

rob barnard essays

INTERVIEW WITH EDMUND DEWAAL & JULIAN STAIR

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BARNARD: When did you two first meet?

STAIR: We first met at a conference in spring of 1995 that was organized by the Crafts Council. It was very interesting because I knew Edmund's work before I met him. It was very nice to find that he was interested in much of what I was interested in, that we had been working in parallel so to speak. The whole issue of not just making pots, but turned pots and not just turned pots but porcelain. Edmund was also involved in critical projects, he was just starting the Leach book then, for example, and he was doing other writing, as was I.

DEWAAL: There was the sense of complete synchronicity; a fellow traveler that was not only involved in the criticism of contemporary work, which is rare for makers in England, but also was involved in historical, contextualizing research as well. Making pots that have reference to history and a tradition.

RB: How did you come to share a studio together?

JS: I had come to the end of a ten year lease at a studio which I shared with some other ceramists and felt that I was, so to speak, grown-up and was old enough to work on my own. I decided that I needed to work alone because I felt relatively isolated working in an urban environment and making thrown pots. I felt it was better to work on my own than to share space with other people whom I didn't have anything in common. Coincidentally, as it turned out, Edmund was interested in a new studio as well. We discussed it seriously the second time we met. So it turned out that I was sharing after I decided not to share.

EDW: I also had made a decision that I didn't want to share and it really could only have been Julian who could have persuaded me. There were lots of really positive reasons for sharing. I think not necessarily in terms of our work, which is very different, even divergent, but, I think, finding another maker whose autonomy you completely respect, and also who is critically confident enough to be able to engage in a proper dialogue with you, is incredibly rare. It is also very interesting because I had actually been thinking through the relationship between Lucie Rie and Hans Coper for a paper I was writing and coming to the conclusion that their work had absolutely nothing in common at all, but they shared their studio as peers. That actually was perhaps, the first real urban-shared studio. I thought that was a pretty good precedent for us to establish a studio.

JS: I think that Edmund's point of our work not being similar is important. It is a sharing of empathy or approach with a belief in the same sort of values that underpins the whole notion of making pottery, especially in the middle of London. Because the work is so different there is no friction or overlapping in terms of our work impinging on each other.

RB: Another thing I think that is interesting is that both of you are writers, as well as makers. There

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seems to be a lot of resistance among potters to the notion of articulating your ideas about what you make. I suppose they fear that if you articulate them, they might vanish or that they might lose some part of their soul or something. So why do you feel you need to or want to talk about your ideas?

EDW: I think there is a very strong, absolutely basic reason for articulating your own views about making. And that is, if you don't do it someone else will. The reality of having people from the outside, who do not understand a complex world like that of ceramics articulating ideas for makers, is that there ends up being a substantial body of second rate projection onto ceramics from different disciplines.

JS: I don't see any difference between making and writing. If pots are a physical manifestation of ideas then that idea has a kind of breadth that can exist in different formats. If pots are the literal embodiments of ideas then we should to some degree be able to some express those ideas as a concept, which is what writing is all about. I do accept the fact that some artists aren't very comfortable or find it very difficult to articulate their ideas, so I am not saying that absolutely every maker has to write about their work. I think, however, that the vast majority of significant artists throughout history have always spoken or written about their ideas. I think that in the crafts there hasn't been enough of that. There are historical precedents for it in the crafts and while one may or may not agree with those ideas, the fact is that there was this effort there to discuss and talk about the ideas that surround the crafts.

EDW: The other thing, I suppose, that is really important to say is that it is a very good moment to be a writer. There seems to be a certain pressure built up from the unsaid things and the unthought through things and now there is this release into real dialogue not only amongst people who do clay, but also other disciplines. I find that when I talk about pots and the values and ideas I have about making them with academic friends from archaeology, cultural anthropology and literature, that often there is a sense of genuine interest about what is going on inside my world. I can talk in a language that they understand and they can talk in a language I understand about the role and value of making handmade things at this point in culture. So it's quite exciting to have ceramics seen and talked about in so many different ways.

JS: I think it is a pivotal time for contemporary craft in Britain at the moment. I think we are at a time now where the concept of craft history is actually in the process of being formed. So the reason for makers to write, which comes back to Edmund's point of taking control, is that modern crafts is a relatively young discipline. It is only very recently, for example, that the major figures in British crafts – Leach, Cardew, Rie and Coper – have died. Modern crafts, for the first time, seems to be interested in going back and looking at its own history. So if makers aren't going to get involved in writing the definitive history of their own past, not only are we going to have to have inaccurate things said about our work in a contemporary sense, but also inaccurate versions of the history of our own discipline written for us. So I think it is imperative that makers are involved in writing in a contemporary vein as well as on the historical developments of our field.

RB: I agree with all the points both of you have made, but what I am really curious about, is at what

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point in your development did you feel the need to write. On a gut level, for example, what was it that caused you to abandon, for the moment, making pots and compelled you to sit down and write?

EDW: For me it was very much bound up in my apprenticeship with Geoffrey Whiting who was a great Leach generation figure. I was trained in an Orientalist tradition. In fact, I went to Japan when I was seventeen and did the whole tea ceremony business at Urasenke. While I was there, I was amazed to discover that the vast majority of Japanese pots weren't at all like the kinds of Japanese pots I had been learning about from reading Leach and being trained by Geoffrey Whiting. I got very confused by this and realized that throughout my reading of early Orientalist writings that there was this great disjunction between what people had projected onto Japan and what was really going on in Japan. So I realized that to make sense of this contradiction – my love for Oriental pots, and my confusion over Leach's writings about Japan – I had to write my own story. I am working on this all the time when I make pots; I have a close conversation with Oriental precursors, but I felt like I needed to do the same thing on an intellectual, literary level, such as researching the book on Leach, writing about Geoffrey Whiting and about Orientalism. It is all part of the journey for me as both a maker and a writer; it is absolutely integral to what I am about.

JS: Philip Rawson was extremely important to me. He taught at the Royal College of Art while I was there. It was a very critical time for me in terms of having contact with individuals who were clued into some of the ideas that I was struggling with. I had just started changing the way I was working to read-dress what really interested me about ceramics, which was the making of pots. I had done sculpture before and felt that I was going down a kind of cul de sac. I was disappointed at the RCA until I met Philip. He was a wonderful man because he showed me that pottery could really have significant meaning. He could give fantastically interesting lectures on any culture or division of the arts throughout history. So when Philip talked about ceramics he talked about it with the same kind of enthusiasm and interest that he displayed when he talked about Taoist religion or Buddhist art. So Philip was an important catalyst because he made me realize that the issues I was dealing with in my art could be talked about on an intellectual level.

RB: Neither of you fit the stereotype of what Americans, at least, think of when they picture the typical English potter. How would you define the differences between yourselves and rural English potters? Why do you choose, for example, to live in London and what does that mean for your work?

EDW: Well I guess the big difference is that the ruralist, the Leach tradition is very much about a meditative play on the complexion of the English countryside, and the value of raw materials, on local clay and local wood. It is about making pots for solace, to reassure; to in some sense to encapsulate a kind of retrogressive view of ceramics being a very particular kind of activity. It just isn't something I am interested in. I can respect it for other potters, but my England is not that kind of settled and grounded place. My dad, for example, is a refugee from Europe so cities are places to me which are full of interesting cycles and nervous energy that I find is absolutely essential to the way I work.

JS: I have spent all my life living in cities except for a year when I lived in Cornwall, almost next door to the Leach pottery, and six months in the Shenandoah Valley. This tradition you're talking about is something I wrestled with for a long time. I was drawn to this rural tradition on the one hand because I was interested in the way pottery as a medium could be used to express certain ideas, but on the other hand I just wasn't interested in the ideas that this tradition was premised upon. The writer Eric Hobsbawm talks about the "the invention of tradition". I think studio ceramics per se is an intellectual invention from the early part of this century and the Leach tradition is just one of the traditions that exists within this larger invented tradition of studio pottery. Someone who was very important to me was as a model, though, was Lucie Rie because she not only epitomized an urban or metropolitan approach, but also the fact that pottery could contain modernist ideas. That it didn't necessarily have to be about a nostalgic, romantic view of the past.

RB: What are the issues craftspeople in Britain are wrestling with at the moment?

JS: Well with the pluralism of the '80s there was a rejection in ceramics of the studio pottery tradition whose time many felt was past. It was like what was said of painting in the '70s, that painting is dead. I remember a catalog of an exhibition of kinetic art at the Haywood that described painting as the primitive practice of daubing pigment on woven material. I think that same kind of feeling existed in ceramics in the '80s about the rural studio pottery tradition. I think that now though there is at the grassroots level a feeling among younger potters in their '20s that the past actually has something to offer us and that making pottery is a worthwhile pursuit. It may not necessarily be the Leach tradition, which for a long time seemed to be the only model for studio potters. I think now there is a movement towards drawing from the past, not in a blind way, but reinterpreting it as part of a loose – and I use the term 'loose' delicately – ceramic language.

EDW: I hope that is so. I think I feel considerably more depressed about the current ceramics scene. I see inadequate revivals of figuration. I see people jumping on the bandwagon on minimalism. I see the continuation of a very vapid kind of postmodernism. I also see a few particularly good people emerging out of absolutely nowhere. I don't think that there is something that I can absolutely put my finger on at the moment either positively or negatively. Except to say that I think that one of the things that really is central at the moment to the crafts is the stuff about writing and language.

RB: It seems to me that here in Britain, unlike in the United States, the crafts world is more intimate and defined, so that when someone writes something or does something it has an immediate impact. So I am curious, do you feel there is any sense of urgency in Britain at the moment about coming to grips with what crafts' role in the near future?

EDW: The thinking here is pretty muddled. My hope for the future is that ceramics and the other crafts will shape up really, in relation to architecture and design. The crafts have to realize that the whole lazy approach to how ceramics are used, displayed and revealed within our cultural spaces is an important issue that has to be addressed.

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JS: I certainly don't want to create the impression that I am optimistic. I am less pessimistic or negative than I was about 10 or 12 years ago, but I still have this overlying sense of concern, if not outright irritation at the lack of any sort of substantial critical examination of the issues that affect us. I agree with Edmund that the main issue is that crafts cannot carry on in the same way it has. Whether you are a vessel maker, a sculptor or a potter, process and materials are not enough to justify and explain your work. Crafts has to define its position in relationship to the other arts, as a critical movement.

RB: I think most of us grew up in the crafts being told that you shouldn't make value judgments about other people's work and yet privately we make judgments all the time. The process of making judgments is how knowledge progresses. Do you think that that is a particular problem for the crafts?

EDW: Criticism doesn't really exist in the crafts because no one is really prepared to critique anyone else's work, (A) because it is bad manners after all and (B) there is this sense that one is somehow letting the side down. So after 70 years of this, if you write a negative review of someone's work, there is a feeling that you are showing up all of ceramics. The value of judgments is that it is a hardening process. It is also refining process that in the long run helps everyone.

RB: Its a dialectic, it isn't someone squashing someone else for your own benefit. Its part of a discourse that must be maintained if there is going to be progress in a field.

EDW: Exactly.

JS: Craft criticism hasn't been at a very interesting level for a long time, though in recent years it has become a bit more rigorous. But it has tended to be dominated by a very small number of individuals who for the most part are professional writers. There are a very few makers who are starting to write as well, but there is this dilemma that Edmund mentioned of criticizing fellow makers. I even found myself arguing with the editor of *Crafts* magazine that it puts the maker in an onerous position to criticize other work when you are also exhibiting work yourself. Then I realized, while listening to a program on literary criticism one day, that it has been a tradition in Britain that reviews of first novels are always written by established novelists. It is not seen as a conflict of interest that by being critical of someone else's work they are either promoting their own particular view or elevating their own work by contrast. So I am eating my words of a few months ago and saying that yes, I think that we have to put ourselves on the line more than we do.