



FRONT

Alison Britton's new show at Marsden Woo, previewed by Teleri Lloyd-Jones

Pouring and pairing

It's a couple of weeks before Alison Britton's Marsden Woo show opens, and there's a surprising amount of work left to do. Standing in her Stoke Newington studio – a converted butcher's shop where the ceramist has been since 1986 – we are surrounded by work; by vessels that bulge, lean and poke without apology. 'I always cut it quite fine, I have to build this adrenal rush,' she explains. Unifying Britton's practice is a continued ability to harness recklessness. Discussing the gestural swathes and drips of slip that wrap her surfaces, I hunt for the right adjective – 'dangerous?' she suggests. 'That's me. I like that anyway. That's part of what one does when one's leaving things late. I think risk and creativity are quite connected. So when you're pouring something on, you can't get it off again. It's that moment of taking a deep breath.'

Standing and Running, which continues until 17 March, features roughly 10 new works, a mix of jugs and plates. The show marks two distinct changes in Britton's approach. As well as the buff clay that has been her constant for the past few decades, she has begun using red clay, and for the exhibition she will be showing vessels which are paired – one made in white, one made in red. This shift in material came after time spent thinking about Devonshire slipware, followed by a trip to Japan last year, to lecture on Hans Coper, which gave her a few weeks to work with different clay.

For Marsden Woo the focus is pouring, referencing the jug-based shapes as well as the application of the decoration. The title reflects states of water, a fluidity, as well as more abstract thoughts about the juxtapositions of form and surface. Her parallel practice as a curator and writer suggests such connotations aren't by accident. 'Words are quite important. Getting the right title for a show is very important, it's not casual, I sweat over it a bit,' she says. 'But I like to be slightly throwaway, not too pompous.'

A continuing force against pomposity, Britton first emerged as a key proponent of the New Ceramics of the early 80s, alongside Carol McNicoll and Jacqui

Opposite: *Cave*, 38 x 35 cm
Right: *Outflow*, 51 x 28 cm.
Both Alison Britton, ceramic, 2012



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ALISON BRITTON

Poncelet, fellow graduates of the Royal College of Art. Hers was the articulate voice for this disparate yet potent group of contemporary makers and artists, all eager to shake up the establishment. Add to this that Britton began teaching at the RCA in 1984 (something she continues doing to this day), and what we have is a portrait of a far-reaching polymath.

With its gestural surfaces and awkward posture Britton's work can be approached purely in terms of form, colour and, yes, surface – but it would be a mistake to ignore her oblique yet profound relationship to domesticity. Throughout the 90s, as her work became harder-edged, jagged and more abstract, their titles began to ignore their functional genealogy. But now she senses a return to the subject, in part an influence of the slipware and also a result of introspection, 'I think for a lot of years I wanted to prove that a pot could be all kinds of things and I'm glad I did that. But I'm drifting back. It sounds quite poncey in a way, that I don't want to make

tableware, but I'm very passionate about it, there is something getting stronger as I get older about eating and crockery... It's as corny as anything. It's what people were thinking about in the 70s when they went to live in Wales and make brown things. I don't want to make everyday tableware, but I want my thinking about it to enter the image of what I'm doing.'

Britton may hint at a softening, a return to the echoes of traditional tableware, but don't be fooled that her work has lost the iconoclastic dynamism for which it became famous. Perhaps as a response to her retrospection, this current series introduces both new material and new practices, while retaining her all-important fascination with the awkward, the unfinished and the broken. After all, as Britton points out, creativity should always engage with a bit of risk. *'Standing and Running'* is at Marsden Woo Gallery, London EC1V, until 17 March. For details, see *Crafts Guide*. www.marsdenwoo.com