

# Review

## EXHIBITIONS

### URBAN TRACES: CERAMICS AND THE CITY GALLERY OLDHAM, OLDHAM 16 JULY-6 NOVEMBER 2011

Eighteen ceramic artists drawn together in a themed exhibition 'exploring the significance of architecture and the city in studio ceramics' was always going to be an ambitious challenge for the curators. The resultant show reveals the thought and sensitivity that they have brought to bear in dealing with a complex topic. The mix of makers includes established names such as Ian Godfrey and Neil Brownsword, alongside relative newcomers like Rachel Grimshaw, whose tactile, squashed, and manipulated block-like forms stood out because of her sensitive understanding of detail within a deceptively simple shape.

The exhibition included some earlier works that served to emphasise that this neglected exhibition theme was popular in a previous era. The inclusion of Martin Smith's *Sloping Vessel* (1981) reminded me of his seminal exhibition *Forms Around a Vessel*, which at the time set a new benchmark for thematic creative exploration. In *Sloping Vessel*, Smith's studies of Italian architecture were translated into a work that showed the potential of clay to portray precision and gesture simultaneously. A more recent work, which directly references architectural form, is Halima Cassell's *Mancunian Rooftscape* (2005) in which she explores the potential of unglazed clay to work with changing patterns of light and shadow to mesmerise the viewer.

Ken Eastman showed two pieces: *Place* (1995) and the more recent *Aber Mawr* (2007). Eastman is one of the best ceramic artists working today. His sensitive manipulation of form and surface may make reference to architectural themes, but like all the very best work it exists strongly enough in its own terms to both intrigue and delight.

Material exploration was, as usual, at the forefront of David Binns' work, but his *Two Piece Standing Form* (2004) rose above mere technique to create something that had a presence based primarily on form.

The exhibition was jointly curated by Dinah Winch of Gallery Oldham and artist Brigitte Soltau. This was Soltau's first venture into curating and I hope will not be her last. She brings to the process a passion that is also communicated in her excellent catalogue essay and in her own work, which is included in the show. Soltau works in a well established genre that has been somewhat neglected in recent years. Her *Hulme 5 Residues* (2007-8) exemplifies her passion for material qualities within a ceramic palette that lends itself to the interpretation of architectural decay. This work also includes some found domestic metal items that bring poignancy to the subject of urban decay.

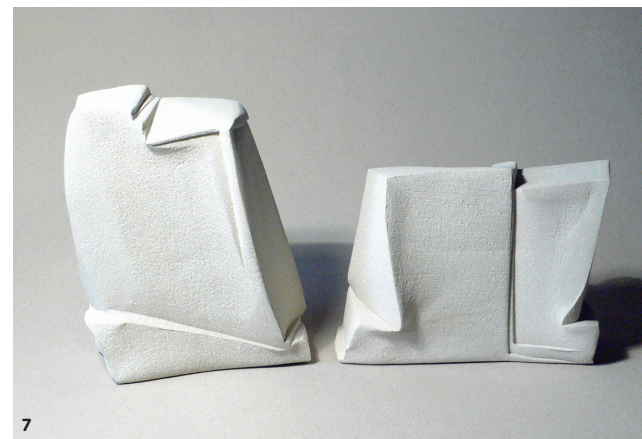
Gallery Oldham is an outstanding venue for showing ceramics and never has it been better linked to a thematic exhibition than here, where the vistas through the glazed walls to the townscape resonate so well with many of the exhibits. The gallery continues to add to its extensive modern ceramic collections, which is great news in these straitened times, and the exhibition includes some recent acquisitions, a brilliant way to introduce and contextualise them to the public. The exhibition continues until November and it is well worth a visit. An excellent catalogue is available that includes illustrations of the work of all the exhibitors.

#### Alex McErlain

Alex McErlain is a potter, curator, filmmaker, and recently retired academic



6



7



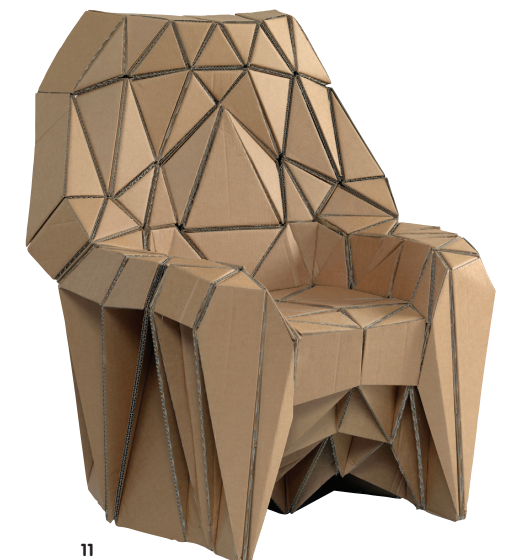
8



9



10



11

6 David Binns – *Standing Form*, H63cm  
7 Rachel Grimshaw – *Angled Forms*, H23cm  
8 Brigitte Soltau – *Residues*, H32cm (Photo: Helen Pugh-Cook)  
9 Ken Eastman – *Aber Mawr*, H33.5cm  
10 Michael Eden – *Babel Vessel #1*, nylon with mineral coating, H37cm (Photo: Nick Moss)  
11 Liam Hopkins (Lazerian) – *Blavais armchair*, cardboard, H103cm (Photo: Nick Moss)

### LAB CRAFT: DIGITAL ADVENTURES IN CONTEMPORARY CRAFT ARTSDEPOT, LONDON, 6 MAY-26 JUNE 2011

Craft's current involvement with digital technology seems quite exciting; as a field of inquiry it is relatively new and latent with potential. To the uninitiated it can appear like magic, to conjure things from nothing, making the seamless transition from concept to commodity possible. This exhibition capitalises on this impression, but also seeks to inform by focusing – through craft – on the skill and sensibility involved in manipulating digital technologies. For thousands of years *techné* – the rational method of producing an object – has been translated as 'craft' and craft's involvement with technology is clearly as ancient as its practice. In many ways, since the industrial revolution and the advent of mass production, a major concern of craft – or the applied arts – has been the nature of the work of craft in the age of its mechanical reproducibility. My impression is that the Crafts Council exhibition seeks to build on this tradition to challenge ossified notions of craft, and to propose that its enduring relationship with technology – its form of knowing or experiencing through practice – lends it a privileged position from which to discuss and explore these new technologies.

Some of the work in this exhibition seems to want to explore and dazzle with what technology can do, and this sits a bit uneasily because it doesn't seem enough to assert that no human hand could have made it because, if it had tried, it probably could have. While the newness of the machinery and current costs of production may render the work precious, and therefore collectible for a while, any 'aura' it may assume from this is undermined by its inherent ability to be mechanically reproduced. For me, the more interesting work is concerned with singularity, that slippery something computer scientists are now trying to pin down and which lurks in the nature of human

interaction with technology, with white noise, or the ghost in the machine. Some of the artists are using technology as Walter Benjamin predicted in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* when he discusses how, like psychoanalysis, the camera has revolutionised the way we look: to focus the eye on the overlooked, as a way of capturing or fixing the ephemeral – the *augenblick* – that which passes fleetingly, in the blink of an eye. Lynne MacLachlan's work with bubbles, Nina Tolstrup's *Branch Out*, and Daniel O'Riordan's *Ripple Tank Table* are examples of this type of work. A pervading sense of romanticism runs through much of the work displayed, like an echo, which is both nostalgic and anticipatory, taking the form of new technologies that evoke a heritage of traditional crafted objects or processes. Melanie Bowles' *Digital Shibori*, Gareth Neal's *Louis*, and Michael Eden's *The Babel Vessel #1* are cases in point. Excitement, but also profound ambivalence is evident in Geoffrey Mann's *Shine* and Zachary Eastward-Bloom's *Information Ate My Table*, which try to embody the sense of the maker relative to these codes that would encrypt, interpret, and direct their thoughts. This is a necessary exhibition.

#### Brigit Connolly

Lab Craft is a Crafts Council touring exhibition, curated by Max Fraser. The exhibition continues in Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum, 30 September-20 November 2011; The Civic, Barnsley, 30 November-21 January 2012; Oriol Myrddin, Camarthen, 25 February-7 April 2012. Web [www.labcraft.org.uk](http://www.labcraft.org.uk)  
Brigit Connolly is a ceramist currently undertaking a research degree at the Royal College of Art