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Architects inspire my ceramics and
sculptors can inspire my architecture



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1 *Black Lift* (detail), grogged stoneware with black iron oxide and black body stain, 2012, H10cm 2 *Double Boxed Trio*, grogged stoneware with body stains, 2012, H14cm

Pots are the Purest Architecture

Ceramic sculptor and interior designer Rachel Grimshaw reflects on her making practice and the shared architectural qualities of her two disciplines.

'So what do you do?'

It is a common question – and one I find difficult to answer. What *do* I do? As a job to earn money, as an outcome of an art education, I practice as an interior designer. I also 'pot'; I am a 'ceramic sculptor'. Both these occupations, one remunerative, one considerably less so, are part of who I am. My interior design and ceramics work well together, each feeds the other as they both have a strong architectural component and both deal with the manipulation of three-dimensional forms. Their visual influences are similar. One is on a large scale, such as the etched glass



community room for the inside of a church in Burnage, Manchester. The other is often related to the scale of my own hands. I like the idea of creating both the immovable and the easily portable.

MAKER & MATERIAL On my studio wall I wrote: 'Pots are the purest architecture'. I think this came from the experience of having building design ideas lose their original spark through practical constraints, from planning rules to cost to clients' requirements, but seeing pots retain theirs – the only constraints are myself and the material. It is I who has total responsibility for the finished piece. Although it never does to impose one's will on the material; if I have too fixed an idea as to what I am going to make when faced with a lump of clay it inevitably all goes awry. I must have some intention, some vision of what I intend to create, but be loose enough to let the clay go its way also. Often forms appear that I don't recognise, visual memories deeply buried surface unexpectedly. Serendipity plays a strong part in my creative process. Between maker and material it is a two-way contract. Neither has the upper hand entirely. Architectural design work, however, involves the input of many others, not least the builders who create the physical form of the ideas. The enjoyment of physical labour for the interior designer is absent; something that is integral to my relationship with clay.

My ceramic work has never been utilitarian; it has never had practical requirements to fulfil, unlike the work of designing to safety and precise size requirements within architecture. I have never been interested in creating ceramic work as an aid to the functions of daily life and therefore needing to conform to aspects of design (does it hold liquid? Does it pour?). And yet my ceramics are not divorced from my other life within the architectural world. Architects inspire my ceramics and sculptors can inspire my architecture. Proportion, balance, a visual 'rightness' are all issues that affect both disciplines.

FORM OVER VOLUME Working with heavily grogged stoneware – coloured with various percentages of body stains and occasionally oxides – enables me to work with solid forms. These forms allude to the built environment but deliberately avoid explicit references. The intention in my work is always to create new shapes that seem

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to change from every angle. In pushing the material to its limits my wish is to explore three-dimensional shapes while retaining a real sense of the qualities of clay. I aim to achieve within the one pot both a flowing freedom and a sinuous tension. The dramatic effects of sharp light and shadow emphasise these qualities. How the pieces relate to each other is also important. As isolated forms I hope they are dynamic and strongly individual, yet when placed in pairs or in groups, the negative and positive shapes can both push against and echo one another, creating a sense of movement and energy. The spaces between are as crucial as the forms themselves. With rarely a hint of a vessel in my pieces, I am interested more in form than in volume. The obsession in the ceramic world with 'The Vessel' puzzles me, although some of my 'box' pieces have been described as 'solid vessels'¹ – a description I enjoy.

I have sometimes been asked why my work isn't larger. One obvious reason is the size of my hands in relation to the technique I use and the result I am looking for. There is also the consideration of weight; solid wet clay is very heavy! On pondering this issue I wonder if the question is something to do with people's notion of what 'sculpture' is, in particular if it is 'abstract', which my ceramics certainly are. Sculpture is big. It often goes outside. It takes up a lot of room. A 'pot' (something made from clay) on the other hand, is domestic in scale. It goes on a shelf, in the hand, can be 'used' (but often isn't!). For myself, I like the idea of portable handheld sculpture.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN Buildings by necessity must be able to be explored from the inside as well as the outside. Sculpture, in any material, can choose its focus. The sculptors and ceramists I admire have always been those whose work appears to reference the language of architecture: Ken Eastman, Anthony Caro (1924–2013), Sandor Kecskemeti. For Eastman, the interior and the exterior of his forms are of equal worth and interest. How the two interact is what his work is all about. Even when hidden from view, the insides of his work are conveying a message. Hungarian sculptor Sandor Kecskemeti's work (whether in clay or stone) deals solely with the outside; creating a void inside his clay work doesn't concern him. It was with great interest that I interviewed both Eastman and Kecskemeti for my Ceramics MA some years ago. Eastman talked of receiving a phone call from maker Jim Partridge who had just visited the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao; 'I've just walked into one of your pots'.² 'Working somewhere between sculpture and architecture'³ is how Jane McCabe, in her poetic monograph, describes Eastman's work.

The principle connecting thread between these ceramics and architecture is form. Where that form is explored with seemingly few constraints or with a vitality that transcends them, there is a sense that a clarity of vision has been achieved: a pure form of architecture. It is this that I strive to achieve in my own work. 



Notes 1 John Townsend, MA student, University of Central Lancashire (Uclan), 2014 2 Ken Eastman interviewed by Rachel Grimshaw, Herefordshire, 12 March 2008 3 Jane McCabe, *Ken Eastman: Behind the Gates of Clay* (Barrett Marsden Gallery, 2004), p3

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