

Allison Weightman

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Shooting Clay

GEORGINA COBURN considers the important work produced by Allison Weightman in the often undervalued medium of ceramics

FOR SCORAIG-BASED ceramic artist Allison Weightman clay is a means of exploring human creative and destructive potential. Recipient of the Mercer Company Award at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1998 and a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art in 2005, she has exhibited widely in the UK and Europe and is represented in both private and public collections.

On an international stage her concerns about the predominance of violence in our culture explored through the ceramic medium are shared by artists such as Charles Krafft, Ehren Tool and the late Luis Miguel Suro.

The way in which ceramics record human history is not only a potent political statement here and now but one that future generations may literally unearth. Citing artefacts of porcelain recovered after the bombing of Hiroshima as an example, Weightman describes the way in which clay “has the ability not only to record time but events as well, (creating) hard- hitting records of the horrific monstrosities we create” (‘Guns and Clay’ by Allison Weightman, *Ceramic Review*, July/ August 2007)

‘Shotgun Five’ (currently on show at the Inchmore Gallery near Inverness) is a study in natural creation through the medium of clay and unnatural destruction by mankind.

“Some cultures believe that man was modelled from the clay that is our earth,” explains Weightman. “This is the reason why I felt it appropriate to use leather-hard clay which has an outer skin giving the work strength and a soft interior”.

Weightman’s work represents a holistic view of art practice integral to life

Five large scale sculptural discs marked and impacted by shotgun residue are a powerful physical and moral statement of consequence. The violence contained within these objects, torn apart by human action, make visible what most of us do not see and that which the artist herself experienced as a result of being wounded as a teenager by an airgun.

When we hear news reports about the rising tide of gun crime, an 11-year-old being shot dead on a UK street or the war in Iraq, the media's steady bombardment of images do not sensitise us to the human cost of these events.

Weightman's art makes us see that damage on a human scale and in terms of our own flesh. Peppered with shrapnel and burnt from the inside out, the artist's use of clay makes our acceptance of the normality of violence painfully visible. The realisation of what the same force might do to a body is openly and beautifully displayed to an audience through the entry and exit wounds.

The intent of the work however is not overt; there are no red glazes or gory effects. The wounds are clean in this respect and completely removed from the sensationalism we so often see in the press or in the work of artists defined by celebrity. Instant shock simply isn't the point.

The power of Weightman's art is that it stays with you long after first exposure to the work. The beauty of form, how the object has been crafted is the first thing to draw you in, then realisation creeps over you in a way you cannot turn away from. The domestic, safe, familiar material of clay and its comfortable associations become something altogether different and potent.

The truth of the work is in the development of technique, the "craft" itself, and the ideological or conceptual aspect of the creative process which are inseparable. This aspect of thought and contemplation is as true of the gunshot works as it is of other sculptural or decorative examples of the artist's work.

'Angel of the North' (Raku) with its simplified and elegant figurative form is a playful antithesis of Anthony Gormley's well-known work near Newcastle. Weightman's 'Angel' is executed on an intimate rather than a public scale, with wings ironically shortened.

A low firing method with its origins in 16th century Japan, the process of Raku usually involves the removal of the vessel from the kiln while the glaze is still molten. This is then placed in a reduction chamber and covered with sawdust resulting in the distinctive black crackled finish.

The artist's 'Female Form and Lace' demonstrates a more formal design defined by clean lines and cool blue and white adornment. Recent work with the male torso and lacy glaze technique are part of a developing interest in representations of masculine and feminine.

Like the work of Orkney-based ceramic artist John Struthers some of Weightman's vessels take this exploration of the human figure a step further into abstraction. The beauty of subtle curves, elongated line or full voluptuous vessel recalls ancient ceramic forms based on symbolic human form.

Observation of the natural world is also clearly visible in the artist's work. 'Scoraig Sea Pod', an urchin-like flattened vessel with shallow relief and delicate pierced line decoration incorporates the form of a sea creature but also the evocation of landscape and shoreline. The concave top of this form makes me think of rock pools, natural places of erosion, full of sea water or collecting rain.

A piece such as 'Balanced and Offset' – a natural pod or gourd-like form – explores concepts of composition and balance. The seed-like form in clay is an apt representation of the artist's work as a whole. Weightman is keen to develop larger scale sculptural works and further explore the shotgun series cast in bronze and glass.

The interplay between traditional ideas about the ceramic medium "fine art" are a fascinating aspect of the artist's work. If defined as an "applied art" in the orthodox sense ceramics are often seen as decorative, useful but not necessarily capable of provoking thought, contemplation or political change.

When we talk about "fine art" we conjure a more serious and valued representation of creative function backed up by a canon of Art History, mankind made visible. Thankfully Weightman turns these assumptions on their head, representing the highest aspirations of both Art and Craft.

Her work is a fine example of the fluidity between traditionally defined "Fine Art" and "Craft" practices that define the work of many Highlands and Islands-based artists. The integrity of her practice is grounded in the techniques of her craft, but is equally conceptual in terms of creative approach and interpretation.

Weightman's exploration and development of hand built and raku-fired techniques since 1990 is superbly balanced by her commitment to initiation of positive change through her creative work. Her work represents a holistic view of art practice integral to life.

As part of the artist's group 'an talla solais' working towards the establishment of an Arts Centre for the West Coast, Weightman's commitment to education is also expressed in her work in local schools such as Applecross and Ullapool and on public art works such as the Avoch bus shelter project currently in progress.

With opportunities for study of ceramic art now reduced to one institution at national level (Glasgow School of Art), Weightman is passionate about the establishment of a training facility for ceramics in the North.

As the success of Northlands glass in Caithness demonstrates, the work of a specialist training facility is international in scope, attracting artists and students from around the world to attend workshops and master classes. The opportunity for exchange between artists of different disciplines is also significant.

With artists such as Allison Weightman, Lotte Glob, Patricia Shone, Daniel Kavanagh and John Struthers resident in the North, the inspiration of the local environment and the fluid exchange between Art and Craft disciplines redefining the boundaries of both in the Highlands and Islands and beyond, I see no reason why the West Coast should not become an international centre and focus for the development of ceramic art.

Weightman's work is naturally global in its concerns and reveals that contemporary craft can be a powerful comment on our time. Though a shotgun may seem a controversial creative instrument it is the method by which many chose to express themselves throughout the world. In the hands of the artist it is used in full knowledge, a process balanced on the edge of the human capacity for creation and destruction.