



**COLLECTING
CONTEMPORARY
CERAMICS**



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An exhibition of ceramics, looking at recent purchases for Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales permanent collection along with new work from the makers

curated by Judy Dames





DAVID BINNS

David Binns' enigmatic, minimalist, slab-like ceramic forms, some upright and tapering like the prow of a boat, some disc-shaped with the gentlest of depressions, others which rock or arch bridge-like, reward a slow focussed look. They do not clamour for attention nor give instant gratification. They reveal more and more in direct proportion to the attention given.

His early ambition was to become an architect. Later, realising that for him "handling materials was crucial," he decided instead to study 3D Design (wood, metal, ceramics) with the intention of becoming a furniture designer. He vividly recalls a tutor introducing him to Japanese architecture and Zen garden design and how moved he was,

on pursuing the subject in the library, to discover something of its extraordinary nature. He recalls the amazement he felt on seeing the attention they gave to the smallest architectural detail. "There was a whole book on cut joints!" Later, on visiting Japan, the swoop of a temple roof set against the vertical lines of the building served as general inspiration for the form



of his ceramics. Clarity of shape and control of material are the hallmarks of Binns' work, the form of his pieces seeming essentially urban. However, he mentions how intrigued he was by the combination of the deep respect held by the Japanese for natural materials and forms and the deliberate control they exert over them, as in Japanese gardens: a meditative appreciation of nature through the intervention of art.

By the time he graduated, the material that most engaged him was clay and following an invitation he spent two years working alongside the distinguished potter, David Roberts. Here he continued experiments with raku firing, exploring control of the network of smoke-stained veins on the unglazed wheel-thrown pots he then made. Ever since leaving Roberts' studio he has combined his own ceramic practice with teaching, which allows him time to experiment.

As he turned from making hollow vessel forms to solid abstract shapes he became increasingly fascinated by the material nature of clay and its fired surface. He began to investigate the introduction of other materials into the main body, such as granite chippings, pebbles, sawdust, leaves, fused zirconium and other minerals, and fired clay which he had stained and ground. Ongoing experiments, some of which have been conducted in partnership with industrial firms, have resulted in a quite extraordinary range of texture and pattern, all of which run right through the body of the clay. In these intricate surfaces one sees a geology of the imagination, a universe of stars. Asked,

regarding the more radical of these experiments, if he felt he must continue to use clay as the essential material, he says he feels that recently he may have pulled back somewhat. "On the one hand as long as you're engaged with the material it could be any material. However, there is a connection to the earth. I have an affinity to earthy things, a creatively emotional attachment." Glassy substances, which he is at present exploring to give a more luminous body, are themselves 'earth connected'.

In contrast to the handling of material, which has been important to him since childhood, he does not want his work to look hand-built. He starts to make his abstract sculptural forms by kneading a combination of aggregate materials into the soft clay and alternatively then 'throwing' it into large plaster moulds or, depending on the desired shape, flattening sheets of clay and shaping them in wooden forms or draping them over stretched fabric. After a very slow firing he then grinds the surface outside in his garden, using a water-fed electric grinder. This can take up to nine or ten hours and is a truly Herculean job, especially in winter when there is snow on the ground and he needs to wear many layers of clothes, including a wet suit. He says however that he enters a trance-like state, focussed exclusively on the shape and surface he is creating, and that he is hardly aware of the physical hardship. The pieces are then dried and lightly polished with wax.

A major source of inspiration for him has been building material: cut rock in quarries, stonemasons' yards, bricks and the polished stone of corporate buildings.

A short while ago he was making slabs punctured by holes arranged in mathematical grids, shadows and light playing an important part of the whole. One such piece was described as being like "a decaying building: glassless, roofless and empty; yet strangely potent."¹ Now the forms are increasingly spare, the texture contained within a pristine smoothness, more an internal pattern, a revelation of the material's structure. This pared-down quality gives an ambiguity to the modest scale of a piece; it could be monumental. He is pleased to have recently been invited, in an ongoing collaboration with a garden designer, to create work for out of doors, and hopes for opportunities to continue making on a large scale. The form of his work is not domestic but austere and suggestive of ritual. These apparently simple shapes have a quiet gravity that is conducive to meditation; an acquaintance remarked that a piece looked like an altar. He writes, "I like the idea of striving for a quality that can no longer be improved by subtraction."²

1. Emma Maiden, *Crafts* 170, May/June 2001
2. *David Binns*, catalogue, The Gallery, Ruthin Craft Centre, 2001

Featured pieces
Two piece Standing Form, glass ceramic, 2004
Square Form, glass ceramic, 2005

