

rob barnard essays

BRITISH TEAPOTS

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One of the first things you notice about the teapots in this show is that they are not metaphors or garish, whimsical plays on the teapot form that one sees so often in the myriad teapot exhibitions across the country. American ceramists seem to view the making of teapots as an opportunity to be “creative” and “inventive” – hence the glut of teapots in the shape of everything from cow’s udders and cantaloupes to nuclear reactors and human skulls. Among U.S. ceramists, it seems that the only prerequisite for a teapot is that it not look like a teapot. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the midst of all of this creative posturing few really beautiful teapots have emerged that speak to us in a language we understand.

We can safely say, I think, that the seven British potters who make up this exhibition run the gamut of aesthetic attitudes existing in British pottery today. David Leach and Seth Cardew work inside the modern utilitarian tradition of their distinguished fathers. Michael Casson and Sarah Walton’s works continue this tradition, but take a more expressive approach to form and decoration. The works of Walter Keeler, Janice Tchanlenko, and Phillipa de Burlet reflect a more contemporary approach to color and form.

What all of these works have in common, from Leach’s self-assured handling of the traditional teapot form in the vein of the classical pottery of the Sung dynasty to de Burlet’s slightly updated teapot with Postmodernist designs, is that their makers accept the cultural and social limitations of the teapot (in much the same way a composer accepts the limitations of a sonata) and to a greater and lesser degree succeed in using that recognizable form to make uncommonly eloquent visual statements. Unlike their clamorous American cousins, these teapots do more than merely declare individuality and brag about ingenuity – they respect the viewer and strive to make him or her part of the aesthetic proposition by using a form and language the viewer understands.

Part of that language – the language of craft – is function. The viewer is given access to the piece through function and is able, because of the possibilities of use, to become an active participant in the aesthetic proposal. It is also through use that the aesthetic significance of these teapots begins to reveal itself and starts to act on the notion of what the art experience can and ought to be. These seven British potters have succeeded in adding to and enriching the language of craft and have not, as is so often the case with contemporary craft, muddled and corrupted it.