

Functional Symbolism

The Pots of Duncan Ayscough

Article by Sarah James

Meeting Duncan Ayscough at his home in West Wales relies on a certain level of commitment on behalf of the traveler. Ayscough and his potter wife, Kate Glanville, find themselves in an enviable environment, yet living and working in a beautiful and isolated landscape can have benefits and drawbacks. These extremes, however, seem to add to their individual approach to life.

Duncan Ayscough has been in love with the potter's wheel since he was in his early teens and he quickly realized that it was the only thing he wanted to do. His meticulously thrown and deceptively simple shapes are a testament to the obsessively repetitive nature with which he approaches his work. "This was the only thing that ever felt right in my life. Working on the wheel connected with something inside me."

Born in Stockport in 1968, a series of moves around the country led him to finally settle in Bristol in 1980. He studied for his BA in 3D Design in Manchester Metropolitan University graduating in 1990, before gaining a distinction for the MA Ceramics course at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, in 1994. This attracted him to Wales, where he has lived ever since. Working in rural isolation initially felt too introspective, spending more than two years doing major renovations on his house, and not much teaching. Thought, in retrospect, being isolated helped him focus in contextualizing his work. Up until then he had spent nearly 10 years in some form or another in art colleges and spent nearly 10 years in some form or another in art colleges and experiencing the positive and negative aspects of that environment.

A production potter in his early days, he says he didn't have the mentality for the production process, as each individual piece would excite him. Each mug would be given the same attention as the finest exhibition piece – not a good quality when speed as well as accuracy is key. "I do everything with the same level of obsession whether it be mowing the lawn or DIY (do-it-yourself). It all comes from the same mind, like painting a copper pipe that is not ever seen. I can't help it. Everything has to be perfect and it is about your weaknesses also being your strengths because now the house is perfect and we enjoy it immensely".

Drawing on ancient histories and found fragments, he creates pots of strength and subtlety. The work captures the balance between the enormous control of the making and then the chaos of the firing. Ayscough puts this down to a need within himself to push the work to the limits, even to find the faults within the work, and to expose them. Even the spiraling crazing that occurs has been

controlled to a certain extent. Having moved away from earlier reduction fired stoneware, a process that can be studied and more easily controlled, he has adopted smoke firing which adds the necessary danger that Ayscough requires.

Coming from a dynasty of scientists and engineers, (he is distantly related to Sir Isaac Newton), he has been influenced by the scientific and fascinated by alchemy. Turning base materials into exquisite pots, to which he sometimes adds gold, gives his pieces a depth at their centres.

Now a part-time tutor at the West Wales School of the Arts, Carmarthen, and a visiting lecturer at the University of Wales, Newport, Ayscough sees teaching as a lifeline and a creative stimulation. Communication directly by teaching and indirectly through his work has always been at the core of his thinking. However, he also feels that teaching can be seductive and being in an environment alive with ideas there can be a danger of losing a sense of creative context. Ayscough has, however, an open and forthright attitude to being a tutor and is all too aware of the problem of tutors influencing work too heavily. He promotes the importance of having a diverse spectrum of opinions to arm the students with ideas rather than following the formula of one tutor's work, preferring not to be too prescriptive within teaching.

He believes the key to good work is through objective critical analysis coupled with skilful making, not through attempting to please the tutor. He teaches the full range of levels from conceptual ideas of degree level, through to more project based HND (Higher National Diploma), ND (National Diploma) level – where it is nearly all skills based – to evening classes. Invigorated by the contrast of different levels, Ayscough enjoys the unpretentious approach of the amateur ceramic student, meeting diverse people who get joy from working with the material without the inherited angst of the intellectual maker. He believes that even though there are differing levels of education one can undertake, good work will naturally rise to the top, whether it be through mainstream education or through sheer force of will and talent.

Having been through periods where he had little teaching, the balance has swung the other way with him now feeling that he needs more time for his own work. Being a self confessed obsessive easily becoming like a hermit internalizing his work, he finds the teaching a vital element in bringing him into contact with people and putting his work in context. In a lecture at the International Ceramic Festival at Aberystwyth, 2001, New York gallery owner and dealer, Garth Clark, opposed the idea of makers holding teaching positions or having other forms of income to supplement their work because it made them less hungry resulting in the work lacking vitality. Many artists in the UK, where the ceramic market is perhaps not as commercially developed as the American model, do not echo these sentiments. Ayscough argues that teaching has become a vital component in the making process. "It keeps your head out of the sand and keeps your eyes open. Constant evaluation, rather than being

fashionable, is important to me. Issues of who is it for, how do you want to make it, where are you going to sell it, are important to constantly evaluate your motives for making". He believes that circumstances change over the years and he accepts opportunities as they come to him, taking each situation and adapting it to suit his creative needs and the needs of his family. The lifting of commercial restraint can give the maker the opportunity to make work that is not constrained by commercial issues.

Ayscough believes the study of ceramic history to be vital because one philosophy is not dominating what is being made, although he is fanatical about the positive influence of Bernard Leach on studio ceramics in this country. Tracing back to Leach in the 1920's and the beginning of studio pottery through to the Leach revival in the late '60s/early '70s and then the anti-Leach movements of the '80s he believes that we owe an enormous debt to Leach and feels that we wouldn't have the quantity or quality of ceramics that we have in Britain today without his influence. Ayscough believes that students now are not bogged down by historical straight-jackets and can look at these philosophies and can pick and choose. He does, however, object to makers setting themselves up creatively in a negative context. He finds it disturbing, as a creative impetus, that a piece of work exists purely as a statement against another form of work. He remembers speaking to teachers in ceramics in France who commented that more people study ceramics in the first two years of the BA at Carmarthen than in the whole of France. In South Wales alone there are well-regarded courses at Cardiff, Swansea and Carmarthen with two further courses just over the bridge in Bristol and Bath. In such a small strip of Britain, not counting the hundreds of courses in ceramics around the British Isles, thousands of people are studying ceramics and Ayscough insists that we wouldn't have had this interest without the teachings of Leach.

Being a fan of the work of Takeshi Yasuda, Walter Keeler and his super-hero, Hans Coper, Ayscough believes that the work of Yasuda and Coper communicate more and have more objectivity because they have lived and worked outside the cultures in which they grew up. He likes to pretend that he has a little bit of that within himself. Being brought up in English suburbia, he finds the direct approach of the people of South Wales refreshing and forthright and any thoughts of him moving from the area would be giving up on a dream. He is fascinated by the subtle use of pots as codes within social ritual and how coding in vessels is relevant today and how vessels can communicate beyond the artifact.

Ayscough feels that strong work needs no embellishing and speaks to the viewer without statements and concepts. His work is simple on one level and complex on another. Its processes have an effect on the work but result in adding subtle complexities that reveal themselves over time. Spraying terra sigillata with a high content of sodium turns the surface almost into a glaze in the firing and picks up the fine tensions within the work – a process that is idiosyncratic at first but true

to form – Ayscough has tried to harness this process and tries to repeat its unpredictable effect. The addition of gold is not haphazard but is a mechanism for drawing the eye into the form with the shapes almost exploding with strength from within. Striving for purity of form his work is not traditionally functional, but he feels that utilitarian work can become a visually functional piece. Working in groups of pieces to avoid projecting too much ego on to one piece, archaeology and alchemy combine within the work. Gold does not oxidise over time and stays true, whereas the outside of the pots, though sealed with wax, continue to evolve, encouraged by occasional polishing. This process, Ayscough feels, gives the owner of the pot a connection with the work and an influence over its future. The counterbalance between the two materials, between clay, which is given value by the force of will the maker and gold which is intrinsically valuable in its own right, is a compelling combination. His education in mixed media, using different materials and especially wood, has helped him find pleasure from the different qualities that the surface can convey.

The momentum of interest in his work is also gathering pace, signified by a piece being bought for the National Museum of Wales' Collection. His first solo show at the White Gallery in Brighton was in 2000, and another major exhibition was held at the Maltby Gallery at Winchester in 2001. He is now working towards the highlight of the contemporary craft calendar in Britain, the highly selective Chelsea Craft Fair. That final connection with the public completes the circle. Struggling with the fact that he is not able to afford his own work – many makers know their collections are predominantly made up of swaps with mutually admired makers – he reconciles with himself the fact that you do not need an artistic background to connect with his work. He considers himself a socialist and finds the elitist elements of owning the work difficult. His wife, Kate Glanville, is a potter who wears her creativity more lightly. She has a successful majolica business and Ayscough finds her a stabilizing factor in his personal and professional life. She doesn't have the preciousness that many makers have considering her successes, and he has enormous respect for that. Kate is a constant source of support and he always turns to her for creative advice and regular reality checks.

Ayscough was awarded a grant from the Welsh Arts Council in 2000 to assist in establishing a studio and in developing creative practice; this was a boost to his confidence and has helped to establish his reputation as a maker. He is skeptical, however, of the role of national funding bodies and is concerned about the emphasis that currently exists – being preoccupied with concept – to the extent that issues of skill and beauty become ignored. It is not that conceptual ideas should not be expressed but there appears an imbalance in the themes and with style.

Believing that the quality of crafts rests on skills, Ayscough blames external influences placed upon art colleges putting them under pressure to process more students than in previous years. The results are that skill levels are pushed

down – it is easier to teach concepts and ideas than skills. He sees that one of the vital roles of the funding bodies should be to communicate directly with educational establishments and influence the level of skills taught. Without seeming to bite the hand that feeds, he is passionate about being honest about what you do and sees that without a strong grounding with skills, concepts have nothing to hang on to. A point of irritation for him is phoney Zen and pseudo-spiritual work. He feels that his work taps into influences that are much closer to home, into Anglo Saxon, Roman and Greek cultures as seen in the dynamic early work of Michael Cardew. He believes that he has a more honest approach to his work. “Crafts is the language of my culture. I call myself a potter and I make pots; what irritates me is the verbal inflation where people say ‘I am a ceramist making vessels’ because I see them as distancing their heritage”. Being passionate about his work has become a personal emotional quest that reflects the intensity of the making. Each issue or process is seen not in isolation but as a continual debate to reach new answers. This raises the work to another level.

Sarah James lives in Bristol and is a freelance consultant on public art and craft-based projects within the region. She is a former maker and was Crafts Officer for Calderdale, West Yorkshire. She was born and bred in Wales.