one sense. It conveys no comment, no self-expression, but seems to contain and reflect its maker and the human world it inhabits... it gave me a glimpse of what man is. (Clark, 1994, p166)

An awareness that ceramic objects are often the major part of what remains of otherwise lost civilisations adds powerful connotations to the material. Rees believes that clay ought to be used to engage with current society, with the permanence of the material in mind. He sees no merit in the ubiquitous vague organic forms used so much in current clay work: *"I see no point in designing, making and being influenced by sea shells, pebbles. I don't think that's for the medium of ceramics anyway"* (Rees Interview, 1995)

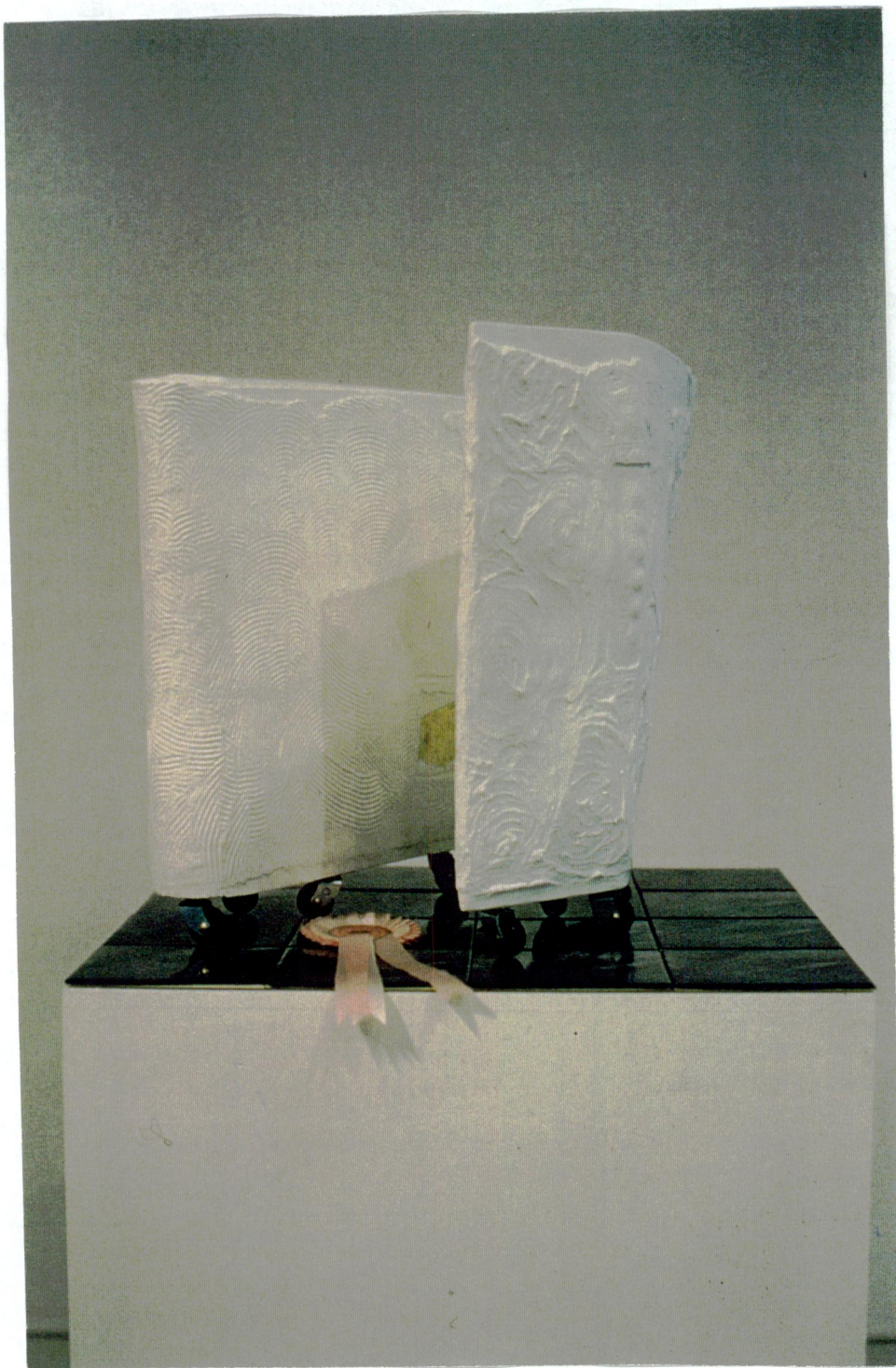


Figure 10
What a Pair of DIY Home Queens, ceramic and furniture castors and artex, 1994,
by David Rees

He sees clay as a very appropriate medium for portraying life in glamorous gay London. He gets inspiration from Greek Attic ware, where there are many depictions of homosexual love and seductions. In a sense he is claiming Ancient Greece and its central part in ceramic tradition back for Gay society.

David Rees admits that when he first came to study ceramics he envisioned himself ending up as a potter in an idyllic Cornwall village, selling pots to people as he plied them with cream cakes. When he became aware of the history of his medium he realised the potential power of ceramic objects in society. He consequently felt a responsibility to do justice to this tradition. This necessitated going against what he saw in British studio ceramics: a boring, passive group of people that had lost its way. *"I feel I make my work for ceramics because I want to dig at ceramics. I want ceramic makers and designers to question their own work"* (Rees Interview, 1995). Much as he reclaims Classical Greece for Gay society, he desires to liberate ceramics from safe, boring and inconsequential concerns.

Another, more basic reason for Rees' use of clay is the huge range of possibilities it offers as a material for exploring form and surface. *"It gives me an opportunity to push my forms in a way I couldn't push them with another material. I really need ceramics as a medium to work in because I feel so confident in the materials"* (Rees Interview, 1995).

Unlike many other practitioners, Rees does not feel bound to use ceramic materials exclusively. This leaves him empowered by the connotations and formal possibilities of the material, yet unhindered by a dogmatic restriction to using clay and nothing else.

His Attitude To The Current Circumstances of British Ceramics

David Rees' iconoclasm and the reaction it has caused is illustrated by an anecdote he told me:

In 1993 he won first prize in the "Ceramic Contemporaries" competition hosted by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The prize-giving ceremony received a lot of coverage from both the ceramics and general press. Rees arrived wearing a silver sequined bay-fronted top, exposing his pierced nipples. He received much less coverage in the ceramics press than any of the other prize-winners. He believes that this was because he insisted on demonstrating that he was different. Had he arrived in a clay splattered smock, nobody would have had difficulty in accepting him. He takes this as evidence of the conservative nature of those in the ceramics establishment.

One of the reasons that Rees cites for the stagnant state of British ceramics is a failure on the part of the colleges. Ceramics courses often occupy the middle ground between the Sculpture Department and the Product Design Department. As such, the broad education in Cultural Studies and contemporary art criticism offered fine art sculpture students is often denied students of ceramics. On the other side, the discipline of designing products for the market place is often absent. Consequently, ceramics students can remain unaware of their responsibilities to a public or market.

The remoteness from debate in college courses is mirrored in Rees' experience of the wider ceramics world: "*The ceramics makers and critics are so passive in their approach*

to ceramics anyway, they won't allow themselves to be engaged in any debate about culture" (Rees Interview, 1995).

One reason for this could be the self-perpetuating image of pottery as a quiet retreat from the complexities of twentieth century modernity. Perhaps those attracted to ceramics share this perception and are seeking out such a retreat.

Another factor that discourages risk-taking in ceramic work is the system for funding third level education in Britain. David Rees and his fellow students at the Royal College of Art found that they incurred large debts during their two year MA course. This directs students towards making safe, slick and saleable work in order to recover their losses. Rees believes that an MA should be a time to push one's work and make the risky developments that are only possible in college. His experience of the Royal College was disappointing to him, the course merely taught him how to make his work more professional looking.

With continuing government cuts limiting ceramics courses throughout Britain, the future does not look bright. David Rees' hope is that the public will become tired of mediocrity and force the situation to change.

CHAPTER THREE

GRAYSON PERRY

His Background and Context

One afternoon when I was eight or nine years old, I was given my first pottery lesson at Woodham Ferris C of E School, Essex. To protect our clothes we were made to wear long sleeved smocks made of light blue rubber. I can vividly recall mine being too small as the pretty teacher did up the snap fasteners down the back. I became very excited at the feeling of the tight smooth material. In this state I made my first ever pot, an ashtray for my dear mother. (Ceramic Review No. 12, p24)

This is Grayson Perry's account of his first encounter with clay. A few years after completing his degree in the Fine Art at Portsmouth Polytechnic he took evening classes in pottery. He had no respect for notions of perfecting his craft. He sold the first pot he made, excluding the ashtray for his mother, in an exhibition. His teacher was horrified that he dared to be so confident about work that was so badly made. But Perry was from a different tradition. He had chosen to use pottery because of its connotations of familiar, polite domesticity. He was also very well aware of the sneering low esteem that Fine Art audiences had for studio pottery. As a medium it had shown itself to be safe and predictable. These are two adjectives that could not be applied to Perry's imagination. His images are profane, anarchic, obscene and shocking. An interesting conversation had been established.

Grayson Perry has a different background to David Rees or Svend Beyer. He is from a mainstream art education. He has no respect whatever for studio ceramics and its sacred cows. He explained what his time at college gave him:

There's a definite difference between people who've been to an art course and people who've been to a ceramics course. I think it's a kind of reverence. People in art school are almost taught to hate art, to overthrow. It's almost like the way of thinking encouraged is to surprise and be fresh. [Ceramics students] are taught how to do something right rather than having to do it wrong. (Perry Interview, 1995)

He is an iconoclast in the tradition of Andy Warhol. Like Andy Warhol, Grayson Perry is a self-mythologiser. The anecdote of himself as a sexually-charged eight year old making his first piece of pottery is an example of this. Articles on Perry inevitably refer to his intriguing personality and multiplicity of identities. In his studio he is surrounded by images and artefacts from his various, seemingly contradictory, activities. There is a photo of himself, taken in soft focus, dressed and made up as Claire, his alter-ego. There is a photo of him in a mountain bike race. His motorcycle racing leathers hang above his pile of picture books on the history of pottery. He is also a committed husband and father. As with the images on his pots, it is impossible to get a coherent overview of his personality.

Andy Warhol came in the wake of American Abstract Expressionist painting. Robert Rosenblum wrote, "*Were any humanoid presence to emerge from that distant mythic world conjured up by Rothko, Newman and Pollock, it could only have been the Holy Shroud, Adam or Thor*" (Herty, 1985, p56).

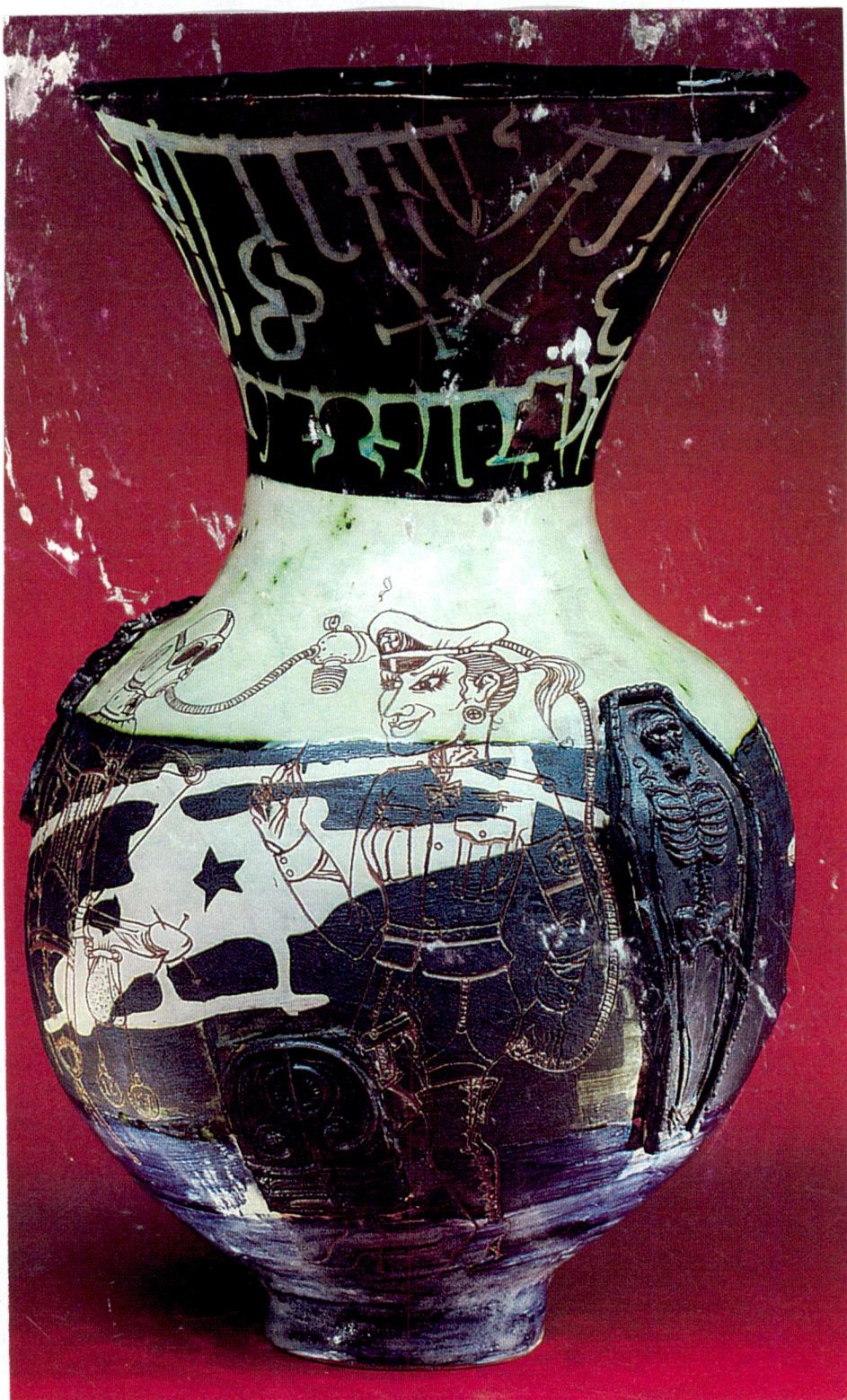


Figure 11

God Says War is the Only True Obscenity, earthenware vase 17 inches high, 1990,
by Grayson Perry

Warhol provided an antidote to the heroically serious work of those men by using images taken from mass culture: the faces of television personalities and film stars, along with fatal car crashes and the electric chair.

There are a number of parallels with Grayson Perry here. The Leach-inspired pottery that he so detests lays claim to an area of heroic, serene, fundamental experience comparable with that of the Abstract Expressionists. There is a similar sense of aloof good taste about both worlds. Perry presents images taken from television, decorative art and the violence of his own imagination on his pots. The ambiguous attitude of Warhol's work to the violent imagery he used is also evident in Perry's work. *God Says War is the Only True Obscenity* (Figure 11) is an example of this. This politely formed vase is decorated with images of torture, sadism, death and war all rendered in the style of an adolescent's prurient doodlings. The horrific and vicious content is not treated with the respectful dignity one might expect for War and Death. Robert Rosenblum's comments on the work of Andy Warhol could be helpful here:

That Warhol could paint simultaneously Warren Beatty and electric chairs may seem the peculiar product of a perversely cool and passive personality until we realise that this numb, voyeuristic view of contemporary life, in which the grave and the trivial blandly co-exist as passing spectacles, is a deadly accurate mirror of a commonplace experience in modern art and life. (Hertz, 1985, p58)

This is exemplified by the Gulf War, to which *God Says War is the Only True Obscenity* makes reference. Torture, death and war were all trivialised to the level of a video game. In fact, the dignity that Perry's images insult is contravened daily in mass culture.

Crossing the boundary between good and bad taste is a game that has been played in art for a long time. Marcel Duchamp offended the sensibilities of the gallery-going public with his urinal and bawdy graffiti on the Mona Lisa. Warhol unsettled the boundaries of good taste by bringing images of the banality and superficiality of popular culture into High Art.

Grayson Perry is a part of this tradition within the history of art. He is associated with studio ceramics solely as a consequence of his use of clay. This association is of little concern to him, and he firmly identifies himself with the mainstream of art production and markets.

His Work

Jeff Koons is also a part of Duchamp and Warhol's tradition of shocking the aesthetic sensibilities of the art audience by presenting bad taste in art galleries. A comparison of him with Grayson Perry is helpful in presenting an appraisal of Perry's work.

Koons and Perry are very aware of who their target audiences are, and they both know how to satisfy those audiences. *"I'm.. interesting in making things that are meaningful to my particular tribe: the kind of tribe that reads Sunday supplements and goes out to art galleries"* (Perry Interview, 1995).

Jeff Koons came to use ceramic materials for their kitsch connotations. He took the image of the porcelain figurine and enlarged it to the point of total absurdity. *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* is allegedly the largest porcelain statue ever made. Jeff Koons is a self-mythologiser. He has created a legend of the story of his rise from membership clerk at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art to become the fairytale prince of the contemporary art scene with Cicciolina as his princess bride. While Perry also propagates similar stores about himself, his façade is not nearly as polished and impenetrable as Jeff Koons'.

This is a strength of Perry's work. He gives more of himself than Koons, who offers nothing but his own myth and aura, just as Michael Jackson does. Koons presents commodified objects, including himself, with all of the banality of current marketing techniques in order to comment on the banality of life. This is a cynical and negative position.

Art is rendered impotent by the assertion that it is a fundamentally phoney activity, merely another part of consumer culture. It denies the validity of art as a mean-of human expression. It denies authenticity and scoffs at any notion of truth. In this way Koons is characteristic of deconstructive or "eliminative" Post Modernism, as formulated by David Ray Griffin. (Jencks, 1992, p33)

This transcends the arrogant certainties of Modernism, in architecture, art, science and philosophy, by negating and discrediting them. It takes away the necessary elements to formulate a coherent world view of any kind. Belief in god, the self, a purpose or meaning to life, a real world and the validity of personal experience is disavowed.

I believe Grayson Perry to be closer in spirit to Umberto Eco's illustration of a Post Modern sensibility in his *Postscript to "The Name of the Rose"*.

I think of the Postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her, "I love you madly" because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her. (Jencks, 1992, p74)

Although a work such as *God Says War is the Only True Obscenity* has the flavour of adolescent sexual fantasies and a black sense of humour it is expressive of a genuine hatred of War. While I was interviewing Grayson Perry he was working on a pot called *Peasants with Fridge Freezers*. It was about the Bosnian War. Typically, he would not be straightforward about making a "statement" on the war in Bosnia. That would bore his audience. Instead he latched onto a comment he heard on a television news report showing Bosnian refugees. The journalist commented, *"These people are used to living in houses with luxuries like fridge freezers"* (Perry Interview, 1995). This contrasted absurdly with the procession of refugees that looked like Medieval peasants. This provided a humorous hook to get the attention of his audience. It also referred to the situation where ancient tribal feuds that go back over centuries were being fought out with high-tech weaponry in the twentieth century. On the pot were images of women and children inflicting obscene atrocities on one another. There were transfers of cigarette packets strewn around the pot like litter. This located the scene in a familiar time and place.



Figure 12
Vase, 1988, by Grayson Perry

Like Umberto Eco's lover, Grayson Perry knows that innocence is impossible in the world in which he operates. In no way remorseful at the passing of innocence, he thrives on the games that he plays. Although he uses irony, he makes his work in good faith. There is a real point being made, just as Eco's lover really does love the woman.

Grayson Perry offers something to his audience:

Disquieting is what I like to be. I like people to look at a pot, constantly having to re-adjust their frame of reference: they see a pot, so they are settled into 'I am about to look at a pot,' mode. Then it's 'It's a pretty pot..', then it's 'Eugh, no!'; then, 'Why's that?'. I want people constantly as they're looking at it, refreshing their angle on how they're looking at it. (Perry Interview, 1995)

He also gives of himself. There is an autobiographical content to much of his work. A lot of the time he is exposing, perhaps exorcising, the darkest elements of his imagination.

Figure 12 shows one of Perry's pots from the late 1980s. The text stamped onto it is revealing:

Cosmic things have contrived to make me unable to care. I must show all the pictures in my mind. To use them is to have power over them. I must use stupid housewife slaves, heat animals and other peoples misery. I want the power and nobility of their servitude, their numb humility and embarrassment to rub off of me for my pleasure. (Ceramic Review 112, p24)

On the same pot are drawn a dying, bleeding rabbit beside its hole and a young man in his pyjamas hanging from a noose with a teddy-bear in his hand. The melodrama of these

images parodies the self-pitying confession in the text. There is, however, a level of honesty in the piece. He explained his situation:

Rude confession has become a tired habit within me which I try to curb but find myself only delving more carelessly inward, creating a myth of what I like to imagine is the inner me. I am only brought back to reality by the observation that I am constantly contradicting and conflicting my "sincerest beliefs". (Ceramic Review 112, p26)

There is an integrity in his non-judgemental use of himself and the products of his imagination. He is willing to set aside considerations such as respectability and social taboo in his unconditional outpouring of images and commentary. In putting his own contradictions, and the absurdities of life, on display, he is revealing a kind of truth about what it is like to be human at this time and place.

His Attitude to the Current Circumstances of British Ceramics

Grayson Perry is a reluctant member of the ceramics community.

When I started exhibiting my work I avoided any associations with the craft world and always showed in fine art galleries. But making pots it was inevitable that eventually I would drift into that funny little backwater of creativity that is studio ceramics. (Artists Newsletter, July 1994, p30)

Garth Clarks' *The Potter's Art* (1994) includes a section on Grayson Perry. Garth Clark evaluates him as providing "*the sharpest satiric edge yet to be seen in British Ceramic Art*" (Clark, 1994, p209). Perry is lauded for broaching subjects that are usually shied

away from by potters. A mythical unity is usually sought after, rather than a disjointed image of identity, explicit sexual imagery, clutter, bad taste and outrageous black humour.

He was included in *The Raw and The Cooked* exhibition, curated by Alison Britton and Martina Margetts. This exhibition set out to showcase new work in clay and showed at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art and the Barbican Centre in London in 1993. Initially Grayson Perry was excited at the prospect of being part of this show, as it was prestigious and important. It was an education for Perry to be surrounded by this work. In an article for *Artists Newsletter* of July 1994, entitled *Fear and Loathing*, Perry wrote about the experience. He had some hard advice for British Studio ceramics:

The few times I've read crafts magazines there always seems to be a letter or article by some disgruntled craftsperson saying "Why aren't we taken as serious artists like painters and sculptors?". Walking around "The Raw and the Cooked" the answer struck me - to artists, craft is just a means to an end and that end is expressing their ideas. Artists don't define themselves by how they make things but by what they have to say. (56)

In that essay Perry described a ghetto populated by inward looking, insecure and frightened practitioners who take refuge in the comforts of clay. When a group of people define themselves by a common material and set of techniques, the discourse of that group can safely remain on the level of technical matters. This is the position of Ceramic Review, which concerns itself with glaze formulae and "Potters Tips", rather than theoretical questions. As Grayson Perry put it, *"The skills of the highly trained potter are a safe haven in which it is easy to hide from difficult questions like how is studio pottery viewed by the art world? Is it a suitable medium for my message? Who is my audience?"* (Artists Newsletter, 1994, p40).

Here is the same criticism of passivity and shying away from difficult issues or debate that David Rees had of studio ceramics. Perry uses the idea of a pot, and the connotations of domesticity and kitsch that it has for his audience. He presents a challenge to the existing climate with the ceramics community because he has introduced a freshness of approach that seems to be uncommon there. While David Rees criticises and pushes against the restraints of the ceramics establishment out of a sense of responsibility to the potential of the medium, Grayson Perry feels free to criticise because he has no obligation to studio ceramics. To an extent, it is in his interest that studio ceramics remains in its backwater, as he freely admits:

I have always played up the fact that pottery isn't taken seriously in the Fine Art world. It lends my work a kitsch irony and another layer of meaning. In this respect the resonance of my own work would be diminished if pottery were part of mainstream fine art. (Artists Newsletter, 1994, p30)

In my interview with Grayson Perry I asked him if he wished to challenge and enliven studio ceramics. He gave this answer: *"No, not really. It seems to have come about a bit like that, and if it is going to give me good copy within the craft world, then let them think that"* (Perry Interview, 1995).

Notwithstanding his aloof and calculated lack of respect for the craft world, he has become involved. In his essay, *Fear and Loathing* he offered a critical, but helpful assessment of the plight of studio ceramics. He called for ceramic artists to define themselves by what they have to say, rather than the materials and techniques they use, and move into the mainstream of art production. This year, Perry adjudicated at a competition to encourage young ceramicists held at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

If he believes that "*aesthetically craft is dead because it doesn't have the intellectual input behind it*" (Perry Interview, 1995), why does he bother with it at all? It may be because of marketing considerations, but he is nonetheless forcing a re-thinking of old certainties within the ceramics world.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANTONY GORMLEY

In her essay "Metamorphosis" for the catalogue to *The Raw and the Cooked* Exhibition, Martina Margetts wrote "*Ceramic art is thriving in this homogenous relativist climate, aided especially by developments in sculpture and design. Both are engaged in a more variegated tactile, metaphorical approach*" (MOMA, Oxford 1993, p13).

She then continues with an account of the distancing of ceramics from the art mainstream. In the 1950s and 1960s non-vessel ceramics was cut off from sculpture because of prejudices against the material of clay. Clay was considered to be a prelude to bronze in the making process, and not valid in its own right. The institutional situation exacerbated this distance, with ceramic work coming under the jurisdiction of the crafts council and being confined to "craft" galleries. Combined with the biases of critics these factors influenced the public to expect a challenge from art, but comfort from ceramic work, which was firmly located within craft. With the diversity and plurality that came with Postmodernism, sculpture accepted media as diverse as stone and formaldehyde soaked animals. Clay was validated as a material for sculpture along the way.

In the 1980s a group of British sculptors including Andy Goldsworthy, Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor and Tony Cragg began producing objects that were sensuous and bore the evidence of the process by which they were made. With Andy Goldsworthy, the process was the product, leaving no evidence but photographs or stained pieces of paper. To an extent, the same can be said of Antony Gormley's concrete body casts, and of both his and



Figure 13
Bear, by Antony Gormley

Tony Craggs work in clay. Martina Margetts took this as evidence that the mainstream had come around to the values that potters and ceramic artists had expressed all along. Most of the work in *The Raw and The Cooked* was made by studio ceramicists, people who, for the most part, use clay exclusively. Rather than validating the work of a group of people defined by a commitment to clay, the work of the above mentioned group of British sculptors raises large questions about the validity of this work.

For Antony Gormley, the materials he uses for his sculpture are central to the impact and meaning of his work. He invested a lot of time during the 1980s in making lead sheet body cases. The fact that the cases were lead, and not steel or plastic, or indeed ceramic, is significant to the works. In conversation with Declan McGonagle in 1993 he explained:

At a certain stage I accepted the Buddhist position; I wanted to deny desire. I saw desire in some way as a false economy of art. The desire to aesthetically possess or be possessed. Hence for the last ten years the preoccupation with enclosing things in an aesthetically neutral material. I chose lead for the same reason as Maillol did for his nudes; he wanted to have a tension between the sensuality of the form and the distancing effect of the material. (Gormley, 1993, p40)

The important word here is "chose". Gormley chose the material that he considered appropriate to what he wanted to achieve with his pieces. The soft density and impenetrability of the lead cases is reminiscent of space suits or personal protection against nuclear attack, or any of the violent, violating realities of modern life. This contrasts not only with the vulnerability of the flesh that is suggested within, but the tenderness and humanity expressed by the situations and predicaments that these cases find themselves in. *Bear* is an example of this (Figure 13). A human figure squats on top of an enormous form like a case for an Egyptian mummified king. The figure appears to have given birth



Figure 15
Field, by Antony Gormley, 1993

to the form beneath it. It peers down, amazed at what it has given rise to. It is a beautiful metaphor for human creativity and how we can surprise ourselves. This vulnerable image is protected and made stronger by the qualities of the lead that it is made from.

Gormley's piece *Field* (Figures 14 and 15) is exemplary of how the connotations and material qualities of clay can be utilised to give meaning to a work. *Field* consists of tens of thousands of small terra-cotta figures filling a space. They are made simply. Gormley describes how he arrived at the form:

In about 1984 I realised that clay was an important material... I was trying to find a way of making that wasn't imposing an image on the material, but allowing a one-to-one relationship between my body and the body of the clay. The forms arose naturally from the space between my hands.
(Gormley, 1993, p41)

The first *Field* was made by a group of villagers from rural Mexico. Gormley got the co-operation of a family-run brick factory. There was a clay pit, a kiln and a willing workforce. The figures were made quickly, with two holes in the top of the head for eyes. The spontaneity of the manufacture gives each figure a uniqueness and personality. Along with this there was a variation in colour, due to the uneven conditions in the kiln. The figures range in colour from orange to a deep, dark brown.

The thousands of figures, standing and staring up at the viewer, create a powerful impact. They are staring up sadly, inquisitive and expectant. Clay in this piece provides for the expression of physical contact. These figures bear the marks of the hands that touched them into existence. This is a more sensuous way of dealing with the flesh than encasing



Figure 14
Field, by Antony Gormley, 1993

it in lead. Clay also points to the continuum between the mineral earth and human life. We are literally made from minerals that have been extracted from the earth and the air and been biologically ordered by our bodies. Our bodies, as well as our psychological selves, are rooted in the earth.

Field would be altered beyond recognition if a material other than clay had been used. It was the only appropriate material for that piece. Paul Astbury, whose work was included in *The Raw and the Cooked* had this to say on the subject of his use of clay: "*Clay is an intimidating material. The more I use it, the more stringent it forces me to become with the justification of its use. Sculpture demands a very rigorous language*" (64).

With the breakdown in the hierarchy of materials permitted for sculpture, a new set of value judgements has taken its place. Every freedom has a resulting responsibility. Because sculpture now tolerates the use of any material, the use of every material is subject to question. No material, from dead animals or the artist's body, to bronze or stone, is without connotations. Clay, while it may be neutral in form, is heavily loaded with metaphors. "*Shaping a piece of clay is like reading William Butler Yeats poems to the Michelangelo painting of Leda and the Swan rich in metaphors, intoxicating in its associations and yet mysterious*" (MOMA, Oxford, 1993, p15).

It is precisely because of this power that the use of clay should not be taken for granted, as it is within the world occupied by "Ceramic Review" magazine and the ceramics galleries, and indeed an exhibition such as *The Raw and the Cooked*.

CONCLUSION

In the two essays for the catalogue accompanying *The Raw and the Cooked* exhibition written by Alison Britton and Martina Margetts, a claim to the title "art" is made for the work on exhibition. There is an almost defensive insistence on the validity and worth of clay as a medium for art-making.

The symposium that accompanied the exhibition discussed the question of why ceramicists are not taken seriously as artists. Martina Margetts, in her essay, explained why non-vessel ceramics had been marginalised in Britain. It was neither pottery, nor allowed to be sculpture.

In order to make the point that ceramics had been accepted into the mainstream, some mainstream artists who made ceramic pieces were included in the exhibition. These included Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley, Paul Astbury and Grayson Perry. This, as I mentioned above, served to expose the difference in approach of the mainstream artists, as compared to the studio ceramicists, those who position themselves within the jurisdiction of the Crafts Council and the bodies that it helps to support.

Perhaps it is unfair to make value judgements on the work of ceramicists based on a set of criteria formulated for mainstream art. Notwithstanding the agenda of *The Raw and the Cooked* exhibition, some ceramicists have no desire to be considered as "artists". Svend Beyer is a case in point. Beyer believes in beauty. It is important to him that his work process, products and tools are pleasing to him. He takes from an older, more

constant and separate tradition of working than mainstream "fine art". The pleasing forms that he produces would have given pleasure to the Bronze Age potters who made similar forms. The successful sales of his work in London bear testament to the fact that, for whatever reason, those forms still give pleasure. The aesthetic concerns that Beyer deals with have long been a part of ceramic tradition, before anything resembling "fine art" had been conceptualised. It would be extremely arrogant to claim to invalidate his practices by actions and developments in a realm that he has no concern with. He has no ambitions to produce "art".

Grayson Perry is at the other end of the spectrum of people making objects in clay. Grayson Perry is an artist. He has been accepted as such by the London art market and critics. His position, like Beyer's is not an issue. Also like Beyer, he has no investment in the debate about whether studio ceramics should be accepted as art.

David Rees, on the other hand, is active in that debate. His work is within the area of contention. He is a graduate of the MA course in ceramics held at the Royal College. His work is ceramic, yet it does not fit in to the tradition of vessel-making. The fact that the pieces are made from clay is not central to the overt meanings of the pieces. Representing gay relationships in an attractive way has been a preoccupation of David Hockney in painting and Duane Michaels in photography. It is not a theme requiring clay for its expression.

Rees works within a strand of production that has its roots in the foundation of the ceramics courses in London art schools in the early part of this century. This world has not experienced an iconoclastic avant-gardism. Its evolution has been, for the most part,

polite and inoffensive. Into this world Rees has introduced glamour, glitter and the spirit of neon London. His work makes sense as an act of resistance within a conservative establishment. Some of its impact would be lost on a mainstream art audience. Part of the motivation behind Rees' work is a struggle to rescue his medium from banal and timid conservatism, and restore it to the culturally relevant and vital place it had in Ancient Greece. This is a metaphor for his efforts, through his life and his art, to have his homosexuality accepted by a reluctant society. In this sense, his use of clay as a medium is significant.

Clay has been used to make beautiful and meaningful objects for millennia. It has a uniquely rich and diverse heritage. Because it has such strong associations with the earth and elemental processes it has a timeless universal quality. This is exploited by Antony Gormley and Svend Beyer. It has also been used historically to produce very current and culturally specific objects. David Rees and Grayson Perry perpetuate this tradition.

Alongside its range of powerful connotations there is far more than a lifetime's work in exploring the material qualities of clay, glazes and the effects of firing processes. The fascination for and commitment to the medium of ceramics of many studio ceramicists is perfectly understandable in this light. However, it is unfortunate that ceramicists are separated from other visual artists by a wall of insecurities, bureaucracy, prejudices and history. The result is that the work of studio ceramicists has tended to be timid and limited in its scope of reference.

The committed and sensitive exploration of themes and techniques appropriate to clay must continue. As this thesis has shown, there is a huge diversity of themes, and approaches

and aspirations within the range of work produced in clay. Clay is perhaps unique among media, in that it is used to deal with questions of utility and design as well as the expression of concepts and ideas, which comes into the realm of art. What is certainly a unique situation is that practitioners from all points within this range identify with one another under the title of "ceramicist". When ceramicists become exclusive in their use of materials and defensive of their right to be so, an insular and limited state can develop. It has taken fresh and lively minds from outside this world to exploit and demonstrate the potential power and the ideological connotations of clay, in a full and clear way. The fresh and direct approach of Grayson Perry and Anthony Gormley to clay may not satisfy any criteria for quality craftsmanship, but the impact of their work is without doubt.

Clay is a valid medium for art making, and those using it as such should not be accorded a lower status among artists as a result. However, in order to sustain a lively and vital tradition, a greater openness to the debates and standards of the wider world of the visual arts is essential. A more rigorous level of criticism and discussion of the work of ceramicists would be of great help in bringing the power and possibilities of clay as a medium to a wider audience, and shed the image of studio ceramics as a *"funny little backwater of creativity"* (Artists Newsletter, 1994, p30).

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