

Exhibition Review by Sarah Gee

Julian Stair: The Matter of Life and Death

Curated by Julian Stair

York St Marys

Castlegate

York

YO1 9RN

10 May 10th – 7 July 2013

As the recent installation *The Matter of Life and Death* at York St Marys¹ and his solo exhibition *Quietus* at mima² in 2012 have demonstrated, Julian Stair is a remarkable artist, using ceramic materials, processes and skills to expose and explore issues which many of us find uncomfortable to contemplate and difficult to articulate: the fact of our inevitable demise, and that of those we love. Our society has largely removed death from our domestic experience; so, with his creative history in exploring domestic functional ceramics, Stair seems an appropriate guide to lead us into a measured engagement with issues of mortality and our impermanence, given that his current body of work concentrates on how the human body may be contained once we die.

Through this practical approach to death, which initially prompts such questions as: How do we deal with the remains of our loved ones? How will others manage the disposal of our own body?, Stair enables consideration of deeper, frequently unarticulated questions: How do we feel when we dispose of the remains of others? What is left when their ‘liveness’ is extinct? Where is dignity in death as the body decays? And none of this is necessarily morbid. These are natural questions arising from the practicalities of putting the corpse to rest, yet they also concern fundamental matters of care, relationships, and remembering.

Stair has in his past work asked us to reflect on our local ceramic environment through teapots, bowls, cups – objects we often overlook even while handling them daily. His exploration of the place of ceramic vessels in everyday use has a refreshing and interrogative perspective: he emphasises their difference as much by their placement on small stands as through his manipulation to alter their familiarity. Thus he distances them from their usual place in our lives – a subtle form of defamiliarisation – and enables us to appreciate their combination of functionality and aesthetic presence.

With his current, thoughtful, body of work, Stair (who describes himself as ‘a potter and writer’³) invites us to look beyond the practical domestic vessel as utensil and to consider some deeper issues regarding (that trite but appropriate phrase) ‘the human condition’. He might well consider revising his description of himself to ‘artist, potter and writer’, exploring – as he does with this work – issues of mortality, compassion and human connectedness. In extending his enquiries into such an arena, he is more than solely a ‘maker of articles of baked clay’.⁴

Stair has spoken of the parallels between the human body and the clay vessel and the potter's terminology – foot, belly, shoulder, neck, lip – is familiar to us all.⁵ Like many people who work with clay, he notes the frequency with which man is equated with clay in creation stories around the world, and also, of course, the description of god, the creative force, as potter in diverse cultures. He is also interested in the substantial nature of work made with clay – ‘stuff’ as he calls it - not just visual, but tangible and tactile, demanding to be explored with the hand and our other senses, as well as with the eye. Indeed, direct contact with his *Quietus* work was permitted (if not trumpeted as such) by the gallery, and tapping *Monumental Jar V* to produce a ringing note has given many visitors a sneaky thrill since its purchase for mima by the Art Fund in 2008.

By shifting his gaze beyond ceramic domesticity to the way in which we contain the human body after death, Stair again encourages a reevaluation of the purpose for the vessel, and also our respect for the human form in death. His focus demands to be considered in the context of his existing interest in the vessel, in ceramic material, and in the parallels between the human and the clay body. Indeed, it emerges naturally from Stair's personal interests and his long history of engagement with the functional ceramic vessel.

In his current investigation of the ceramic container for the human body, Stair has not compromised his well-honed and clearly personal aesthetic. Those familiar with his work will recognise his range of mainly unglazed clay bodies, thrown to achieve a slight dissonance from what we might expect in the form and the function for a pot, and his natural, earth-derived tones. Through his practised technical skills with diverse clay bodies and firing regimes, he creates vessel forms which are aesthetically pleasing in their contours and volume, while, occasionally, unnerving in their echoes of the human form. Measured, sensitive, subdued and rigorous are the adjectives which come to mind when engaging with his work.

Alongside this robust use of material, clearly – almost defiantly – showing the making process in its superfluous untrimmed eruptions, fixed by fire, of the soft clay under the maker's tool, Stair also demonstrates a compassionate expression of his subject matter, drawing in and engaging his audience without shocking us. By the openness of his intent and the frankness of his forms, he enables us to engage with reassurance in a dialogue with his pieces, and through them with his view that our remains deserve a sympathetic and thoughtful mode of containment after death; one that shows respect and consideration of a different order from that of the usual modern MDF box with its shiny finish and brass handles.

The installation *The Matter of Life and Death* at York St Marys relates very closely to Stair's impressive touring solo exhibition *Quietus: The Vessel, Death and the Human Body*, first exhibited at mima and later shown at the National Museum Cardiff and currently at Winchester Cathedral.⁶ But it takes the issues initiated in his *Quietus* investigation to a different level.

At mima, Stair's pieces, many of human dimensions, filled the dedicated gallery and made their own very bold statement in an otherwise empty space, clearly an exhibition focused on one artist and his concerns. In Cardiff, funerary ceramics from the museum's collection were introduced into the solo show, enabling connections to be made across the centuries, and indicating the constancy of our concerns at the time of death: how to dispose respectfully of someone's remains. In Winchester, the cathedral surroundings no doubt take the connections further still. All seems to be progressing along a path away from the individual focus of the solo show.

At York St Marys, Stair in collaboration with the York Museums Trust has taken that development a significant step further, engaging his work in a conversation with (mainly ceramic) pieces from the Trust's collections with funerary and cinerary functions. New work and historic material share the stage, in physical and psychological balance. They speak with one silent but eloquent voice. And the location in a medieval church, which has seen its fair share of burials and memorials, could not be more appropriate for Stair's examination of the rituals and practicalities concerning death across varying cultures and centuries: from preservation of significant body parts in canopic urns from pharaonic Egypt, prehistoric jars to hold human ashes, Roman head-pots and gypsum tomb-packing, to a very moving mediaeval casket to preserve the heart of a traveller and bring it back home to rest.

The first impression on entering the exhibition space in York from the tourist-thronged city streets is of quiet, calm and order. There is an austerity, simplicity and airiness in the setting of this stone-built church, which belies the crowds, colour and noise of the world outside, with its close neighbour, Jorvik, an inevitably busy tourist attraction.

The sympathy of this peaceful context with Stair's installation is marked: the space has very strong connotations with death and the Christian ritual, given the significant number and variety of monuments and memorials to the dead which it still houses. The church's stillness is emphasised by the cool, neutral, natural stone structure and the spacious, symmetrical volume of the nave. The measured spacing of the installation's white plinths resembles a congregation, while the lack of glass cases – the open, trusting form of the display – enables close engagement with each piece, both historic and contemporary.

The contextualising of the selected pieces, whether Stair's or from the YMT collection, and their mutual conversation, creates a strong impact, but does it really enable the visitor to engage and come to better terms with the issues of human mortality – the matter of life and death of the installation's title?

The pieces the artist has selected from the York collections to converse with his own work are varied in size and form as well as age and provenance. Though none of them are on the impressive six-foot scale of the life-sized standing vessels of the *Quietus* show, these archaeological pieces do share the diversity which that exhibition had: large and small, vertical and horizontal, anthropomorphic and abstract. In retrospect, in the Middlesbrough gallery, the variety of forms and scales, while intriguing, spark the question: what does the artist really think is appropriate as a container for the body in

death? While much ingenuity, technical skill and imagination were invested in generating the work, there was such variety, such a sampling, that it was tempting to think Stair had not made up his mind about what he was comfortable with. He did not appear to have settled for himself the matter of the containment of the body in death.

In the context of St Marys York, the archaeological pieces cohere - all being the result of a pragmatic, as well as a ritual, problem-solving exercise. In their diverse ways, they were made for similar purposes in the real world; and in the cool intimacy of the ritual space of a church, Stair's pieces work well alongside and with them. The tacit invitation offered by the lack of glass cases enables the visitor to get as close to Stair's work as she can to the funerary containers of the past. Maybe because the ratio of Stair's pieces to the collected pieces is in balance, and because the variation across his own work (about fifteen pieces in total), is much reduced in this setting compared with his solo show, the selection feels more animated and focused in its mutual dialogue.

What comes across strongly in Stair's York installation is that these are the forms and volumes which, for the artist, are appropriate for the important task of holding human remains: elegant lidded, mainly unglazed, cinerary urns in Stair's hallmark range of colours and textures; his simple abstracted coffin forms, one with a smooth lead cover, another (in sombre black) small enough for a child ... What is more, the combination of Stair's work with that of makers from time immemorial offer the visitor to *The Matter of Life and Death* a palpable sense of harmony of intent and respect for the remains of the departed. Indeed, the sole glazed vessel Stair has introduced might jar with the rest of the installation, were it not for its harmonising form.

So Stair has, in this installation, succeeded in encouraging his audience towards better recognition and respect for issues, practical and emotional, regarding human death. He has progressed from his powerful, more experimental, *Quietus* show towards a distillation of his subject matter, enabling his audience to face the inevitable with greater equanimity and – dare one say – with pragmatism. After all, it is not every installation which prompts a visitor to ask in earnest: Does he make these things for practical use? And to receive the answer: Yes.

Sarah Gee, Artist/Researcher (undertaking a practice-led Ph.D. in Ceramics at the University of Sunderland)

Notes

¹ Commissioned by York Art Gallery, 10 May – 7 July 2013.

² Commissioned by mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), 13 July–11 November 2012. On tour to National Museum Cardiff 6 April–7 July 2013, Winchester Cathedral 1 August–30 September 2013

³ <http://www.julianstair.com>

⁴ **potter**: a maker of pottery; **pottery**: articles of baked clay collectively (as defined in *The Chambers Dictionary*, Edinburgh, Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd. 2003 ed. p.1180).

⁵ e.g. in Mark Wilcox's 2012 video *Quietus: A Documentary*, viewable at vimeo.com/user470262

⁶ See note 2 above.