

Resonant Objects: Inextricable and Inevitable

<http://cinba.net/conference/programme/resonant-objects/>

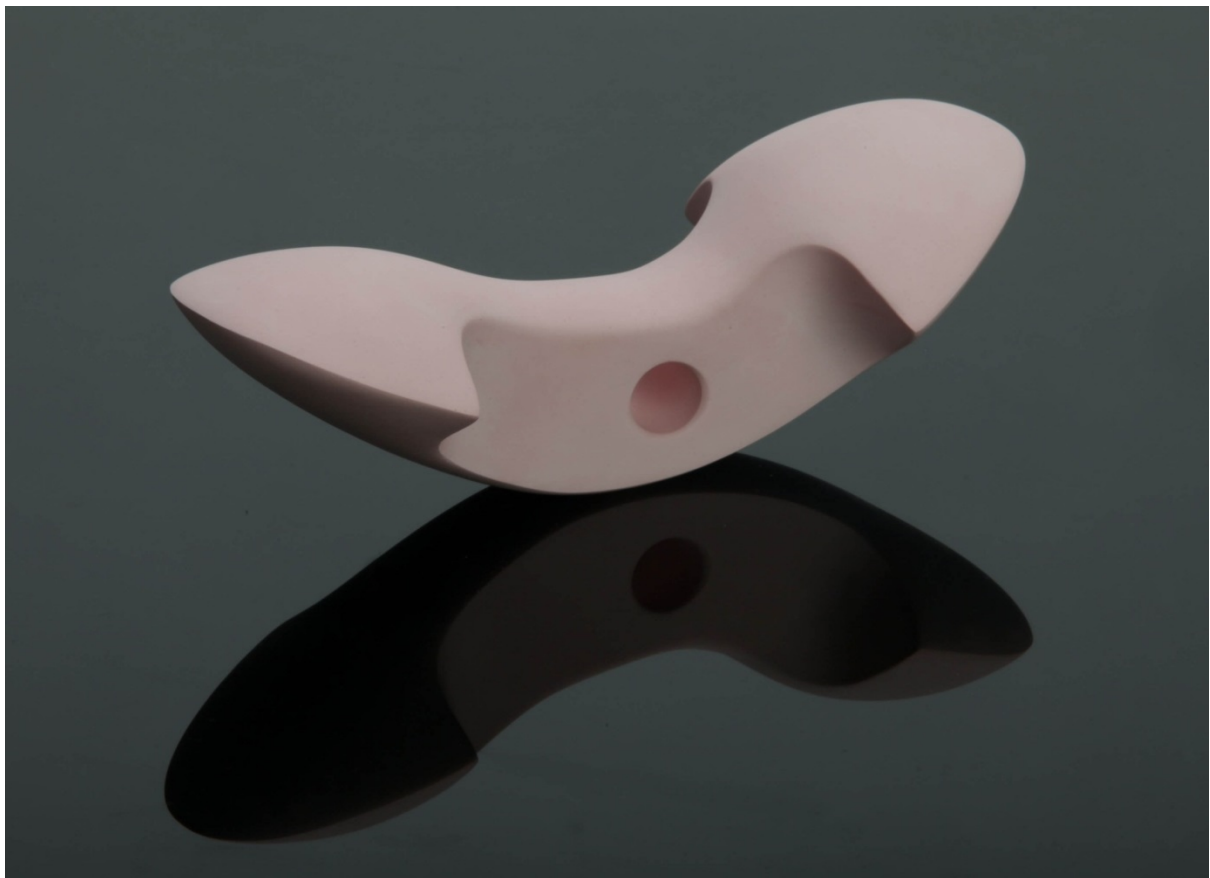


Figure 1. Ceremonial Blush: Plaster & Acrylic

Helen Marton Senior Lecturer

Falmouth University

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As one of six contemporary craftspeople chosen for the Crafts in the Bronze Age maker's engagement project, it isn't possible for me to reflect upon anyone else's journey and so I offer an exploration of my own creative process, inspirations, and the physical outcomes so far. Whilst citing resonance as an aspect invested in every material/artifact it has become clear that in my own teaching of craft process and the creative cycle, this notion can underline resonance as a pedagogic threshold concept, investigating the idea that learning and creativity go beyond any reductive notion of a qualification.

During the last year I was offered the means to engage with and reinterpret materials and objects from the very origins of craft production. I had access to some extremely interesting and inspirational sites, experts and academics as well as many Bronze Age artifacts. I spent several days in Copenhagen learning about religion and iconography from Flemming Kaul. The pinnacle of experience for the ceramic artist was indeed the week spent at Százhalombatta Archaeological Excavation, led by Dr. Magdolna Vicze, (Director of the Matrica Museum, Százhalombatta), together with Dr. Marie Louise Stig Sørensen (University of Cambridge) and Dr. Joanna Sofaer (University of Southampton). This incredible site is one of the largest and best preserved Bronze Age tell settlements in central Europe with deposits of cultural material up to 6m deep. In addition, walking the original entrance, '*the avenue*,' at Stonehenge and visiting the Devises Museum contributed a great deal to my understanding of archaeological process.

It was almost twenty years ago, whilst traveling through Romania with my brother, sitting in the closed carriage of a train, that I remember having a lengthy conversation about process. He is an engineer and I am a craftsperson, we both make '*stuff*.' We spoke at length about the mirroring of process within our fields of work. Much to our surprise, we realised that we both present or are presented with a concept, we look to underpin this historically and culturally, we design and make, or engineer and ultimately we reflect upon our final outcome and its suitability for purpose, its effectiveness. We observed that more often his outcome provided specific function and that mine might require a somewhat different interpretation of function. Perhaps similarities in nature and also in nurture seemed to have given us more commonality than we might have predicted, or perhaps there is just more general commonality in terms of process towards making.

In the fields of Art, Craft and Design, there have long been discussions surrounding the perceived boundaries between the functional and symbolic. For some there is a feeling that a strong critical position can be utilised through analysing the process of production, a position relatively well considered in craft and design disciplines but perhaps underrepresented in fine art critique whose preferred stance is to interrogate creative practice from an objective and subjective position.

Opinions clearly differ from one culture to another; however Craft practice in particular has long suffered from its low status position with much preconception being insistent whilst subjects vie for credibility and popularity in funding, education and market.

'Fine art's symbolic value has consistently outstripped the cultural capital of craft and design, both of which have been conventionally invested with use value rather than conceptual distinction, based on the Western cultural primacy of the intellectual over the manual, content over form.'

Lees-Maffei, G and Sandino, (2004)

I have never held with the tired old debates and preconceptions regarding specific position and I look for and want to see the commonality rather than the difference. Ignoring the divisions can sometimes be seen as a disregard of challenging questions which may provoke innovation and progression. There are clearly many influencing factors, however we deal constantly with an ever changing dynamic and so I might identify a similarity in process between making activities, not an argument for selective recognition.

'Art and design discourse are easy to blend because they have the same concerns: context, production, and consumption of their object. However design art is not exclusively about design and art, but elements of craft can also be found within it. This is feasible as all three have the same fundamentals elements; there is overlap but also distinction.'

Allen, R. (2012)

In my own work as well as in my teaching, it is the gradual discovery and emergence of a personal visual language and the recognition of a shared creative process that preoccupies me. I approach this subject very much from a pedagogic perspective. The mapping out of a cycle of productive activity and reflection sits comfortably within such a realm.

We all inhabit a world where social cohesion is maintained through various means of communication, both verbal and concrete; it was the soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky who claimed language as a tool, he argued that the development of reasoning was semiotically mediated and therefore reliant on cultural practices and language as well as on universal cognitive processes. American author and academic, Daniel Everett claims that language itself is *'a cultural tool, an artefact,'* and *'an instrument created by hominids to satisfy their social need for meaning and community.'* It is through this primary means that we aim to communicate and yet where a

difference of language occurs and there is no other means of communication, out comes the pencil and paper to draw pictures, frequently accompanied by wild and animated movements and gesticulation.

Culturally and historically, the maintenance of social cohesion has been and remains complex and dependent upon myriad variables. Certainly in European history at least, a crucifix or stained glass window may have elicited more profound emotion and possibly fear than a sermon. That for the majority of the population an education was seldom available outside the confines of the church. Reading and writing wasn't an option and so communication was essentially through the telling of stories and the use of objects imbued with meaning and significance. It is interesting to discover that new technologies creating tangible interfaces for storytelling in computer mediated toys, are aiming to merge physical objects with computer technology and enhance children's learning experience. Ironically we are now seeing the development of multi-sensory interfaces designed to reintroduce a binding activity and create narratives where children learn about culture and identity in order to develop a sense of self. Forms beyond function frequently communicate the desire to understand existential issues; the wonder of birth, mysteries surrounding death, the heavens, earth and environment. We understand that values adjust and are not absolute, that they are relative in culture, time and place. Changing from one person to another as well as being relative to the value of other things.

In thinking about objects and storytelling perhaps the most recent example of the widening interest might be the BBC Radio 4 and British Museum series and book, 'A History of the World in 100 Objects.' This gave a chance for curators and others to highlight the many different ideas and narratives to which a single object might allude. It is perhaps as part of the creative process that we problem solve and foster divergent ways of thinking. It can encourage the combination of materials through experimentation, the construction of new ways of seeing and of progressive material exploration. Clearly advances in technology can and do continue to drive and assist creativity and innovation. In their 2011 paper on 'Problems and Potentials of Creating Something New,' Juhl & Gylling recognise that this has to be done in steps.

'The end result simply reflects what these steps have brought in terms of problem understanding, definition and new knowledge. It is seldom mentioned that Picasso sometimes did more than 200 alterations to get a picture right, as the focus on Picasso's end results leaves his process in the shadow.'

Focus upon any end result alone does not show the whole of the creative activity, the problem solving and analysis as well as any in depth research. The creative process is frequently exciting, sometimes agonising, and yet ultimately rewarding and personally advancing. To use the analogy of the worm creating a spiral cast on the beach is entirely appropriate, once the cast can be seen on the surface of the sand; the worm has long gone and is probably working on the next cast.

Juhl & Gylling argued that the journey of the creator may have nothing to do with having '*special gifts,*' or '*unique mental capabilities.*' They recognized that in the main it has to do with hard work performed systematically through incremental steps of exploration and experimentation, they argue effectively for an emphasis on process rather than end result. Perhaps it would be fair to acknowledge that we are continually learning through the course of making and through the process of living. There are however points within the cycle where there is a birth of idea, certainly this offers a unique and entirely personal perspective. There is no magic, but it is a kind of alchemy.

To examine creativity and the creative process is to also examine pedagogy. In some form or another, teaching and learning are at the core of all knowledge based societies and economies; as there surely cannot be progress without, a capacity for learning and following some form of instruction is implicit. Perhaps we can presume that in some way this has always been the case. Contemporary systems of education aim to form a framework and assure development and innovative progression. We have a consistent paradigm for education, largely implemented since the enlightenment and in the face of industrialisation. In a relatively short period in our history we have moved precariously close to the edge of complete regularisation. Author and educationalist, Sir Ken Robinson has suggested that in order for humans to engage and succeed, education must develop on three fronts: '*First, that it should foster diversity by offering a broad curriculum and encouraging individualisation of the learning process; That it should foster curiosity through creative teaching, which depends on high quality teacher training and development; And finally that it should focus on awaking creativity rather than standardised testing, giving the responsibility for defining the course of education to individual schools and teachers. Much of the present education system fosters conformity, compliance, and standardisation rather than creative approaches to learning.*'

Consideration of 'alchemy,' is essential in unpacking creative process for students. A focus upon the purely technical or research based aspects of the creative process can lead to a diminished and inadequate view.

'In the knowledge economy, memorisation of facts and procedures is not enough for success. Educated workers need a conceptual understanding of complex concepts, and the ability to work with them creatively to generate new ideas, new theories, new products, and new knowledge. They

need to be able critically to evaluate what they read, be able to express themselves clearly both verbally and in writing, and understand scientific and mathematical thinking. They need to learn integrated and usable knowledge, rather than the sets of compartmentalised and de-contextualised facts.'

ET, ORGANISATION DE COOPÉRATION (2011)

Learning about materials and processes are central to any creative teaching practice, considered to be vital in assisting to develop an ability to manifest ideas. However in the main, this imparting of knowledge simply deals with those aspects of the learning experience that have been studied to the extent that we might predict with some certainty that if we do something in a particular way we will be able to achieve a specific outcome. We aim to foster a degree of control and familiarity with these core principles of making and in addition we must contextualise, develop ideas and reflect.

In order to explore the notion of creativity through the creative process, I have attempted a natural breakdown of my creative practice.

The steps in this cycle are somewhat interchangeable and I commonly repeat or revisit actions. It is important to substantiate ideas so contextual research is essential. Gaining new knowledge feeds and develops a personal visual language.

'The word connoisseurship comes from the Latin cognoscere, to know. It involves the ability to see, not merely to look. To do this we have to develop the ability to name and appreciate the different dimensions of situations and experiences, and the way they relate one to another. We have to be able to draw upon, and make use of, a wide array of information. We also have to be able to place our experiences and understandings in a wider context, and connect them with our values and commitments. Connoisseurship is something that needs to be worked at – but it is not a technical exercise. The bringing together of the different elements into a whole involves artistry.'

(Eisner, E. W. 1998: 6).

In the case of The Makers Engagement Project we were asked to respond to Bronze Age artefacts from a variety of sources, all of those selected set out armed with camera, notebook and sketchbooks on an extended data collection mission.

In my creative journey, theory and practice are inextricable, nothing exists in isolation from all that has gone before, I think perhaps the observation by Sir Christopher Frayling in conversation with David Pye, Author of Nature and the Art of Workmanship, describes it well. *'The one thing it doesn't mean is copying what has been done before. What it does mean is standing on the shoulders of what's been done before.'*

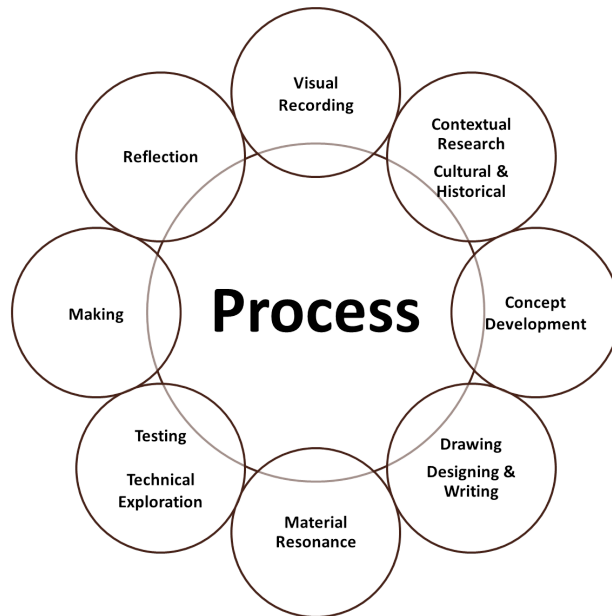


Figure 2. Process Cycle

For me, ideas really develop through 2 dimensional explorations, I write, I sketch and doodle, draw, and make maquettes, often going back again and again to see which motifs pervade and demand to be made manifest. This is a strange but exciting part of the process. Inspiration can come at any time of the day or night and it pays to have a little sketchbook handy at all times. This is the point at which transition from input to output happens; this is the place where all information sits a while, growing and metamorphosing. If there is any 'mystery' at all it exists at this transition point between input and output.



Figure 3. Sketchbook Imagery

This brings me onto the idea of material resonance and the use of materials as specific signifiers. Throughout history the use and of course ownership of specific materials made into objects has indicated power, status, wealth, gender and is the foundation of economy. Each substance resonates, speaks, and holds meaning and significance. Many artists use material resonance in their work, perhaps a good example is that of the controversial piece *Equivalent VIII*, usually referred to as "The Bricks", by minimalist sculptor Carl Andre. The work comprises one-hundred-and-twenty fire bricks, arranged in two layers, in a six-by-ten rectangle. Not only are each of these bricks of equivalent shape, size and volume to each other but they also reference a commonplace building material in stark contrast to the high status materials such as marble, alabaster or bronze, more traditionally used in sculpture. The fire bricks resonate with familiarity, their origin, their purpose (in kiln construction) and the home of the clay body from where they originated. In addition they speak of their manufacture and the process of mass production for construction, industrialisation and the working class. How ironic that the humble brick, as a statement of class equality in art, drew much criticism in the press because of the perception that taxpayers' money had been spent on paying for a collection of bricks.

I hope to communicate viscerally through my material choice; clearly meaning and significance do alter according to culture and history and from one individual to another, however it is possible to attempt communication specifically within one's own society, as with verbal communications.



Figure 4. Venus II: Gabbroic Clay, Porcelain & Red Glaze

To illustrate something of what I mean by material resonance in my own work, some of my pieces for the CinBA project are made using 2 clay bodies; they both come from Cornwall. The geology of the area is varied. Gabbroic clay found on the Lizard Peninsula had been used to make vessels for

over 5000 years. My particular interest in the clay began with my first ever visit to Truro's museum; I was a young tutor under the guidance of Senior Lecturer David Metcalf. Our visit enabled us to see some of the Funery urns close up, touch fragments and handle several pieces. It struck me then the importance and significance of this moment, my love affair with this material had begun. I literally felt as though I had travelled back in time, walking in someone else's shoes. I stood in the museum with one hand inside and one outside of the pot, with my eyes closed, feeling my way up the sides, feeling the thickness and traveling through time, engaging with the material and the journey of the maker.

For many years we ran a reconstruction project with 1st year degree students. We dug clay, processed it, visited Truro's museum to draw and handle Bronze Age vessels, built replicas and fired the pieces. We took students by the coachload to dig clay in winter, wellies, waterproofs, buckets and spades. We processed some of the clay, made replicas from the drawings and photographs made in the museum and finally we would visit the Cornish Celtic Village, a Bronze Age settlement reconstruction run by Jacqui Wood,' where the students experienced what life in Bronze Age might have been like. The work would then be fired in pit or bonfire. 15 years later, I still go and dig small amounts of Gabbroic clay from the Lizard, I can still find small deposits in already disturbed run offs. The gabbroic clay dug straight from the Lizard Peninsula near Goonhilly Downs and containing a variety of natural inclusions can be immediately modelled into a vessel form. Dried out, this clay frequently survives firing to 1280°.

In addition I chose Porcelain, made in part from China Clay, mined in the North of Cornwall. China clay was first used in China more than ten thousand years ago to make fine white porcelain. In the UK we were importing such fine ware but it was exclusively for the wealthy and elite. Lower fired earthenware was the common clay used for domestic ware at the time. It was during the 1700's that a Plymouth chemist called William Cookworthy began to research the porcelain-making process. In 1745 he eventually found it, at Tregonning Hill, near Germoe, in Cornwall. Uniquely he found a particularly rare type of decomposed granite, naturally occurring and finer than any talc. He went on to form the Plymouth Porcelain Factory, sourcing all of his china clay from St. Austell in North Cornwall. These two clay sites are only 30 miles apart geographically and the resulting works express my location as well as the inherent historical and cultural significance these clays each embody.

In terms of a technical exploration, I produced clay tests using combinations of Gabbroic clay with a variety of inclusions. The results of tests produced ascertain workability, plasticity and temperature range as well as establishing colour and texture. I must also make mention of new tools and emergent technologies. Exploring 3D scanning enables me to make smaller replicas through rapid prototyping and larger moulds for construction through CNC milling. I am also working with the

team at Camborne School of Mines using Qemscan, a sophisticated machine providing automated mineralogy and petrography. I will be able to produce imagery taken from thin sections of Gabbroic clay in order to print digitally.

It is only after a great deal of deliberation, drawing, researching and material testing that I will engage in the making process. For me making is a wonderfully meditative engagement. I am locked out of thinking I simply manifest my designs. Over a long period of time, I have developed a good relationship with clay. It may well have been another material I chose to work with and although I frequently use other ingredients, the core of what I do happens in clay. The engagement is entirely experiential, a dialogue between hands and clay, something that in essence is not easily taught. The learning process for this experiential engagement can only really come with practice through familiarity, failure and patience. There is a real peace and joy in this streaming of design into reality. If I am completely honest though, occasionally, whilst the subconscious is at work, the 'happy accident,' might also lead the way.

Reflection is without question one of the most challenging yet vital aspects of my creative process. Donald Schön, educationalist and author of the reflective practitioner conceived of the idea of reflection in action, and reflection on action. Reflection in action is perhaps best described as thinking on our feet. It really involves the use of all our immediate senses and keeping our minds on those theories in use. This type of formative reflection assists us in immediately structuring new approaches to move ahead differently, potentially accepting and or rejecting particular ideas throughout a process.

'The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.'

Schön, D (1983: 68)

The process of reflection in action can also be linked with reflection on action. This kind of reflection is entirely after the event so to speak. Reflecting on action is purely summative. We can spend time looking at the reasons why we made decisions or took a particular course of action. We can reflect upon interactions by developing new questions and ideas. This seems, in essence, to be how we learn whilst doing and how we learn after doing. This is how we might ultimately develop a frame of reference, draw together certain theories, and bring fragments of our recollections from the past into each moment. The development of critical awareness is central to the creative process. The creative process is critical to learning and to development. My creative practice describes how I make connections between images, metaphors and theories and how I reflect on action by looking

to my experiences and my perceptions. In his own reflection upon the work of Schön, and in the defence of the importance of both forms of reflection, Mark, K Smith, writes,

'We have to take certain things as read. We have to fall back on routines in which previous thought and sentiment has been sedimented. It is here that the full importance of reflection-on-action becomes revealed. As we think and act, questions arise that cannot be answered in the present. The space afforded by recording, supervision and conversation with our peers allows us to approach these. Reflection requires space in the present and the promise of space in the future.'

(Smith 1994: 150)

A significant part of my own reflection is to consider display, it is always as important as the work itself and when I conceive of an idea it will come within a space or a sequence and once the works are manifest I can stand back and ask myself whether it might be done differently. These manifestations need to work visually and conceptually by achieving what Eisner describes as 'connoisseurship,' with what we understand innately as balance, proportion and grace. Developing an inner critic takes time and a particular kind of 'hack and slash,' approach is essential. At this point, there might be a need to compromise in some way but without losing sight of the initial concept.

I'm sure that in some ways I have made this seem like a dry and analytical endeavour, in reality for me it is an innate process that has come into focus over many years, agonisingly time consuming and frequently riddled with anxiety and self-doubt. It is through examination of my own practice that I have been able to advise and encourage my students to look with honesty at themselves in the manifesting of their visual language and to critically reflect upon the stages in their own creative process.

In acknowledgment of a personal visual language, I have frequently witnessed this 'eureka' moment first hand, the point at which any student might suddenly be aware and fully enabled to pour out all that they are and all that they know into their practice, but more often than not this is something that slowly develops over time. This is evident in both clarity of vision and visual consistency in aesthetic. Each of us has a visual language; I can only really speak with some certainty about my own.

I use the metaphor of an 'invisible backpack,' which contains, everything that I know, everything I have read, all that I have learnt and in particular all that I have seen and experienced, whether consciously or subconsciously. When I manifest and express an idea, pieces of the contents are thrown out, sometimes violently, mixed up together, literally 'thrown up'. A visual response or reaction is not necessarily straightforward to interpret but it is as powerful a representation of the whole of the maker, their culture and their place in history, as any verbal or written contribution.

'Objects, things we carry with us, are markers of complex personal histories and it is in this sense that they take on the cultural markers of memory and of time. Objects tell stories of our relationship to the world and to others and they offer a material base not just in terms of production – hand, industrial or even electronic media – but in relation to how we consume them, long for them and even obsessively collect them.'

Prof Janis Jefferies (2012)

Our culture and unique place in history allows us to open up the backpack and see a diverse array of signifiers, ranging from those that entered pre speech to those that arrive on a daily basis from any given experience. I am sometimes amazed that with a little detective work on my part I can identify many of the early gems to have entered the visual repository of my invisible backpack. They sneak into my work whether I like it or not. I have discovered that you are what you make and you make what you are.

In differentiating between those responsible for the crafting of objects in the Bronze Age and myself as a contemporary maker, I first needed to examine my fundamental aims. Potentially in no way differing from those that have gone before me, I look to understand my world in myriad ways. To a great extent it is advisable to question what has gone before, but as Jarred Diamond points out,

'We shouldn't be so naive as to think that study of the past will yield simple solutions, directly transferable to our societies today.'

Diamond, J (2005)

I reinterpret and translate what I consider to be significant, I often produce things alluding to function; purposefully fraudulent. I carefully select those visual elements which might imply a practical function however in reality the composition means that they cannot ever be effective for a domestic task.

I work as 'isolated individual' and in no sense other than occasionally in the manufacture of my works, do I belong to a community of making. I can't claim to know a genuine clarity of community vision or indeed any personal value that might have been felt from the past production of artefacts. I confess that I am a product of our prevailing ideology which, since the enlightenment gradually led creative practice into the cult of the individual and away from an ethic of community. It is no longer possible for me to engage in a way that is intending to mirror some reanimation of a potentially past ethic.



Figure 5. Shaken, Strained & Measured. Porcelain & Gabbroic Clay

In developing my personal visual language, many years of research and experience has led to a certain persistence of themes, to some extent I always seem to manifest works driven from investigations into our fundamental drives and needs; reproduction, consumption and protection. I am interested in the Darwinian notion of our place on this planet, simply the human animal.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow, proposed a “Theory of Human Motivation”. “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”, although more recently extended, still designates the primary levels of this order as biological, physiological and protective. These themes remain central to my work; globally the changing balance of these preoccupations continues to concern us all greatly. I spent several years living as a New Age traveller in the 1980’s. I became absorbed by the rhythm of daily life and the simple tasks for survival. It did go some way to helping me understand natural cycles and the importance of reading my environment. This was a way of being in the world that really impacted upon me. Consumption loomed larger and less could be taken for granted in terms of acquisition. In my making, I continue to focus upon the domestic, the repetition of use, the wonder and beauty of a vital tool, the meditation in the everyday task and the rhythm of doing.

In addition to the unpacking of my process, I offer a glimpse of what has contributed towards the work made for the maker’s engagement project. Many of the influences do indeed herald from the Bronze Age, however, it is inevitable that as part of this journey many other influences have crept into the mix.

The diagram clearly shows what feeds my creative practice in this case, it clearly identifies that this combination of interactions is inextricable. Ruskin once said, the most important tools we have are the head, the heart, and the hands. Commuting between past and present and from one culture to another, it is inevitable that my resulting artefacts hold their own unique blended significance. Churning around in the mix has been a fascination with resonant materials, with the archaeology, many tools and processes, further research, and of course technologies. I must also acknowledge the cultural experience, the places I have visited and the many significant people I have met. I make no apology for the fact that my creations are also partial echoes of these places and people, and that therefore in some way the works are celebratory.



Figure 6. Ancient Tool. Gabbroic Clay

I'm not convinced that the human condition has changed all that much, in contrast to our comprehension of the world which has expanded exponentially. Our drives and needs remain the same, as do our most basic preoccupations, hopes and fears. So if Bronze Age makers had listened to Radio 4 whilst coiling pots, maybe we would have seen some reference to women's hour inscribed on the outside.

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