



Squaring the Circle

POTTER – MARTINA HEINTKE investigates how St Ives potter Sam Hall squares up to tradition.



According to several trusted dictionaries, a pot is by definition 'a round, deep container' or 'a round vessel for holding liquids or solids or for cooking things in'. Most people's concept of pottery is shaped by the image of a revolving potter's wheel, with the potter's hand shaping the clay towards a perfect cylindrical form. Sam Hall's thrown stoneware certainly starts off like that, but the finished pieces are, generally speaking, anything but round. Nor do they purport to have any inherent functional value, despite the fact that they are clearly vessels, able to hold and contain. So, what is it that makes them the antithesis to the traditional pot?

Judging by his show at Lemon Street Gallery in Truro last year, which Hall sees as the culmination of fifteen years of trials, trepidations and experimentations as a potter, it must be the sheer presence that each piece exudes. The predominantly square or rectangular forms vary in scale, but at their most colossal reach a height of seventy-five centimetres and, whatever their size, command immediate attention. Their monolithic stature, coupled with a bold and dramatic surface rendering, gives Hall's work a kind of

magnetism, acting like a natural force field. Here, like on a canvas, the eye wanders across the form to take in marks, colours, crackles, textures, and dribbles – of which there are many. As Hall says, 'the blankness of form and minimal use of glaze and oxides along with scored lines, random marks and a sombre palette hopefully help to create a tension where drawing and form cohabit together.'

Unlike a two-dimensional canvas, however, one gets to walk around the vessel and see a different view unfold on the other side. Hall is often called a painterly potter, a classification that he neither embraces nor rejects: 'I am committed to my craft and see myself as a potter working on a pot. I am happy for people to view my work like paintings, but I don't consciously set out to achieve this effect.'

Sam Hall was born in Shipley, West Yorkshire. After initially training at Harrogate College of Art, Hall graduated in ceramics from Loughborough College of Art in 1990, and now works in his studio at Gaolyard Studios in St Ives, a pottery complex shared by eight other potters. The studios were set up by John Bedding, a former student of Bernard Leach, in 1999. From the start Hall was able to work



alongside Bedding, enabling him to exchange ideas and explore the boundaries between modern and traditional ways of potting. A straightforward and grounded attitude is apparent in the way he approaches the making of his pots, which he describes as writing the history of each individual piece, building up layer by layer and reworking the surface over an extended period of time.

Hall begins with the simplest of forms, the cylinder. The combination of Hall's hand and eye has thrown thousands of these cylinder forms, and it is precisely this repetition of process that is his starting point, unencumbered by ornament or artifice either in thought or deed. Distinctions between thought and action, brain and hand dissolve in this repetition; that which is learned through doing is done. Thus the clay is given a structure, the form providing the aesthetic and theoretical context within which all decisions and all other justifications of its use must be made.

Since 1996 the forms have evolved consistently, following various limitations that allow Hall the intense scrutiny of inherent possibilities. The process may involve squashing and pulling a cylindrical form to create a narrow flat tube,

and the extent to which this process is taken is governed entirely by the nature of the original cylinder. Subtle variations in weight, form and feel determine the unique character of each piece. In keeping with the nature of the process, Hall limits himself to a narrow band of surface qualities; material, colour, surface or line are stringently coerced and manipulated to arrive at an inevitable result dictated by the form and process. All these elements coalesce through recognition of that necessity to produce a truth, an innate rightness, where no distinction between surface and form exists.

With a particular image of a pot in mind Hall starts by throwing a simple cylinder on the wheel, which is then cut and altered to produce a flat-sided oval form. Once the piece has achieved a certain level of dryness he places it on the floor and throws clay and slip at it, which land haphazardly on the surface to create a totally random effect. Dripping is done in the same manner, allowing the material to find its own route and finish where it chooses. Although trusting

OPPOSITE PAGE INSET: Sam Hall ■ MAIN PICTURE: Exhibition at Lemon Street Gallery, Truro ■ THIS PAGE: *Midsummer 2004*, H52cm (Photo: Graham Gaunt).



his applied processes, they will nevertheless produce surprise markings and effects which channel new approaches. Reacting to these incidental changes and chance markings, Hall will often alter the results and reassert some kind of control. 'I may scratch the surface in a certain way one day, and a couple of days later I rework the surface completely, leaving only traces of the original marks. That's what I mean by building up the history of the pot, it can take quite some time to make and the vessel becomes a diary of the making process.'

The pots are fired at least four times, and some as often as seven. In a final firing Hall enamel fires yellows and whites and then adds the occasional splashes of colour, such as red, green or gold to accentuate an area or produce a focal point. Lately, he has also started to tie the pieces to an event during the time of making, for example adding his father's birthday on the pot or referencing it with something that carries meaning around the time of making. 'When it comes to the last firing, I will have spent a lot of time with these pots, and like every potter, I am full of nervous anticipation. I just hope that it has all come together when I open the door to the kiln!'

Sam Hall has evolved a personal language bearing his distinct and unmistakable marks – vessels that square up nicely indeed. **CR**

Forthcoming exhibitions: *Gaolyard Studios 05*, Trelowarren, Mawgan, Cornwall, May 15 – June 19; Bettles Gallery, Ringwood, Hampshire, June 23 – July 16. Website www.bettles.net

Stockists: St Ives Ceramics, St Ives, Cornwall; Lemon Street Gallery, Truro, Cornwall; Stour Gallery, Shipton on Stour, Warwickshire.

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THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Large flat form, H54cm | *Easter 2004*, H34cm | *Black Stripes*, H34cm | Four tall cylinders, H66cm | OPPOSITE PAGE: *Black Corners*, H52cm (Photo: Graham Gaunt).



Technical Notes

CLAY BODY

The pieces are all thrown and altered, using stoneware clay with added paper for strength.

DECORATION

Layers of slips, from dark earthenware to porcelain, are applied, often thrown on or dribbled whilst the pot is laying flat on the floor. Areas are often masked and worked on later; lines and words are added. All this can then be scraped back to a finer point before been built up again. In this manner of working I feel the pot gains a history, a kind of diary of events that build up over time.

SLIPS

Standard porcelain	12kg
Flint	1 handful
Sodium silicate	3 lids full

Standard red clay	12kg
Body clay	12kg
Iron spangles	½ handful
Coarse illmanite	½ handful

Standard porcelain	1 litre
Silicon carbide	2 dessertspoons

Standard porcelain	1 litre
Tin oxide	2 dessertspoons

These slips are added at all stages of making whether the clay is wet or bone dry and used very wet or almost in their clay state.

GLAZES

Black		Yellow	
Feldspar	1	Whiting	70
China clay	1	Ball clay	20
Manganese	1	China clay	70
Copper	1	Vanadium	10

Matt Green

Barium	30
China clay	20
Soda feldspar	50
Chrome	5-10

Glazes tend to be very simple and more often than not mixed together without recipes or any weights as and when they are needed, although some do come from my glaze book. Initially the bisque pot is covered with a black glaze, which is rubbed back or washed away before other stains or glazes are applied. As with the earlier stages I work over and scrape back the surface until it looks finished.

FIRING

I fire to 1200°C in an electric kiln, sometimes several times. An enamel firing is often used.