

Ritual and Sensuality

When His Royal Highness Prince Philip visited our graduation show at the RCA and saw my work for the first time, he assumed that the objects were purely decorative. When I described them as 'serving dishes for use', he reacted with an outburst of incredulous laughter! While the Prince may inhabit a rather different world to the rest of us, his response (versions of which I have encountered since) brought home to me the extent to which for most of us the terms 'useful', or 'functional' as applied to tableware conjure up mainly traditional and familiar forms and items.

I started my journey as a domestic potter by making traditional, production-thrown tableware, but my current work represents a shift towards making one-off, exotic looking pieces that may not immediately suggest a specific or even potential function, though I make them as serving dishes.

Although I was born in Israel, I had acquired an appreciation of British culture and tradition long before I arrived in England, initially from my British-educated parents, and later through reading English Literature and History of Art at university. On completing my BA, I decided to follow a dream, and come to London to study Ceramics.

I received my formative ceramic education during 1984-86 at the renowned Ceramic Course at Harrow College of Higher Education. In our first lesson we were to throw a traditional plant pot. Before demonstrating any techniques, our teacher, Danny Killick, explained the reason for every aspect of the pot's design: the base - sloping inwards on the inside for drainage, the widening conical walls which allow the earth to expand upwards with frost without shattering the pot, and the doubly thick rim, strengthened for tapping to loosen the earth when taking the plant out. The realisation that so much thought has gone into the design of such a humble, mundane object to make it perfectly fit for its function, struck me so forcefully and excited me so much, that it became a defining moment in my career and inspired my way of thinking for the next decade. From then on, I used function as both the starting point and the inspiration for making my pots. Mixing into my ideological "pot" the Bauhaus creed of 'Form Follows Function' and a generous dose of William Morris, I aspired to create widely available, well designed and expertly made tableware items for

everyday use. I considered the 'loving' spirit invested in them to be intrinsic to their function, and the main feature distinguishing handmade tableware from their industrial counterparts. My pots were intended to radiate light and warmth, thereby giving their users sensual and spiritual pleasure, and enriching their daily lives. Idealistic, passionate, bombastic aspirations perhaps, but deeply and sincerely felt.

The rich tradition of the English dining rituals with its multitude of tableware items, provided me with wonderfully fertile ground. My range of pots was tailored to English customs: toast-racks, teapots, creamers, cereal bowls, breakfast cups and saucers, etc. – each item described and defined by its function in a language understood by all who shared in this tradition. For ten years I developed my work along these lines, forging a personal style within the field of traditional tableware.

Following the birth of my second son in 1996 we moved home, and for about 3 years I was without a studio. This was an opportunity to pause and reflect on my work: Firstly, though highly enjoyable, I found the unrelenting, intensive pace of production-throwing physically exhausting. Additionally, I began to question the ideology that had so far driven me. My belief that handmade tableware for everyday use was morally superior to mass-produced items and should be widely affordable now seemed outdated. In spite of my pots being in demand and selling well, the way I had worked had proved to be financially unrealistic. I also found that the pots were not necessarily being used for the particular function for which they were so carefully designed: Cups-and-saucers were used as sauceboats, jugs as vases, and so on. At the same time, I felt I had developed my work as far as it would go, and recognised the need to refresh my ideas and extend my techniques. I decided to return to education, and joined the Ceramics and Glass Department at the Royal College of Art. Remaining certain only of my abiding and passionate interest in the relationship between people, food, and ceramics, I found new creative inspiration by concentrating on one particular functional item - the serving dish.

My explorations led me to The Wallace Collection where I fell in love with the amazing array of 18th Century Sevres porcelain. The elegant, luxurious forms, the jewel-like colours, the staggering technique, and superb design reignited my enthusiasm.

While investigating the current relevance of handmade tableware and experimenting with new ideas and techniques, I gradually came to realise that for me the compulsion to make tableware is all about the gathering of people around the dinner-table in a festive and convivial atmosphere.

Marking a special occasion, or making an occasion special by sharing a meal, is an age-old social ritual for binding people together, be it lovers, family, friends or colleagues. The thoughtfulness and care invested in the preparation as well as the presentation of the meal, in both the food and in the dishes in which it is offered, set these occasions apart from ordinary mealtimes. Indeed, they serve to provide a window of joy, peace, and security, a pause from the hardship and greyness of daily life, and to reinforce a sense of belonging. Consequently, I set out to make work that would be part of this ritual and contribute to an ambiance of ceremony and well-being.

Through my new range of sumptuous and individual dishes, I am trying, first and foremost, to express and share my vision of special dining occasions as profound uplifting and bonding experiences. I have chosen to work with Porcelain, the 'princess' of clays. Referred to as 'White Gold', and historically patronized by royalty, it quickly became associated with notions of preciousness and ceremony. As if forming with silk or velvet, I allow very soft porcelain to fall into gentle folds as I 'sew' different components together and create expansive and flowing forms that speak of generosity and sensuality. Feet and handles add height and flamboyance. Thick, fluid colourful glazes run into each other, pool in the folds of porcelain, and drip off feet and edges, accentuating the feeling of joyous abundance and overflowing plenty. Rather than describing my pots in terms of function (eg. sauce-boat), their titles: *Celebration*, *Bountiful*, *Ample*, *Brimming*, etc. are deliberately atmospheric.

I have turned the idea that 'Form Follows Function' on its head and replaced it with the notion that 'Function Follows Form', adopting a bold and imaginative interpretation of function. The unusual, non-traditional shapes offer exciting possibilities for presenting food, engaging the user's imagination and encouraging the continuous interaction between user and maker. Bearing food,

these serving dishes are intended to adorn the dining table, heighten the festive atmosphere, and enhance the shared aesthetic pleasure of the people around it.

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My early work reflects the way I was negotiating my way into the new culture in which I found myself through the work: taking on board English traditions and customs in the pot range, while maintaining my cultural identity through the decoration. In my current work – I am more confident about belonging here. I can now challenge that tradition as well as my original tradition, and rethink more independently.