

Julian Stair and Sir Mark Jones in conversation

September 2018

Mark Jones Julian, what I want to ask you about first is your current work and I wonder if you could quickly describe that work and why it's taken the form that it has.

Julian Stair This current body of work consists of large scale domestic forms which are free-standing, and an equivalent number of smaller pots sited on wall-mounted grounds. The idea being that by scaling up I change the context and perception of what are very familiar, archetypal ceramic forms. Re-contextualising these pieces, and excluding ideas of use, allows people to consider them in a different way. These are very large, far too big to pick up and handle. I'm presenting them as more formal, sculptural objects, which in turn hopefully brings about a new understanding of the smaller equivalents in the exhibition.

MJ We're here in your studio surrounded by your work and it's curious because these forms are both enormously familiar and suddenly very unfamiliar. That was your intention, was it?

JS Yes. I have made larger work over the last 15 years or so and, having a reasonable understanding of pottery form, it has been intriguing to see how scale impacts one's reading of an object. You can have the same form but on a different scale. It then becomes something quite different.

MJ And because the scale is so surprising and unusual, it jolts you into looking at them as pure form, so that you see them, as you wouldn't see them at their normal scale, as a sculptural object and you appreciate their pure form.

JS Yes, exactly that. The reason why I make pots is because I think they're extraordinarily interesting – I would say this, wouldn't I? They're complex objects because they fulfil a huge range of different roles. They're objects which you can appreciate with the eye, but when you use them, as for example we are doing now drinking our coffee, one's sense of touch, taste, smell and hearing comes into play because of the way in which these objects move around and touch surfaces and come into contact with each other. This multivalence, this extraordinary layering, is so enmeshed it's actually quite difficult to separate individual strands out, and so this exhibition is about pulling the visual strand out, the abstract pure form which is quite distinct. It's really a kind of declaration of pots as pure form or sculpture.

MJ You've written elsewhere about the distinction between the useful and the useless, between applied and fine art, and you've talked, I think sometimes with regret, about the way in which it's seen as a necessary condition that fine art has no function; but what you're doing here is creating equivalents of things that we use in our daily domestic life which are intentionally unusable, which are, in fact, useless, and which therefore partake of the kind of essence of what makes art fine.

JS I am, but these objects have their counterparts, hence the name 'Equivalence'. It is about the dynamic between two bodies of work and I'm using one to echo, amplify, and hopefully increase an understanding of the other; and it's this relationship that is the pivot of this show. If I can get people to think of the large work as sculpture, what implications does this have for the smaller scale work? If the forms are the same, are they also sculpture?

MJ You've touched on the aesthetic qualities of your vessels, although I noticed that people don't very often discuss the role of

beauty and aesthetic appreciation when they're talking about art, but do you think of these vessels as beautiful, and if you do, could you explain what it is that makes one thing beautiful and not another?

JS Beauty, hmm. (laughs) He laughs.

MJ Nervously?

JS Nervously.

MJ Beauty makes people nervous, I notice. (laughs)

JS Beauty, truth, words that were bandied about with abandon years ago – yes, there's a huge nervousness and uncertainty over ideas of standards, and whether it's committing professional suicide or not I do actually think there are things of beauty. My inclination as an artist, my sensibility if you like, is to try and make forms that pare ideas down to an essence. Herbert Read talked about pots in the 1920s as abstract art (after Roger Fry) saying they were "free from imitative intention". It's an ungainly phrase. Pottery didn't have to overcome the figurative legacy of sculpture and painting and therefore it was, within the arguments of early modernism, able to offer exemplars of pure form. But what is key is that as well as having an extraordinary multivalence, pots also operate within a social context. When art does this it enriches both our social life and the appreciation of the object. So, having tried to avoid talking about beauty, and this is another very unfashionable position to take, I also think there are universals. Having looked at pots from many cultures there are forms and surface treatments that are absolutely iconic. I think our brains are hardwired to recognise certain fundamentals. When I was a student at the RCA, Philip Rawson, who taught art history, pointed out one day that I was making work to the ratio of 2:1. I had no idea. My sensibility, my temperament as an artist, is about trying to get a sense of balance and, if you like, order, and that for me represents our cognitive abilities as human beings. It represents our ability to think and use language, our capacity for abstract thought, not in a mathematical way – that's far too crude – but to rationalise.

MJ So when you were talking about one of your pieces a moment ago, you were talking about the proportion of one element to the other and whether that proportion was right or whether it was not quite right. Does that mean that you, as an artist, are always thinking about a relationship between your work and relationships which, in some sense, are true of the universe as a whole, which inform your thinking?

JS I certainly pick up on iconic proportions, universals, whatever ...

MJ Intuitively?

JS Intuitively.

MJ Not in a calculating way?

JS Exactly. If I try to work them out in a very calculating way, the objects become dead. And so my absolute ideal is to create objects that are the product of mental thought but actually there's a tension between the other things that make us human, the inconsistencies, the irregularities, the faults, the little details that break down logic and structure, so that art, and this is a cliché, is a balance of the head and the heart.

MJ But also between perfection and imperfection.

JS And perfection and imperfection. If you look at the human face, what ultimately makes a human face really interesting is imperfection. If you photograph half a face and then you make a mirror image, it's very disturbing.

MJ Absolute symmetry.

JS Absolute symmetry, and that is alienating to us. We strive for order, but actually, we don't want perfection. The best art can somehow suggest and demonstrate this but also soften. So you have a straight line, but the line isn't absolutely straight, there's a slight curve in it because that curve creates tension and then that curve in

combination with another curve creates further tension. A great work of art is built up of elements that somehow come together to present a matrix of all of the qualities that make us human.

MJ I think as a society now we're quite conscious of the tension between the digital and the haptic, between us directly using our senses and us inhabiting a more or less virtual world, and one of the things that you seem to be doing with these large or over-scale vessels is giving people the impetus to notice something directly rather than simply to passively receive images from digital and other sources.

JS Yes. I wake up in the morning and depending on whether it's a good or bad day, sometimes I think that we are going to be so swamped by the digital world, that our sense of touch and material awareness will be lost. On positive days, I think that the notion of us as physical creatures in a material world is so vital to our makeup that it will become even more valued. We shouldn't be thinking about 20th century ideas of art to shape contemporary practice, we should be addressing 21st century ideas and what it means to be human in a world where screens predominate. We have to remind ourselves on a daily basis that there's much more to life than pixels.

MJ But whether we like it or not, we live in an image-saturated society in which our attention is constantly called upon. Our attention is constantly sought and aroused by all the purveyors of images, so it's very difficult for us to find the mental space to actively notice and enjoy noticing things. Our bandwidth, if you like, is used up by all the images that we are receiving and it seems to me that what your work is doing in part is to try to give people the opportunity to look actively rather than receiving passively.

JS And to feel actively, because I don't think art just should exist in white cube galleries and museum spaces. It shouldn't be something that we go along and get a monthly fix of with a blockbuster at the Tate or V&A or wherever. If we have art in our homes in our daily lives, it's a constant, something that is active and on-going and is built into life as opposed to a bolt-on, and pots do this naturally from that first

morning cup of tea through to formal meals with friends, to objects that you can appreciate with the eye. This is something I explored in my exhibition, *Quotidian*, which consisted of a dinner service laid out on a table, and a film of a dinner taking place at that same table. Pots switch from being static objects of visual appreciation to having agency and orchestrating our lives, they're visual and tactile constants, the optic and the haptic, operating in the domestic arena. You have quite rightly concentrated on the larger forms in the current show, but their counterparts are commonplace – pots, cups, beakers and jugs that can be picked up and used but are arguably the most complex objects in this exhibition, because they operate in all these different realms. The big pots are prompts to look again and to re-examine.

MJ It's a prompt to look again at the things that we use every day and to appreciate both their significance but also their beauty as objects and, in doing that, actually to site ourselves in the moment rather than always in the past or future?

JS Yes, in the moment. And that moment isn't a moment just of thought; it's not just a moment of looking, it's a moment of being, it's a moment of feeling. When you actually engage, those moments turn into passages of time and that cup of tea in your hand which started off as hot will gradually cool, the moment is stretched and extended. And if you sit down and have a meal with someone over three hours, you're engaging with objects: looking, feeling, appreciating them as part of living and engaging socially. The big pots might, on one level, be more spectacular, they might fulfil all the expectations of what standalone art should do in terms of scale and intention and I try to make them as interesting and provocative as possible, but I come back to the fact that it's the almost inconsequential, the small objects that actually have this extraordinary currency.

MJ So they're pots, they're made of clay. How important is that to you? If we conduct a thought experiment and you were doing the same thing in glass, would it be the same thing or would it be a different thing?

JS That's a good question. 80% of the world's crust is silica and ceramics is one of the very first technologies and this is why pots have such a central place in human culture. In chemical terms, glass and ceramics are very similar but you can't fashion glass with your fingers so many potters are left cold because of this. I do use tools, but the core actions of making pots are with my fingers, my hands on clay. I'm pressing and coercing and stretching the clay, and it is the pots that are the concrete legacy of my body on this material. For me, it's a fundamental relationship.

MJ So the process of making with clay is one which reminds us that thinking doesn't just happen in the head. It happens in your body and in your hands as well as in your head and it's that thought which is made concrete in the pots that you produce?

JS Exactly. So much of our understanding of the world is gleaned through sensory perception which goes beyond the five primary senses. Neurologists now talk about "embodied cognition" and us having 32 senses, from proprioception through to interoception and many other senses that are innate. Neurology is able to open this up through scans of the brain. Yes, making is about the intelligence of my body, something that I'm not even aware of because it's such an innate process. If I try and show a beginner how to throw a pot, I struggle because the movements for me are absolutely automatic. They're a reflex, like a violinist playing an incredibly complicated piece of music. Manipulating material is absolutely a product of my body, my hands, my fingers. And when I'm working on a large scale, the pots are shaped by my arms, shoulders, torso. I lean into the pot with my full body weight.

MJ Many of our actions derive not from our brain, but from our limbs themselves. It is actually no figure of speech to say that we think with our hands; so for you, when you're working, the flow of information runs in two directions, doesn't it? It runs from your sense of touch and your sense of involvement with the material to your brain as well as from your brain to your hands ...

JS It's a two-way process.

MJ It's a two-way process, yes.

JS Exactly. And different materials will have different properties and characteristics and so making is an on-going relationship. One of the interesting things about clay as a material is it starts off in a very soft form, a most incredibly plastic material but as it dries, it changes its characteristics and becomes firmer and harder and it will get to a state where it becomes completely inflexible and quite brittle. With Henry Moore in the 1930s there were discussions about modelling versus carving, plastic versus glyphic art. The modernist canon was carving, the Victorian modelling, but the interesting thing about clay is it's both plastic and glyphic. It's got extraordinary scope for creative practice because it can do everything, it can record the most nuanced of movement – the literal and metaphorical thumbprint, and also become so hard that you can carve it, like wood or plaster.

MJ You were talking about Fry and about the way in which he conceived of ceramics or working ceramics as a way of escaping the limitations of figuration and I think that tells you as much about Fry as about anything else.

JS It does.

MJ Because when you look at his art, you see that he personally was unable to escape, as he saw it, the limitations of figuration. Abstraction is one of the strands in avant-garde art between the wars. Of course, the other strand was Surrealism and I think it's interesting that the role of the subconscious in the creation of pottery, perhaps, has been rather less appreciated and described, but when you talk about your working methods, you talk, I think, about the role of the unconscious or the subconscious as well as of the conscious in making. Is that right?

JS Yes. You're absolutely right.

MJ What I'm really trying to get at is what do you think the role of the unconscious or the subconscious is in making your own work?

JS Well, that's a really big question that actually I've been thinking about a lot recently. Maybe this is in the realm of psychoanalysis but I think one of the reasons why I have gravitated towards making pots is about wanting a certainty in life.

MJ You want to be grounded?

JS Exactly. It is ... it's something to hang onto, something to touch. It's something to remind you that you are human and that you're in the here and now, and is a confirmation of life. This is quite a recent realisation and it was really shocking to me to make the connection. It's about 'feeling real', as Sly and the Family Stone said! What are the things that are important in our lives? Ultimately, it's about our relationship to the world and not just intellectual relationships but physical relationships. What is it actually to be human? It is to be grounded in the world that we live in, in this physical world, and whether this is some deep need in me as a person, I don't know, but I think that's one reason why I gravitated towards making objects, making things that reinforce the sensation that we are actually present in this world. I know physicists say that this table in front of me is 90% space because the atoms are a tiny part of it and I know there are arguments that there's more anti-matter in the world than there is real matter. I can't understand that. I can accept it because of people who do understand it from that incredibly analytical, theoretical way, but I know as a human, this is a table, and I'm putting my hand on it and I'm touching it and I'm sitting on a chair – all I think we can rely on is our sensations and I don't care whether they're electrical charges or not that are going through my spinal column and up to my brain. If you're hungry, you eat, if you're cold, you clothe your body. These are primary things that we need as creatures.

MJ But these are also the primary needs that we deny. When we're hungry we're not sure whether we should or shouldn't eat and we create environments in which we don't have to think about our clothing because they're moderated to suit us. I think too that you talked about the senses and whether there are 32 or 5 or whatever, but it's very clear, isn't it, that the senses of hearing and sight are the ones which we're comfortable with but the senses of smell and of

touch are ones which we increasingly find more difficult to process and to feel comfortable with.

JS Yes.

MJ Your work, as part of its value, puts people back in touch with, encourages them to enjoy, the sense of touch.

JS As a 60-something, uptight English man, yes.

MJ Sensuality?

JS Sensuality, physicality. We have to recognise these aspects of ourselves, we're social creatures. We absolutely need other people, this is what defines us as a species and when we are removed from each other there are varying degrees of alienation – talking to each other through texting as opposed to talking directly. The consequences of alienation are powerful in any era. I'm asking questions about our values and the way we live our lives now and the fact that maybe we need to think differently.

MJ So just going back to the material that you use, it's interesting, isn't it, and I think you've pointed this out, that we talk about the planet we inhabit as the Earth. We talk about coming from earth and returning to earth. Indeed, we talk, in the Genesis myth, about the creation of human life from the clay itself, and I'm wondering if you could just talk a little bit about the significance of earth and clay and how that relates to making pots.

JS I made an exhibition about eight years ago called *Quietus* that addressed the idea of death. It was how clay as a material is used in funerary rites and at the heart of it was the idea of the transformation of material that echoed the transformation of the body in death, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Many creation myths build on the idea of humans being made by a deity from the stuff of the Earth. We were born out of the world we live in and then we're buried back in the ground, or burned. We're transformed through the same process of heat as the pot is into another material, and that's an

irreversible transformation. There is an incredible symbolic richness, I think, between the parallels of using clay and rites of passage dealing with death, let alone the anthropomorphism and symbolism of the vessel as body.

MJ There's also the creative side of it, isn't there? Each act of fashioning with clay is an act of imbuing the inanimate with spirit, and so, on however humble a level, every time somebody does that, they are recreating a kind of pact between the animate and the inanimate; the infusing of the inanimate with spirit.

JS Whether you're making a cinerary jar or a cup, you're working to an objective and you're putting your individual stamp on it. I don't like using the word 'function' when we're talking about pots because it's such a loaded word, it has so many connotations and is so reductive. I truly question whether there has ever been a functional object that has no expressive potential whatsoever except for a kind of a purely mechanical engineering object. But if we think about something that is hand-made, the expressive capacity of humans comes into play and imbues things with their own individual take on the world. The idea of use, which has been central to the genre of pottery over the millennia, from when we started to settle as a species doesn't preclude expression.

MJ We know from the earliest Neolithic pottery onwards, that what you find is the useless combined with useful. That's to say even the earliest pottery will have incised decoration and almost every piece of pottery ever made combines the functionless with the functional. You never find the functional ... almost never ... without this embodiment of the human spirit which is to do things which are valued purely for their own sake.

JS Absolutely.

MJ And which have no contribution to make to our survival, but every contribution to make to our wellbeing. Now, one of the things which I noticed about art is it's not strong on humility, or to put it in another way, it's a world in which arrogance flourishes, and

I wonder whether you have any thought on the humble object and the way in which some sense of humility can be reintroduced into a world which often seems quite full of its own importance.

JS I think the complexity, the multivalence of pottery is so extraordinary that there's enough interest in that to last me my lifetime and many more and because I feel those ideas are so powerful, I don't think they need embellishing, aggrandising, and I've chosen to work intentionally with the most 'unlike-art' objects that you can have, which are the simplest cups and beakers and jugs and bowls in an anti-art statement if that makes sense. It's not that I don't think they're art because I do. It's not that I don't think of myself as an artist because I do, but it's a challenge that art can be anywhere and everywhere and it doesn't need always to be on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square or in a gallery, in a museum. Of course, I am interested in placing my work in a variety of different environments, but I think the power of these incredibly simple, humble objects which as we've been talking about, is really complicated. It's not an inverted snobbery, it's not forced humility. It's actually just a declaration of belief that pots have the capacity to carry meaning and ideas that are strong and powerful enough to exist in the art world. Maybe I take a perverse pleasure in making the simplest things I can in the most careful way I can.

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