

MARTIN SMITH

POTS - PLATES - CHAIRS

MARSDEN WOOL GALLERY

5 MAY - 18 JUNE 2011

Rigorous. Controlled. Immaculate. These are the words that usually come up in discussions of Martin Smith and his work. Playful? Not so much. But if you don't see an artist having a good time in this new exhibition, you're not paying close enough attention.

For his previous outing in this gallery Smith presented visitors with just three works, all of them wall-hung groups of tiles. The middle of the space was empty, the effect austere and focused. This time round he has created three more wall works, but he's also bounded off the vertical plane and back on to the horizontal, where he has spent most of his career. His recent experiments have been prolific – so much so that when we spoke prior to the opening, he was wondering how much of it he would manage to fit in the show – and have ranged across three genres and three styles of production.

The most striking addition is batch-produced furniture, a genre that Smith has briefly visited in the past, but never with this degree of conviction. The material he has chosen, birch plywood, introduces a theme of unit-addition that appears consistently throughout the exhibition. In a pair of low-slung, X-form chairs, the laminated layers are clearly visible in each wooden member. These slats are repeated 21 times in total to make one chair, which is repeated... you get the idea. What excites Smith is the way that this extremely direct, repetitive construction creates complex, moiré-like shapes when the chairs are seen from an angle, any angle in fact, except dead-on.

This dynamic binds together the exhibition. In each work, there is a simple system which seems to make the work of its own accord. We've been here before, in the Minimalist and Conceptual works of the late 1960s – artists like Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, whose twin influences are front and center. Smith's furniture is not quite in the terrain staked out by Judd, who disregarded the functional constraints of chairs and tables, resulting in powerful but strangely unforgiving shapes. But LeWitt is definitely the presiding spirit behind Smith's grids of wall-mounted plates, printed on industrial blanks. These were made for him rather than by him, but they nonetheless constitute the greatest labour of love in the exhibition.

For anyone whose aesthetic is very particular, it is never going to be easy to order up work over the phone (as Judd reportedly did). These plates were literally years in the making. Finding just the right plates was important. Various colours were tried; the red background of one set proved particularly challenging, and ultimately had to be separately silkscreen-printed to achieve the desired saturation of hue. And then there was the challenge of getting the lines exactly where they should be. Observe the extraordinary vertex at the center of the blue-on-white set, where all the lines and arcs converge, the vibratory optical effect of the cascading lines falling away as they approach the single still centre. This technical difficulty in Smith's work puts him some distance away from many Minimalist and Conceptual artists, who aimed to 'dematerialize the art object' and tended toward amateurish making. Of course Judd and LeWitt are big exceptions to that rule, and of all the things that Smith's plates owe to their example, material specificity is perhaps the greatest. Here we have the work of graphic designers and ceramic printers, instead of metal fabricators and wall draftsmen, but the transcendence achievable by taking very great care is much the same.

Despite these affinities to fine art, Smith is even more attuned to music than he is to sculpture. Theme-and-variation is everywhere in this show, usually developed incrementally, much as a composer like Steven Reich, Brian Eno, or Philip Glass might do. In serial music (also frequently called Minimalist), small divergences repeated over and over produce dramatic, even baroque departures from expectation. This is true in Smith's plate works, too, with their contrapuntal expansion and contraction. The play of pattern across the curvature of the rims adds nuance, like tones shifting in a melody. His new ceramic 'pots' (let's call them that, as long as he's happy to) work essentially in the same way. All are based upon the geometry of a truncated and inclined cylinder, which yields an ellipse-shaped top and bottom. Inside these hollow forms, Smith has placed discs that are set at a perpendicular angle to the central axis of the cylinder. In one set of seven pots, fabricated from brick clay, this produces a lazy rolling rhythm, each interior shape slightly askew from the previous one. These pots and another red pair, shown low to the floor, draw much of their visual interest from the

ghostly reflected shapes that appear in the interior. Like the patterns in the chairs or on the curving profiles of the plates, they move with you.

A pair of wall-mounted pots, in chalky white with platinum leaf interiors, are even more astounding from the point of view of fabrication. An inner form, mounted on four pins, is an inclined cylinder that exactly matches the geometry of the outer container. Hold on to your hats, potters: that means Smith has nested one nearly-impossible-to-make clay object inside another, maintaining absolute consistency between the exterior wall of one and the inner and exterior walls of the other. Yet he doesn't belabour the point. You have to discover this isometry through close looking, much like the colour hidden behind, which reflects against the wall as an ethereal glow. Further visual interest is provided by the surface, achieved by mixing wood shavings into the clay body. They disappear in the firing, leaving voids that Smith associates with Italian travertine. These wall pots have an alpine beauty that comes from the palette and the command of craft, but give them time and you find they are filled with surprises.

So there you have it: a typical outing for Martin Smith. Technique there is, aplenty. Yet the real pleasures of this show, like those of a good concert, are evanescent. They are in the subtle rhythms and rhymes between these three groups of work; and in the way that unexpected, complex richness can be evolved from simple rules (without which, of course, there can be no game). Smith is never anything less than serious. But these days, he's moving from one idea to another with a hop, a skip and a jump.

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