

bernard jacobson gallery

Clay

8th – 30th May 2009

On display at Bernard Jacobson Gallery from May 8th will be works in clay by a variety of contemporary artists. The works testify to the continued vitality of a medium in which humans have fashioned artefacts for the last 30,000 years or more and the allusiveness of which has been celebrated for millennia in religious narratives, secular poetry and traditional folk art by civilisations across the earth.

Works by Phillip King, Tim Scott and Anthony Caro testify to the possibilities afforded by the medium to a generation of innovative formalists whose interests in using industrial materials and moving sculpture away from the plinth and into the viewer's space would seem to negate the usefulness of clay. All three, however, have come to exploit clay's malleability and ability to quickly create and define clean spaces and surfaces to explore their spatial concerns on a smaller scale, to great effect.

For the next generation of British sculptors clay's appeal has been more apparent - the relative lack of a strong theoretical or academic clay tradition allowing them to define themselves against the embattled formalism of the previous generation whilst the relative strength of non-western clay traditions gives the opportunity to expand the conceptual remit of their work. Barry Flanagan's Raku ware thus references a crafts tradition passed down through 15 generations of Japanese potters, whilst Nicholas Pope's work relies upon the artist's study of the abstract symbolism of African Makonde sculpture.

The Japanese ceramic tradition touched upon by Flanagan in his Raku ware, is more comprehensively displayed by the works of the Japanese potters Kato Tsubusa and Higashida Shigemasa. Whereas for Western sculptors clay's malleability is often matched by a looseness of tradition, these Japanese ceramicists are extremely conscious of the strong heritage of their craft, the slightest deviations marking significant statements. Kato, for example, works in New Zealand porcelain clay, with a pale blue celadon glaze traditionally associated with the still, tranquil ceramics of the Chinese Sung porcelains. Yet in Kato's work movement and fragility are celebrated by accentuating the flaws and eccentricities thrown up in the kiln. Higashida, meanwhile works in the Oribe tradition, a style that dates to the late 16th century, making highly sculptural landscape inspired vessels and dishes, with rich green, blue and white glazes

bernard jacobson gallery

and intriguing contrasts between smooth and rough surfaces.

For Bram Bogart, William Tillyer, Bruce McLean and Ivor Abrahams the absence of a craftly orthodoxy around clay in the Western modernist tradition has enabled a free flow of ideas from their work in other media. All four have thus exploited the freedom afforded by the clay medium to create three-dimensional expansions of their overarching interests be they in plasticity, mark making, iconography or conceptual matters. Their works thus attest to the possibilities of an integrated artistic vision, and the ability of artists to shape our physical environment.

Clay offers a diverse insight into contemporary practice in this exciting medium.