

Peter Beard



Gold Vessel. 29 cm/h.



PETER BEARD IS a meticulous maker. His vessels, his free-standing, wall-mounted or plinth based forms present a dazzling surface quality. His surfaces, perhaps drawn from crustacean-like structures, textures in nature or organic pattern, betray their apparent spontaneity and freshness and actually exist due to precisely crafted applications of clay slip and glaze.

Beard is never without his sketchbook, which reveals another dimension to his practice as a ceramist. Perhaps this is not often seen or noticed. Sketchbooks are often private things, where ideas that never see the light of day are tested and considered. In discussion with Beard, both during time we spent at the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemét and during visits to the

University of Ulster, it became apparent that drawing is central and paramount to his practice. "I draw at any opportunity I can."¹

If we consider Beard's practice as a marriage between surface and form, then clearly his drawing demands consideration of both. And this is the case. Beard's drawings ask many questions and allow ideas to be fast-tracked without the commitment of time and material that would be exhausted if one made everything one imagined.

"The importance of drawing is that it is quick, it answers lots of questions and you can explore a simple idea into many different variations of that idea, which helps to clarify images in your mind."²

Clearly, drawing is used as a central tool in the development of these works. So this outlines a starting point for the work, the origin of thinking that becomes material form. One must consider what informs the work. As Beard states: "I never stop thinking about work and potential things to make and potential ideas. It could be something new or something ongoing in the studio. The importance of

drawing is that it is quick, it answers lots of questions and you can explore a simple idea into many different variations of that idea, which helps to clarify images in your mind."³

There is an organic nature to both form and surface. That drawing that has just been outlined for its importance does not stop there. Drawing occurs again from slip to glaze to wax resist, back to glaze on the surface of the work. And what inspires this?

"Much of the work is inspired by nature, particularly landscape and its formation by the forces of wind and water. There are echoes of the ripples left in the sand by the retreating tide, of the growth of lichens and fungi, of the patterns in fossils, shells and seaweed. Nothing is treated literally; these are the starting points for explorations that Beard develops in his studio, sometimes over many years."⁴

This outlines a clear continuum from natural sources and phenomena through initial drawing that eventually finds conclusion in clay only after deliberate editing and refinement at the preparation stages. It is noteworthy that Beard's references to nature are not just passive observations but reactions to and inspirations from the power of nature and the effects that these forces can reap. Therefore, his forms retain an element of survival and endurance as layers of colour where slip, resist and glaze are eroded back, revealing sensational colour harmonies.

Beard is also drawn to history and throughout his career constant travel has born influence (on one

*Left: Orange Tall Form on Stone Base. 28 cm/h.
Below: Disc Form on Stone Base. 49 cm/h.*



occasion supported by a research grant from the Arts Council of England). "An equally powerful influence in his work has been the art of ancient Egypt, evident in many of the forms of his vessels and particularly in their glazes. The results can be a striking blend of ancient and modern, timeless objects which will resonate in a thousand years as strongly as they do now."⁵

It is important to examine the dissemination of Beard's practice. Clearly this is a sound practice in terms of its thorough preparatory investigation and resolution of form and surface. Yet as one examines Beard's career history, one observes the recognition it has won. In 1999 this work won the INAX Prize. It has been selected for the *Royal Academy Exhibition*, London, in 2004 and was presented in a major solo exhibition at the Rufford Art Gallery, UK, in 2007. In 1999 Beard was elected to the International Academy of Ceramics and published both in the Yale University Press' *Contemporary British Studio Ceramics* and Peter Lane's *Contemporary Studio Porcelain*, published by A&C Black. These are just some of the events and publications that confirm the respect that this work earns.

If one returns to this work, a closer examination reveals intricacy, close colour harmony and a sound balance between surface and form: "His is an evolutionary process, using a limited number of basic forms but working with pattern and layers of colour, pushing the glazes through different firing processes

to achieve subtle variations in shading and blistering. His colour palette shifts between pale greens and soft blues, the cool, delicate shades of nature so that, although some of the pieces are massive and heavy, they can appear light, even fragile."⁶

This defines a subtlety and balance where the relationship between technique, firing, surface texture and colour sit in a refined way. These objects range in scale from large to hand-held. Some are vessels, some solid form, some hollowed form. Yet all reveal a surprise. They are lighter than they look and are often smaller than they appear. This is testament to their inherent monumentality where the dignified vessel and form displays its strength in a refined and discreet manner.



Below: *Pink Vessel*. 31 cm/h.
Right: *Tall Blue Vessel*. 90 cm/h.



FOOTNOTES

1. Interview with Peter Beard, University of Ulster, March 2011.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. www.peterbeard.co.uk
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.



The Artist's Signature.

Michael Moore is a Belfast-based maker of ceramic sculpture. A Council member of the International Academy of Ceramics, he studied at NCAD and lectures at the University of Ulster School of Art and Design.