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**Betty Woodman**

Florence and London

By Alison Britton

The American artist Betty Woodman began her career as a potter and is now also a painter. Born in 1930, she has studios in New York and Tuscany, and spends half the year in each. The exhibition *Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic*,[[1]](#endnote-1)at the **Institute of Contemporary Arts, London** (closed 10th April),[[2]](#endnote-2) is by far the most substantial showing of her work to date in the United Kingdom,despite her prominent position in the ceramic world.

In the history of ceramics there is a continuous tradition of painting on the surfaces of pots, but Woodman takes this relationship of painting and three-dimensional pottery into new kinds of complexity. Within this body of colourful and flamboyant works made over the last eight years, some not previously shown, Woodman revealed her particular ways of combining clay objects, canvas, wood, and painted surfaces with illusory intentions. The thrown pot at the heart of her sculpture is a cylindrical column. She adds to this core a few planes of thrown clay, wings or silhouettes, that convey the improvised speed of a paper cut-out. Her spiralling fingermarks are on almost every piece of clay, thrown first on the wheel and then stretched into ovals. Works in this exhibition were often grouped to make horizontal compositions on the floor, or raised up on plinths, which were cut from wood in complementary silhouettes and painted to make an unexpected relationship with the pot.

The forms in which Woodman is currently interested are apparent in her titles. There are many kinds of vase, arranged as diptychs or triptychs, also several on painted canvas ‘carpets’ such as *Aztec vase and carpet 1* (2012), and a series called *Vase upon vase* (2009 -2013). Moving round each sculpture, a surprising change of colour composition, pattern and painting confronts the viewer. In her current work what you expect to see is often not what you get - there is consistent thwarting of preconceptions, in moving from front to back.

The beautiful horizontal double piece shown at the entrance to the exhibition, *Posing with vases at the beach* (2008)*,* was a good example. One view depicted sand, sea, pots and nudes in vibrant yellows, blues, and pinks, while on the reverse a more sombre composition of olive green, black and red had no figures, but drawings of white vases on either side *(*Figs 47).It seemed that Woodman was making two façades, split visions, rather than a whole sculptural object. She is intrigued by the pictorial illusion of space, perhaps, more than by the occupation of space itself. The eye discovered another visual game: a reiterative image of a vase is drawn across the vase form and its added planes, slightly out of place, like a mis-register in a print. The vase form and the flat surface interact on many levels, for Woodman threads ideas about two and three dimensions and how we read them into all her current work. There is a bold and restless energy that holds our attention: she strives to give the spectator the utmost visual diversion and entertainment.

Woodman has a vivid vocabulary of colour derived from nature and from other art, and a fluid sense of line, whether this is painted, or an edge sliced through a slab of clay. Some of her simpler works are the most powerful, but she is drawn towards an accumulating complexity. Fewer sculptures should have been shown in the downstairs gallery to space out their intensity. In an upstairs corridor at the ICA, however, there was a calmer mood in a group of ten small drawings, (2013-2015) in ink and acrylic paint on sketch paper. These are roughs and plans of still lives in rooms, titled with the day’s date. Onecalled *March11* is painted only in blues and has a lucid directness.

Painting on surfaces other than clay has become increasingly important in Woodman’s work. Her canvases can be both backcloth and painting, painted canvas ‘carpets’ or larger paintings to hang on the wall. Clay forms, both three-dimensional and in relief, were fixed onto the backcloth or propped on shelves that protruded from the picture plane and helped build our grasp of perspective in the painting. Woodman’s theatrical sensibility was evident in the ‘painting’ she was composing, but she was *also* scene painting, making an arena for objects that sometimes blends into carpentry: a wooden shelf (also depicting a table) supports some actual pots.

The wall paintings had the titles of rooms, such as *George’s* *room* (2013)*,* and the grandest work was larger than a room: *The summer house* (2015) is a tour de force, made for ICA’s upper gallery and twenty-four metres long. In *Country dining room* (2015; Fig 09) the wooden shelf held a couple of vases, and placed on the painted table cloth, at scales diminishing with the illusion of distance, were a red plate, a cup and saucer, a classical vase, and two jugs. The objects furthest away were in silhouette, as definition receded into space. Her painting on the canvas was loose and fast moving, with stripes plotting perspective and distance.

In these sophisticated works Woodman was manipulating two registers of meaning: objects and surfaces, but also two types of colour. The dense materials of terracotta, clay slips and glazes were juxtaposed with the washiness of scene-painting or modernist still-life painting in the hands of an artist like Matisse. These two registers do not always combine into a satisfying relationship, despite the swapping of certain ingredients, as when she paints with a clay slip on canvas or with enamel paint on fired clay.

Woodman’s wall drawings, made with her leftovers from the sculptures, are spectacular. *Wallpaper 9* (2015; Fig.48) is composed of scraps of clay that carry the gestures of process, throwing and cutting, directly onto the wall. This spirited decoration is spread over many metres of wall on two levels in the main space of the gallery. The drawing was best seen from the other side of the room, from where plant-like images exuberantly emerged from the fragments. There were hints of a table, seats, expanses of space and the outdoor sensation of a Baroque garden on an Italian hill.

Betty Woodman is immersed in painting with a rich materiality on many levels, always playing between two and three dimensions. As a subtitle, *Theatre of the domestic* suited the vitality and drama of this exhibition.

1. Catalogue: *Betty Woodman, Theatre of the domestic.* With contributions by Vincenzo de Bellis, Suzanne Hudson and Stuart Krimko. 160pp. incl.numerous col. ills. (Mousse Publishing, Milan 2016). £ 24.99 (forthcoming) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Previously it was shown at the **Museo Marino Marini, Florence** (20th September – 28th November 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)