

# MARTIN SMITH

## *static field*

9 May to 15 June 2013

A body of new work for Martin Smith involves rhythms and series. To see a group of new pieces is to be given something whole, a concept dancing through some variations, a complete performance. The visual evidence of his train of thought, his mental plan, is there when the eye wanders over these modulated forms, their invitations to space, the criss-crossing of the linear marks.

In these new works Smith is baffling the eye with intersecting lines running across surfaces. For the past few years he has made work for both the wall and the table, horizontals and verticals. The characteristics of the pieces made for vertical viewing have played on the historical convention of hanging the best plates on the wall, separating them from use and regarding them as pictures. Smith's wall pieces are more than an individual 'plate'; he makes a pair or a series for visual comparison.

In this exhibition there are four works for the wall, in which he pursues his interest in exploring lines on surfaces. There are two pairs of discs with flat rims, a red version and a black version. These were made with a semi-industrial process called jolleying, engaging a spinning horizontal mould with a descending template like a blade, which defines the top surface of the clay as it whirls around. Smith's pairs are made of white earthenware and covered with a layer of so-called 'velvet underglaze' pigment which does not require glaze. They are inscribed with shallow arcs of lines across the whole surface, fine intervals of rhythmic curves, disrupting regularity. The drawing tool was a diamond burr on the long arm of a specially rigged kind of compass, working from two different centres; hence the title *2 Corners Diptych*. (Smith's titles are a record of the work's constructive principle, as we shall see.) The imperfection of line, the interference as a spike travels repeatedly across a dished surface and a rim from two directions, is what builds the mesmeric effect.

More obviously plate-like are the works composed with a number of industrially made bone china plates, whose shifting apparitions of lines are made with digital in-glaze transfers, blue on white. These are displayed in two layers in rectangular boxes, pristine echoes of the Welsh dresser, and the plates can be removed for use and then returned to their 'still-life' on the wall. A tiny printed line on the rim of the plate shows you where to rest the plate back in its slot.

*2 Corners Doubled* is a group of eighteen plates in two double rows in a white box. As the title implies the linear arcs are struck (in the language of maths) from two corners, and the stretching of the spaces between the lines creates ripples of moiré effect. A moiré pattern is defined in physics as an interference pattern that can be seen when two grids are superimposed at an angle, or when they have slightly different mesh.

The last wall piece is *2 Degree Rotation*, a longer version, with 19 plates in a single storey double row. The graphics of this reveal a different linear system consisting of two layers of repeated V shapes. The top

layer is stretched vertically by 97% and horizontally by 103%, and then rotated by 2 degrees around the centre point. Geometric delight, multiple netted lines shifted over each other for the frisson of moiré. Smith exploits the absolute precision possible with digital calculating, drawing, and printing with increasing confidence. The moiré effect needed the mediation of the computer screen, and thence print, in creating minute and accurate stretching of the distances between lines. We see this digital advantage too in the motif of backing up the rows of plates, as those in the layer behind are exactly filling in the totality of the pattern; the empty triangles between two adjacent circles.

These composite works are ambiguously poised between a cool visual exploration of linear variation, and a cupboard full of plates; a play with horizontal and vertical meaning.

Moving now to the upright pieces, pots on tables. And these ones can more comfortably be called pots than many series in the history of Smith's form making. The multiple, graphic mode of the plates in archetypal blue and white, contrasts with these larger pieces, singles and a few pairs, which are painted in deep strong colours. These may be different on interior and exterior walls, and are adaptations and darkened tones of the same velvet underglazes. They also exploit the older traditions of ceramic process; these plain imposing forms are all made by throwing. The range of colours – olive green, grey, terracotta red, dark blue-green, brown and black – have echoes of the palette of Scandinavian Modernist design.

Jar and bowl in Smith's hands combine conventions of ceramic and geometric form. There are plates that flare out from a slightly domed base, and plates that taper in with a rippled interior. Tall cylinders rise out of a concave curve; two kinds of shape adjoin in every piece. And lastly three striking pairs of pots, tall jar and wide bowl. The geometric variation from cone to elliptical curve, where the walls of bowl and jar partner each other, leave perfect spaces between them that draw the eye.

Most of these pieces are drawn across with lines inscribed on the rotating form through the dark pigment back to the white clay. The lines traverse each other, arcs of interference (or 'static' in radio wave parlance) from two directions. The machines that Smith builds to achieve the drawings, the jigs he rigs up, are meticulous systems for creativity. The titles tell us about the method: *Static Progression* conveys that the jig can increasingly widen the gap between the lines. *Static Double Tilt* tells us the pot was tipped first on one axis and then on the opposite side. *Static Shift* means the 'compass' arm is made to start drawing circles from 2 different points, by nudging the pot off-centre. And as the scientist in him must also reveal the baseline, the 'control' or standard of comparison – one of the most impressive pairs of pots has no contrasting colours, is red allover, and has no scratched lines at all.

The words in Smith's current titles are understated but important. *Tilt* and *Shift* are terse plain verbs instructive of process. *Progression* describes the spooling out of a line, as the distances increase between marks. *Static* can be seen to have two meanings: the stillness of his clean forms on wide flat bases, and the buzzing of their interfering lines.

The formal proposals of the work itself and its command of space are not static, they move on in every exhibition. Smith's innovations of making are thoroughly thought through, the devices to make it with are constructed, and then the ideas can be executed. This exhibition takes him from digital manipulation, geometry and visual perception at one end of the scale, to throwing and drawing at the other. Permutation (as in maths) and variation (as in music) are embedded in his norms of production. Martin Smith is intrigued by systems and strategies and tools to achieve things, but there is another quest involved. His work is both methodical and serenely aesthetic in the end result.