

Sam Hall's pots - working in-between

always the 'potter', the down-to-earth Yorkshireman talks about his pots

Sam Hall's pots have the capacity to jar familiar expectations of craft pottery, and to exceed contemporary confluences between craft, and fine art conceptualism. More than hybrid, Sam Hall's practice bridges 'phenomenal and conceptual dimensions'ⁱ.

Based in St Ives for the last 15 years, Hall's practice may have been influenced and informed, in some ways by St Ives Modernism, or the Leach pottery heritage, which has produced an enclave of excellent contemporary potters. Yet Hall's work resists these contexts. His work firmly departs from tradition and heritage. Hall admits that working between juxtaposed strands of history and 'heritage' in St Ives has been enriching.

Hall's pots have a common, yet sparse language of solidity of form, and repetition. What Hall calls 'flattened forms' or 'flat forms', are essentially a kind of squashed cylinder, which can be square, reduced, or enlarged proportionally within the repetition of the form. Hall's interest seems to primarily lie, in the surface that he creates to play on. A recent trip to Denmark underlined differences between Hall, and other potters; their dictum of 'making and firing is everything', is for Hall, changed to 'what happens in-between making and firing is everything'.

The process of what happens in-between looks like play (as we talk, Sam playfully graffitied 'yes' onto one of the pots). Hall explains how the 'scribbles' he makes onto the pot surface create a shape, and a character for that pot. Hall has the confidence, and freedom to 'play', because of his skill and experience. He explains that the knowledge of how to change or reverse anything at any stage, frees him for play; even using an angle grinder to shave off excesses if necessary. Hall's work is a culmination of technical ability, but he is also a master of his art, as he transcends technique 'so that the art becomes an 'artless art' growing out of the unconscious'.ⁱⁱ

Hall goes on to describe a thought-form process where he thinks or visualizes three or more, stages ahead. Using alchemy, Hall knows how copper, and magnesium will bleed through layers of slip, with each firing. He will place slip onto wet or dry clay in various amounts to get surface and texture. He knows how to place coloured slips into scratches and lines, creating texture and depth. He knows how to use graphite pencils, including an invented white one, and what marks will 'come through' successive firings. Hall knows 'his' chalk white paint, commercial stains, and enamel.

The methods Hall uses are a vocabulary of which he talks lovingly, meeting

John Dewey's advice that, 'Craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be 'loving'.ⁱⁱⁱ Hall loves the idea that any mark, is never lost, 'every mark made in clay is forever', he says, scratching a mark in the table in front of us as if to underline this idea.

Each pot is 'like a fragmented score that has to be orchestrated'^{iv}. This 'score' is the composition residing in the surface of each pot, and whilst 'the object's native tongue resists the qualification and codification common to verbal communication'^v, Hall's orchestrated mark making loosens the object's native tongue, and has become almost 'automatic' writing. Automatic writing is the practice of producing text, in which the person producing it, doesn't acknowledge it as coming from his or her central place of identity. It's a practice that mediums indulge in. It's also practiced by writers and poets. Like artist Susan Hillier, Hall uses 'automatic writing' as a medium for visionary experience, and communication across boundaries. The mystique of our participation in this mark-making, as an audience, is one in which we are invited to find our own meaning. In the same way that Structuralist Roland Barthes insists 'the goal of literary work is to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of the text'^{vi}, Sam Hall's pots 'animate[]...language system's condition as coded communication and as an object for an infinite interpretive process'^{vii}. We are invited to decode meaning and decide for ourselves what is 'written'.

Hall spends his time in-between making and firing, 'talking' to his pots. He records experiences and feelings, in a personal, and abstracted way onto his pots. It is this, which imbues these objects, with desire, as well as knowledge. His work becomes about finding his way in the world, negotiating meaning, and establishing identity.^{viii} Mark-making comes out of a sense of shared understanding of human condition. Hall admits, 'pots actually say everything beyond their boundaries'.

Like the work of Peter Voulkos, these are 'deeply felt sculptural forms, and symbols'.^{ix} More than decorative enhancement, the tactility of the surface multiplies the compositional elements. In each firing Hall builds up stratification, and historification. Hall thinks of clay as symbolizing 'permanence', he says 'it is how we know about civilization.' I am still fascinated by the story, some years ago, of Hall taking some of his pots out to sea on his boat, and throwing them into the water. If found, what indeed will future generations make of such archeology?

In early work Hall used a different vocabulary. More like primitive art, it was heavy, earthy and geometric. Later this simple vocabulary was extended by lines, spots, and more colour. Then in 2003, after an art residency in Ireland, where Hall spent the whole time drawing, Hall made a definite departure. Drawing broke through the formality and structure of earlier work. Mark-making went beyond scribing and incising. Like Lucio Fontana, Hall also began

breaking and puncturing the clay. It is from 2003 onwards, that we see Hall develop his current vocabulary of methods, techniques, and colour.

In Hall's latest work he references the 'foot, body and spout' of Bernard Leech's proportional aesthetics, which in the light of Hall's recently addition of plinths as part of his 'flattened form', becomes almost 'stage, lights, action'. He talks of playing with proportion, begging the question of where the pot ends and the base begins. One idea behind the addition of plinths was to lighten the form in several ways; in a practical sense as it sits on the feet of the plinth, as well as letting light through, and compositionally 'lifting' it. It is also a dramatic form, providing a stage upon which Hall's dramas can 'act out'. Hall admits he has been recently seduced by Caravaggio's still-life painting. It will be interesting indeed to see where this new interest will take him.

Like those before him, Hall's work with his material, and vocabulary is one of performance and process. He is a craftsman driven by ritual, intuition and innovation. Sam Hall's work reveals an artist-shaman whose practice is unbounded and could be seen as

'a solitary séance of possible, even new ways of seeing and acting'.^x

His last words as I left the studio were 'the years go quickly when you're having fun'.

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Total: 1,170 words

ⁱ John Beardsley, as quoted in Fariello M. & Owen P., eds. (2004) Objects & Meaning. New Perspectives on art & Craft, Scarecrow Press, Maryland:London

ⁱⁱ Herrigel, E., (1953) Zen in the Art of Archery, Routledge:Kegan Paul

ⁱⁱⁱ Fariello, MA & Owen, P (eds.) (2004), Objects & Meaning New perspective on Art & Craft, scarecrow Press, Maryland:London

^{iv} Ceramics (art & Perception), Issue 75, 2009 p13

^v Fariello, MA & Owen, P (eds.) (2004), Objects & Meaning New perspective on Art & Craft, scarecrow Press, Maryland:London

^{vi} Beasley-Murray, T., (2007) Mikhail Bakhtin & Walter Benjamin, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, NY

^{vii} Ceramics (art & Perception), Issue 75, 2009 p13

^{viii} www.adam-welch.com/docs/InterlocutoryExistentialism.pdf (4.06.09)

^{ix} John Maltby in Slivka R., (1978) The art of Peter Voulkos, Kodansha Int Ltd & Oakland Museum,

^x Heiser, J. (2008) Things that matter in contemporary art, Steinberg Press: New York, p.98
