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The Pottery of Extremes

The Work of Julia Galloway

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IF CERTAIN OBJECTS ARE, BY NECESSITY, PART OF QUOTIDIAN life, it might be due to the fact that they are too complex to be apprehended by a simple glance, through vision alone. They have to be lived

with for a long period of time, in the most intimate manner possible, in order to be fully understood. Usually, the simpler and more familiar they seem, the more complex and foreign they actually are.



Salt, Pepper, Oil, Vinegar. 2000. Porcelain. 7.5 x 12.5 x 10 cm.

This being said, I have mostly experienced Julia Galloway's work through photographs on exhibition invitation cards; not the best place to experience pots, especially when they are as tactile and blatantly functional as hers. This rather limited experience probably means a limited understanding, similar to that of a reader within the pages of this magazine. Nonetheless, I have physically experienced her work directly twice. Each time, what struck me most was their actual size, much smaller and more intimate than their image would have you believe. This extreme of scale, despite the fact that these objects are not miniatures (rather they are just often small) is one of the first extremes I feel the need to address. This somewhat reduced size creates a concentration. This density is not unlike certain aspects of Islamic art and Persian miniature painting, where the contained nature of architectural spaces is exploded, forms within forms, to reveal the domesticity and intimacy of interiors; it pressurises the work, intensifies the experience and condenses its quiet power. In a world where bigger seems to have become the norm, these objects offer a welcomed reprieve from the ambient lambaste. Yet the work isn't quiet and understated. Quite the contrary. Their form is somewhat exaggerated, their surface bold, colourful, complex and, often, challenging.

The work itself is situated within the relatively recent tradition, actually a revival and renewal of the old technique of cut and paste, where thrown or hand-built forms are altered and reorganised by subtraction and addition. This form of making is eminently tactile, bordering on the erotic, with its folds, curves and bulges. This emphasis on touch is reinforced by the lush, juicy, drippy and wet glazes, and it connects the

hand of the maker with that of the user. This tradition can be traced, through various historical precedents, to the maiolica work coming out of NSCAD in Halifax under Walter Ostrom and the stoneware pottery often referred to as 'Mingeisota' and originated, through Leach, by Warren Mackenzie. This loosely formed school of pottery, most of whose members are graduates of NSCAD and/or the University of Minnesota, includes such diverse practitioners as Sarah Coote, Freddie Rahn, Linda Sikura, Mark Pharis, Jeff Oestrich, Linda Christiansen and Joan Bruneau, among many others, like John Gill or Chris Gustin. Most of the ideas I am discussing here apply to their work as well. In many respects, Julia Galloway's work belongs to both aesthetics, in the sense that she uses the sensibility of maiolica – its graphic richness and the lush colourful surfaces, while using the materials and processes – and, to a lesser degree, the forms of stoneware. This in itself is a curious and interesting hybrid, and another form of the extreme.

By discussing precedents and genealogy, I want to define the climate that generates these works and to set the stage for these somewhat theatrical objects. For this reason alone it is interesting to note that Galloway studied at the University of Colorado, under Betty Woodman. However, the relation and kinship with Woodman's work is not stylistic; their sensibility as artists is too different for such an obvious parallel to exist. The similarity is more conceptual than formal; it could be succinctly described as a fascination for the interstitial or the 'space between'. Both makers are interested, possibly obsessed, with relationship and combination, either by actually joining forms together, presenting them as pairs, groups or stacks,



Double Spouted Ewer. 2000. Porcelain. 5 x 7.5 x 10 cm.



Teapot and Saucer. 2000. Porcelain. 15 x 20 x 15 cm.



Cream and Sugar Set in Tray. 2000. Porcelain. 10 x 7.5 x 17.5 cm.



Cream and Sugar Set. 2000. Porcelain. 7.5 x 10 x 10 cm.

or assembling them while leaving a gap between the two elements. This interest is particularly evident in the double-lidded containers of Galloway, where the point of juncture, the gap between forms, the void between masses (or volumes, since this is pottery we are talking about and not sculpture), becomes such a focal point for the energy flow to be released. I would like to see what Betty Woodman would do with the idea which, to the best of my knowledge, she has never exploited. In term of surface treatment, their work also greatly differs. Woodman is an epicurean, celebrating the senses and her decoration tends toward the disorganisation of organic systems. Galloway's work is cerebral, more controlled, logical,

balanced and stabilised. Beyond modes of representation, another distinction between their work is at the level of presentation. In the past two decades, Woodman has progressively moved away from the sphere of the domestic to intrude into the largely public space of the art gallery, with ambitious large-scale installations. Julia Galloway's interest in presentation and the inclusion of context is still firmly grounded in the domestic. The trays and baskets in which the objects sit are containers within containers and not bases or plinths or sconces, which would locate the work (as is the case with Betty Woodman) within the sphere of the decorative, the particular space of the museum or the gallery, the domain of 'display'. Their role is to



Teapot and Saucer. 2000. Porcelain. 20 x 20 x 15 cm.



Dry Sink Vase. 2000. Porcelain. 20 x 20 x 32.5 cm.

protect, situate and define a place for the object to operate, beyond function and manipulation. They help us to localise the work, they tell us where they belong. Pots by nature have no real locality. They are essentially mobile and can fit in numerous contexts. Artworks on the other hand are generally site specific and their operative space is clearly defined by culture. When art objects are potentially mobile (and usually, they tend to stay put), they are clearly framed, and it is that frame that defines their space. In these pots presented within other pots, the container within container becomes also framed and its location clearly defined. This reinforces their meaning within the realm of function. These trays and baskets are slab-constructed with raw grogged stoneware and this plays against the colourful, smoothly-glazed porcellaneous stonewares they contain. This textural and material contrast is yet another expression of an extreme.

Over the years, I have come to be convinced that the extreme is particularly well suited to ceramics and by extension, to pottery which is, after all, the prevalent form ceramics tends to embody, historically as well as today. Even brick buildings are conceptually large containers and tile work is a form of glazing on these same large volumes. This fusion of seemingly opposites aspects, interior/ exterior, surface/ form, etc., is particular to containers as well as to containment as a concept. The reconciliation of opposites is, in my opinion, the central operative factor in all crafts, and it is usually embodied in containment. Galloway's pots are emblematic of this reconciliation of extremes.

Extremes of course, like most phenomena, operate in polarity. It is as extreme to be exceedingly simple as

it is to be overly complex. Ceramics is at its best when either loose or tight, quick or slow, totally direct or overly fussy, quiet or busy, understated or over determined, smooth or rough, drab or colourful, small or big, innocent or totally guilty: Warren Mackenzie or Adrian Saxe, Raku tea bowls or Meissen figurines, the nun or the prostitute. Galloway's work, in its symbiotic meeting of mind and flesh, embodies simultaneously the rigour and ascetism of the monastery with the exuberance and abandonment of the brothel.

All extremes suit the capacity of these kinds of objects to be potent and relevant and, as a rule if not an absolute law, they don't tolerate the middle ground, the too much of this and not enough of that, we still too often see. By combining the poles of extremes, simplicity/complexity, presentation/representation, Julia Galloway achieves her most successful work.

I must also address the decoration on her work and the decorative impulse they so assertively celebrate. Here again, two poles are at work. The first could be described as formal abstraction, through patterns and marks (lines, dots, crosses and fields of colours) at play against the texture generated by the sensitive and masterful touch of making. These articulate the forms within framing devices: shifting borders, defining forms or negating them, flattening their space by creating other planes for the graphic to invade. These rectangles of pictorial energy are particularly efficient when they move from one object to another, presented as a mirrored pair. Fields of gold, reflective and garishly seductive, are particularly surprising and unexpected. These devices bring in a painter's sensibility and are generally used with great efficiency. With a bit more ambition and familiarity, with

the confidence that experience will no doubt bring, they could develop into visually efficient images of a type rarely seen in this material and on these types of forms. The intricately exquisite and challenging surfaces have the potential to become, with the introduction of illusionistic depth, as intensely charged and potent as many contemporary paintings, like those of Ross Bleckner, for example.

The second decorative aspect would be less abstract and more referential. It uses a vocabulary of ornate elements from history: organic forms, the arabesque and also, surprisingly, letters and text. These are much more problematic. The historical patterns are too familiar and obvious; they do not operate like they did on the historical objects. Their meaning, so evident and potent in the original, with references to cycles, regency and change, is now diffused and they are but pale imitations of themselves. They have become merely decorative; they still do their optical work of seduction but their meaning is now cheapened. Their use is mindless, and is not grounded in absorbed familiarity and purposeful intent. I would suggest that they be replaced with signs or symbols which, while retaining a longing for universality, would be significant now. There is a pressing need for a still absent awareness of how these elements operate. Unfortunately, too much ceramics being made now still falls prey to that temptation of appropriating references to history in a manner that remains superficial. Luckily, Galloway's use of these devices is marginal in the overall complexity of her work.

The use of text and letters is more interesting and puzzling. Text is probably the clearest purveyor of meaning, the most efficient anyway. We tend as a culture to be more text-literate than form-literate or object-literate. The implicit difference between text, which is something that already exists, that is perceived through the eye, visually, and writing, which is something grounded in action, in transformation and becoming, that happens through the gesture of the hand, is what interests me most here. On these objects, it is writing that takes precedence over text, the act over the expression, the materiality of words over meaning. Julia Galloway's use of disjointed, single letters in rows is also decorative, acting as periodic elements to create rhythms and, in the process, frustrates our impulsive need for rationality and narrative. The fact that this desire is always unfulfilled engages us even more with the meaning of the work itself, private, personal and secretive. Or again, letters and text are used to define distances between events and remind us of the potency of silence, of



Salt and Pepper Pot. 2000. Porcelain.
7.5 x 7.5 x 12.5 cm.

what is missing, of the gap between things and words, of, again, the space between. At other times, sentences are scribbled in the clay, again, undecipherable. The tension between the recognisable text as sign and the impossibility of accessing its code, creates another form of extreme when we are presented with the clarity, openness and generosity of the objects themselves. I am ambivalent about it but I remain intrigued and reserve final judgment to a closer inspection. This use of literary elements and references to language makes me think of the proverbial work that speaks for itself. These chatty, often loud objects remain mute on that level.

Ideally, it would be best to experience these objects slowly, over time, the way they were made, and the way they are meant to exist. I haven't had that opportunity yet. Despite their familiarity and obvious accessibility, I know from experience that these objects are difficult, complex, and that they release their potency in small doses, slowly, over time. Our lives rarely allow us the luxury they so proudly embody. They ask that we stop and slow down, that we care. We must accommodate them more than they can possibly serve us. Few are willing to take the trouble. In the process they have much to teach us. They make us aware of what we may have lost and what we still have to gain.

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