

Making: some think weaving – baskets and ultimately cloth – is the oldest of that specifically human activity. Moulding and shaping from earth, from clay, must have come at the same time, or soon thereafter. Extraordinary tiny and startlingly vivid sculptures of female figures in fired clay (as well as stone, ivory, and bone) have survived from perhaps 30,000 years ago; utilitarian pottery from, say, 20,000 years ago. Containers, vessels, receptacles, jars, bowls, pots, urns, beakers are among the oldest things made by us, used by us, and turned into art. The associations of these forms touch all aspects of our shared and communal existence: the preparation, the cooking, the presentation, and the storage too of both food and drink, and the great urn or jar shape for burial. Funerary jars have a history of millennia, none more astonishing than the many surviving in Laos' Plain of Jars, each three to six metres high, round, and carved out of rock. These megalithic Iron Age prehistoric creations were immovable, therefore fit for purpose, and both the shapes and scale were achievable in clay.

AN IMAGINATIVE FUSION It is the absorbing excitement of Julian Stair's continually evolving and experimental practice of ceramics that leads him to occupy a country all his own in such an intellectually provocative and aesthetically stimulating manner. The cliché about the past is obvious but nevertheless true – it is another and distant country – but it is Julian's gift to quarry it both far and near. He has made academic studies of twentieth-century British studio pottery and has explored the extraordinary combination of veneration and pragmatism that infuses the long history of oriental pottery and porcelain. Oriental pottery is both used and worshipped, ritualised and ordinary. There are tea ceremonies; there are small perfections set aside, mounted, admired from a distance. These attitudes are contradictory. From them Julian Stair creates an imaginative, intellectual fusion.

Julian reaches back into the diverse histories of pottery: that of use and that of beauty. His open-ended trajectory began, of course, in student days. There and then, during an extensive visual education, he made ceramic objects almost totally abstract with no utilitarian echoes except those we subliminally associate with the use of ceramic as the primary material. Here, there was a making of objects which were and are defiantly objects, made of clay and fired clay rather than the more conventional materials of sculpture. They exhibited one prevalent characteristic of the potter's art – that they had to be seen and understood in the round. It is this inescapable multiple viewpoint (no back, front, or side) that has almost, albeit not entirely, been an inevitable component of our experience of Julian's work.

Julian and several of his notable contemporaries, whilst not in any sense a heterogeneous group, have (through the shared studios of several years ago and an apprentice-assistant system that is still flourishing) contributed to the transformation of our understanding and appreciation of so-called studio ceramics. This history, shared in time but immensely various in art, is encapsulated in group and individual catalogues. Moreover, several members of this small but significant force are writers, historians, and theorists. Practice has been complemented by academic study, writing, and teaching.

Julian Stair's own practice went back for a period to what historians and archaeologists of the history of ceramics would acknowledge as the beginning, and which is usually the starting point: the individual, handmade object of utility, including shallow bowls, saucers, and plates that normally had only one surface visible, and cups, mugs,

Absorbing & Inescapable Presences

Marina Vaizey contemplates Julian Stair's vessel objects, large to small, individual and grouped.





As seen in **CERAMIC**
REVIEW

3 Stoneware beakers (detail), 2010
 4 Keuper Marl cup and Etruria Marl beaker (detail), 2010 5 Eleven cups, thrown Etruria Marl, stoneware, basalt and Keuper Marl cups and beakers on a handbuilt oxidised Etruria Marl ground, 2010, W83cm 6 Cups and beakers (detail), 2010 7 Etruria Marl caddy (detail), 2010 8 Keuper Marl teapot (detail), 2010 9 Teapot and two cups,

thrown Keuper Marl teapot with a basalt beaker and white stoneware cup on a handbuilt stoneware ground with vitreous slip, 2010, H19cm 10 Five teapots and caddies, thrown and constructed teapots and caddies, basalt, Keuper Marl, porcelain and reduced Etruria Marl on a handbuilt oxidised Etruria Marl ground, 2010, L88cm



beakers, and jugs, both held and seen in the round. The well-made thing: the oft-quoted but little followed William Morris dictum, 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful', is astonishingly alive in Julian Stair's practice. Thus, there was a period in Julian's work we could almost call hybrid – domestic ware which also had a life in its own right.

OBJECTS His œuvre has evolved from making things that are participants in daily life to the making of artefacts, almost inevitably and inescapably formed into groups and set apart from practical utilitarian use, which have quite another use entirely. Here are objects for their own sake, to be looked at, gazed upon, meditated on, indeed lived with, and in a very different way from other visual imagery. First, everything may be, and sometimes should be, seen at maximum in the round, and at the very least in a semi-circle. Second, every object – teapot, beaker, cup – could be used. They are physically robust; we choose to look and at times handle but not to use. Knowing however that we can add a further dimension to their physicality. The artefacts thus echo the domestic with an austere pared down elegance and simplicity. They are fully realised,

yet they are completely and irrefutably set apart. Sometimes they are on their own, but almost invariably the artefacts, from single objects to as many as a dozen or more, are set in a row on a 'ground'. One installation, a private commission in a London home where a complete work is set out in a range of groupings horizontally and vertically projecting from a wall, has ninety individual pots or containers and is designed to be seen, and even just subtly glimpsed, from multiple viewpoints. These, unusually, are set relatively high on ceramic plinths or platforms.

This installation writ large points out and underlines what is for now more typical practice. A ground, a lowly platform, almost echoing in form archaic Chinese tables, receives and upholds the groupings. The groups may mix forms – beakers, drinking vessels, sometimes with lips, none with handles; lidded caddies and teapots with handles in their same material – or contain simply one class of form, each individual, coloured differently, glazed or not. They repose serenely, slightly lifted in their special supports, their platforms. Each platform is a different dimension supporting a different group. Thus each form is a syllable, or perhaps a word. Grouped, they are phrases, sentences, *apercus*, aphorisms, visual cadences.



6



7



8

Julian Stair is currently exhibiting new work at the Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, until 4 September 2010
 Web www.julianstair.com
 Marina Vaizey is an art critic, and has been a member of the Crafts Council. She collects and commissions work by contemporary makers, and has written extensively on contemporary applied arts



9



10

The individuals in their groups are related in all their different dimensions, in seemingly inevitable ways: independent, cooperative, equal, in a series, sometimes almost slightly different generations, a natural hierarchy. The work is simultaneously narrative and abstract, just as the pieces call on and echo traditions and histories while being new, curiously unexpected, and utterly familiar. The relationships within the groupings are ambiguous, ambivalent, mysterious, and at ease: *familial*.

MONUMENTALS In parallel, between making containers of various sorts, all of which could fit in the hand, Julian Stair made an astonishing technical breakthrough into the truly monumental. He has made ceramic monumentals taller than us, rising in oblique angles from the floor. A specialist brick factory – Wienerberger Bricks PLC – has been the site of this extraordinary endeavour, providing the facilities which the imagination of the artist has used and extended, creating works in which the handmade is paramount.

In all, monumental and the endlessly varied small processions and groupings of receptacles, there are totally absorbing and inescapable presences. The monumentals have a human scale; the small receptacles

imply potential human use. The colours, matt or glaze, are always a range of blacks, greys, ochres, terracottas, and whites, subtly changing, an extraordinary variety. The materials too, the slips and glazes, may be combined in many ways: there are pieces that are not yet fired; there is stoneware, basalt, Etruria Marl, porcelain; and pieces are thrown, handbuilt, constructed in various combinations of techniques.

Thus for the visitor to an exhibition, carefully contrived as a satisfying installation of varied pieces placed horizontally on free-standing surfaces or horizontally and vertically against walls or at right angles, there are relationships to be perceived in each individual piece of a variety of components. Having one's daily life at home enlivened and enhanced by the visibility of a piece by Julian Stair is, as this writer can testify, an exemplar of that almost indefinable response that art finds in us. We are both questioned and reassured, comforted and energised, looking at a resolution, yet aware of changing possibilities. The vocabulary is austere, and the language endlessly rich, eloquent, generous, and open.

Less does mean more. ☞