

Line and Body

1 *Soft Pale Vessel*, salt-glazed stoneware, 2011, H33cm, accompanied by (left-right) heavy vessel, Jeannie Orr, and encrusted vessel, Akiko Hirai 2 *Soft Teardrop* and *Tall Vessel*, detail with lines, salt-glazed stoneware, 2011, H32cm max



'...my work is about the home, about human feelings and feeling human'



Jane Cox explores the complexities hidden in the sculptural work of Ruth King.

Ruth King's sophisticated and beautifully made sculptural vessels bridge the gap between sculpture and domesticity. The sensuous, seemingly simple abstract forms are underpinned by a deep level of intellectual enquiry into all aspects of the work – surface texture, detail, form, and scale – and while expressing the tensions between paradoxes of nature, they seem to also contain these paradoxes, giving them a primal or archetypal stature.

DOMESTIC SCALE It is unusual to refer to such obviously sculptural work as domestic, but King says, 'Everything I do is domestic... my work is about the home, about human feelings and feeling human, about being held and needing to hold.' This is borne out by the scale of the work; most of it is between one to two feet high, with the largest ones being a maximum of three feet. This domestic scale is established, she says, because 'I need to be able to physically hold each piece in my lap. The appropriateness of scale in relation to the body is critical.' King is not interested in large-scale grandiose public projects, preferring her work to register on a personal level, so it can readily communicate something that people can identify with.

King does not describe herself as a sculptor; neither does she feel limited to working in this particular scale. Rather, she consciously chooses to work to these dimensions. The physical nature of making her work on her lap likens her to other artists, where what is expressed is dependent upon its relationship to the human scale.

3 *In the Studio*, salt-glazed stoneware, 2011, H33cm max
Photography Peter Heaton

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Morandi, for example, whose intimate still life paintings depict spatial relationships on a massive architectural scale, actually painted on moderately-sized canvases. In the same way, King's work has a monumentality rarely found in work of this size; it expresses profound human relationships because of its small scale, not despite it.

HENRY MOORE Because of the shape of the forms, parallels have naturally been made between King's work and the work of Henry Moore. King has a strong and instinctive reaction against this. When questioned about it, she says, 'I dislike the way Moore's heads are small and the bodies large, and the way women are all depicted in a similar way... I think heads and minds are important.' Does she mean that he is too literal or too obvious? And here, there is further insight: King likes her audience to work a bit; things are not given to you on a plate.

I ask whether she finds Moore's work crude or too formulaic. She alludes to Moore's masculine use of openings: forms are hollowed out and oversimplified to a simple abstract formal geometry. This is everything that King's work is not. Her forms are swollen, bellyful weights and volumes grown from within – human form hinted

and implied, rather than overtly portrayed; forms growing out from inside, rather than imposed from outside.

Clearly, the human scale of her work is very much about wanting her audience to engage with it, to touch it – not about appreciation from afar. The work is like an invitation to engage in a conversation where statements are made but left open-ended.

THE LINE AS REFERENCE POINT Line has always been a significant part of King's work, although her use and understanding of line has changed over time. Where in her earlier work lines took the form of incised surface decoration, they now emerge in the firing process with King choosing which ones to keep and which ones to obscure. 'They provide a reference point for the eye and tighten the form; drawn lines conveying tension become the axis from which the rest of the form emanates.'

The lines act as a further entry point for her audience, appearing slightly raised on the surface like a ridge in a landscape or a raised contour on a topographical map. They act as signifiers and create intrigue. Drawing you in, your eyes trace a path around them, following them over the curved surfaces and contours. This results in a metaphorical 'stretching', which King attributes to a love of

graphs in her early life. The line appears like the gesture of a dancer's limbs in movement, caught in a moment between momentum and climax.

THE FIGURE The dancer's line leads to the figurative, the work obliquely referencing parts of the body. They are starting points – transposed and translated – and never literal. 'I want to convey the feeling, essence, or sense of something, without copying or alluding to it directly.'

To me as a fellow potter, they have a further significance. The lines seem to refer to the way model-makers mark out shapes on the 'master' before making a mould. This helps to reinforce the idea of her work as archetypal. The first form, the original form, gives rise to all the other forms and relates back to a birth metaphor. It gives her forms further meaning as primal and prehistoric.

The surface lines or seams also hark back to mechanised production, and more particularly, the tools of mechanisation. In King's work we see parts of anvils, hammerheads, cams, and blocks of steel; their shiny polished surfaces are evocative of the polished steel surfaces of cars or motorbike engines. This is intentional, making us refer to both the natural and the man-made world.

Exhibitions *Ceramic Art London 2012*, Royal College of Art, London, 24-26 February 2012; York Open Studios, Grays Court, York, 23-25 & 31 March, and 1 April 2012
Stockists Contemporary Ceramics Centre, London (www.cpaceramics.com); www.onlineceramics.com

Email ruthkingceramics@tiscali.co.uk
Web www.ruthkingceramics.com
Jane Cox (MA RCA) is fellow of the Craft Potters Association and member of the Art Workers Guild. She has lectured in ceramics at Central Saint Martins and Richmond Adult Community College

IN CONTEXT King's work therefore hovers between the human/figurative world and a pre- and post-industrial one; belonging to both, but limited and constrained by neither. One is reminded of sculptors such as Epstein whose *Torso in metal from the Rock Drill* (1913-1914) was shocking for its time. Intended to celebrate man's relationship to mechanisation and industry, it later became associated with the ravages of war and industrialisation and the stifling of humanity. King's work is gentle and more feminine than this, but it references the large-scale works that precede it.

The sense of dynamism and movement in her work presents a neo-modern interpretation of the work of Italian Futurists, such as Boccioni (*Unique forms of Continuity*, 1913); sculptors working in bronze to express 'speed' and the excitement of the machine age in the 1920s.

Using ceramic combined with the polished metallic finish of salt-glaze, the most dynamic of King's pieces are figures in a whirling dervish dance, rock steady on their bases but whirling up to a future unknown. ■