

Sandy Brown **The Still Point and the Dance**

Article by David Whiting



Sandy Brown is one of the great individualists of British ceramics – and, as the years pass, her particular creative path diverges more and more from the mainstream. Her work shows a rich absorption of broad visual culture, in her case not only modern Western art but much older native traditions and rituals from as far as Japan, where Brown trained as a potter in the early '70s. Yet she arrived at her language – exuberant and vivid, freely conceived pots and sculptures and joyfully expansive paintings – remarkably independently. She has always avoided superficial notions of style. This outlook is reflected in the relative isolation of her home and workplace in Appledore, on the North Devon coast, sustained by the presence of the Torridge Estuary, but principally drawing on creative energies from within herself. She is inevitably affected by the physical world around her, but is not responsive to the shallow changes that govern so much ceramic endeavour these days. She is a true originator.



Now in her 60th year, Sandy Brown has been immersed in perhaps the single most important project of her life so far, a major two-part ceramic installation, *The Still Point and the Dance*, funded by a generous grant from South West Arts, and which formed a centrepiece to the 9th Appledore Visual Arts Festival in June 2006, the general theme of which is 'Ritual Feasts'. She has taken inspiration from T. S. Eliot's poem *Burnt Norton* (from *Four Quartets*) and found in its words a parallel:

"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;

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Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance."



Just as in the poem, Brown has come to recognise how in her own making of pots, the exuberance and freedom she enjoys is born out of a particular discipline, a creative silence, the 'still point'. There is the therapeutic preparation and wedging of the clay for instance, and the centring of the clay on the wheel. Out of this natural reflective calm the spontaneity of making emerges, expressed so well in Eliot's metaphor of the dance. And it is this process that Brown wanted to celebrate in a large-scale work, one that dealt not only with elements of artistic gestation, but the fertile interaction of broader creation.



During her time in Japan, in the early 1970s, learning her craft in Mashiko, Brown absorbed the time-honoured tradition of the tea ceremony with its ritualistic drinking of tea in which the prized teabowl is contemplated and savoured. This quiet understated participative performance, a kind of communion seemed a perfect starting point for Brown's project, symbolic as it seemed of the creative contemplation, from which the energy comes. So, in her vast airy studio in Appledore, refurbished for the installation with the inventive and good humoured assistance of Richard Mounce and Steve Heard, a tea house was constructed, a square enclosing screen of taut cotton. Here visitors will partake in tea as the first stage of their experience, a place not only for them – seated at specially designed tables and benches – to collect their thoughts, but to appreciate in concentrated form the visual and tactile richness of clay in the teabowls they handle.



This performance allows Sandy Brown to address a central sensory aim of her work, struck as she is "by the absence in our culture of a ritual in which art is fundamental". As well as teabowls, Brown has made large teapots for the ceremony and a big clay kettle is being cast in metal. This will stand on a speciallymade tripod over a clay burner with sprigged motifs.

At the outset participants will have the opportunity of climbing through a colourfully striped clay disc, symbolic of cleansing and renewal before they take tea. This object resembles the Zen Void form and the circular healing stones found on prehistoric sites (notably that of Men-an-Tol in Cornwall). While Brown is obviously indebted to Chado, or the Way of Tea, and has received instruction from Chieko Kanaya, a tea ceremony teacher in South Devon, the ritual as practised by her was deliberately hybrid, a Westernised event. She is delighted when people see the crossover with the British tradition of tea drinking, seated at

furniture more reminiscent of European kitchens, and using utensils that deliberately coalesce with the domestic objects we use daily. Brown would like to refocus attention on our daily observances in this way, her underlying philosophy as a potter. The ceremony will bring together other craft skills too – not only the wooden furniture but her own vivid woven covers for the cushions and the cast utensils. This pooling of creative skills has been one of the pleasures of the project for Brown.



After the teahouse, visitors pass through another door into the lofty principal space of her studio, a beautifully lit room that was long used for glovemaking, and picks up the reflective light of the estuary. Here is arranged a sculptural ceramic dance, a large group of abstract and semi-figurative forms that represent the energy that comes out of the still centre, the outward expression of the inner calm. These large-scale ceramics, many of which were nearing completion at the time of my visit, are placed in dance-like formations, intended as an almost pagan paean to nourishment, to the male-female relationship and fecundity. Sandy Brown has certainly been singing about femaleness throughout her career. Here the abstracted pieces are round, generous and voluptuous, woman expressed in oval womb and orb-like forms, while the male is explored in tall phallic structures and obelisks, some of the latter topped by spheres, a recurrent form representing the fecund. All the pieces are decorated with lively glaze painting, brushed, trailed and dripped, showing not only a natural colour sense but her ability to animate surface.



The raw life of those sculptures, immediate and gutsy, have something of the sensual sexual vigour of the temple figures she discovered in India in 2001. They also have the expressive richness of the votive painted terracottas found in local shrines there. I saw two large animated forms, twisting and gyrating, which dance among the standing pieces in what could also be interpreted as a modern fertility rite. The whole project has proven a technical challenge in making and firing, involving the investigation of different types of armature,

and structures that don't buckle or crack in firing. She makes large male and female energised spiral forms, made up of giant ceramic 'beads', threaded on to metal poles. The source for all these ideas can be found in small clay sketches or maquettes that lie about the studio, the result of playing with the material to see what emerges which, as she says, are "avoiding too much deliberation".



Completed by ethereal abstract paintings on the wall, the room, full of exultant colour and life, represents a kind of apotheosis, not only of Brown's essential optimism, but of her vocation in ceramics, her ability to release ideas through clay and glaze. This is but one stage in her artistic journey though, of intuitively "digging some stuff from the depths," as she puts it. She would like people to be open to the possibilities, to take what they need from this project, just as she has been able to find her own affirmation through her art. There is something distinctly primeval about Sandy Brown's installation, recalling ancient traditions of earth ceremony and celebrations of self. More specifically it uses ceramics to create a whole new environment, not just to enrich it.

David Whiting is a writer and art critic specialising in ceramics. He lives in the UK.