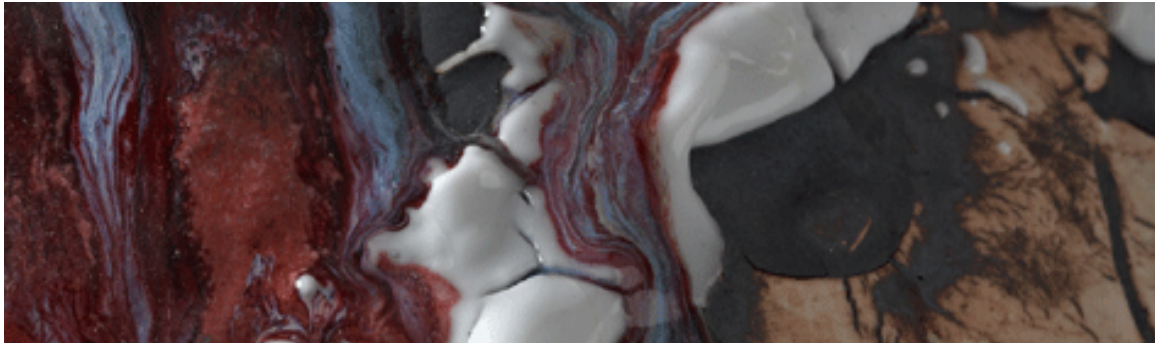


re:sculpt

In the Studio with Gareth Mason: Tweaking the Demons of Doubt



Dream Seed, 2011 (detail). porcelain, layered glazes, oxides and feldspars, lustre. 20 x 19 x 29 in.

Gareth Mason has spent the season razing a mega-ton bomb shelter in Alton, part of Hampshire, England, to build a ceramics studio. The following conversation shows that Mason's aesthetic philosophy is as adventurous and non-traditional as his ceramics. Mason's work is included in art collections worldwide, including, the Izmir Foundation for Culture Arts and Education, Turkey; Haegang Ceramics Museum, Icheon, Korea; Nairobi National Museum, Kenya; and Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland. He is a Fellow of the Craft Potters Association and a Brother of the Art Workers' Guild, both in London. Links to more work follow this interview.

Castro: Can you summarize the process of building your new ceramics studio?

Gareth Mason: Building a workshop is proving to be every bit as demanding and exhausting an enterprise as I expected it to be. I now am at the beginning of week 12. I have found it gratifying to utilise as many recycled materials as I have – used scaffolding planks, tin sheet and composite roofing, doors and windows salvaged from a skip (dumpster) and even an old telegraph pole. I had to demolish a World War 2 bomb shelter, which I had the happy fortune of being sited in my garden... all 12 tonnes of reinforced engineering brick and concrete, nibbled to rubble over five days with a 75lb electric breaker...and that was just the start (a couple of chunks found their way back in to the new build, as 'touchstones' to remind me of the pain). Still, the end is in sight. At about 300 square feet, it is modest, but light and a vast improvement on my old shed.



Preparations for the concrete slab at the demolished bomb shelter site.

Castro: *How has your work changed over 2 ½ decades in content and style?*

Mason: It is actually 30 years, this year... I am gunning for another 30. Wish me luck. In some ways things have changed an enormous amount, in others not at all. Some of the first things I made in clay, at art school in the mid '80s, contain exactly the energy and alchemy that the current work does: a restlessness with received orthodoxy, with 'known' outcomes and 'design'; a desire for the experience of making things to be 'felt' and 'discovered' rather than the outcome of predetermination. So I struggled with some of the more prescriptive aspects of arts education, especially the chemistry bit of ceramics as a student. Formulae still bore me to tears; I was never a technologist the way many potters are. I needed to be surprised by the 'events' of making at every stage. This is all still true. By diverse routes – a period as a production potter and an infatuation with some misplaced 'modernist' aesthetic – the work got lost for a while in the mid '90s, became technically proficient but said nothing, became something I 'did' rather than lived. It gradually dawned on me that I was on the wrong track. The 'inner compass' was way off whack and I was unhappy with the outcomes, with myself. Something had to change. So I began by fairly natural and unforced degrees, over time, to change my approach, to treat the work as a revelatory experience, to actively take risks, pulling the rug out from under myself; to treat skill as a malleable entity rather than something set in stone. I was in fact reclaiming earlier territory, though I have only made that

connection in the last couple of years. Gradually I found myself occupying a more wholly honest, experiential terrain.

So I came full circle and the work finally started to scratch the itch in me, replicating the wide-eyed wonder I first generated for myself at art school but with advantages. As a student, I acted wholly from naivety and instinct; now I am probably as naïve and idealistic, but I act from a combination of instinct and experience, which makes things more complicated and much richer. It is interesting to notice the parallels – what drove me when I began still drives me now. I take heart from that. The overarching content of my work is about baring (or bearing?) witness. Much of what I do is rent open in some way. That is about my need for disclosure. I want work that is a window on the inner life, as far as that is possible. The ceramic vessel – the pot – is the ideal medium for this. I have always believed this, at some level.

Castro: *What kinds of clays, kilns, glazes, and processes do you use for a work like “Inner Life”?*

Mason: I mentioned restlessness above. That drives much of my working pattern. I have a lot of repeated gestures, almost rituals: rhythms in making with clay. And moments of anarchy. I use whatever material scratches the itch: porcelain, coarse stuff, stuff I dig, stuff I find...I improvise and mix and match all my materials as I see fit. I have a kind of material audacity. I have no great respect

of orthodoxy. For example, I have both a profound respect and a deep disrespect of porcelain. I am riddled with

contradictions. I am an inveterate rule-breaker: the multifarious ‘thou-shalt-nots’ of the ceramic world are a red rag to a bull to me. A lot of ‘listening’ is required, particularly when clay is in its pre-fired condition and its state is changing constantly. I manage it both carefully and recklessly. I am greedy.

It is a cliché, perhaps, but it helps me to think of material as language. Different things are possible at different stages on the continuum from soft amorphous mass to hard brittle



Precision Instrument, 2011-2013. Porcelain, Stoneware, Ceramic Detritus, Glaze, Lustre. 18.5 x 17 x 13 in.

crust. A whole universe of expressive possibility emerges on that spectrum, and I want it all. And that is before the work even touches fire. Subsequent firings open many more doors. They feel like Pandora's Box sometimes but I am drawn back to flame again and again; it is my playground, and a kind of torture chamber. So working is for me a push-me-pull-you relationship where tension is key: the tensions inherent in the material at these various stages of development, and tensions within me as I push at my – and the material's – parameters each time I intervene. I am attracted to material (experience) *in extremis*. It is as though qualities become most eloquent when they are right at the edge of being, the verge of collapse, the verge of non-being. This is not mysterious. Others speak of this 'edge': free climbers, tight rope walkers, racing drivers, base jumpers, stand-up comics, musicians, actors – anything improvisatory, unplanned, risky: you name the 'extreme' activity and the connecting tissue between them is a quality of 'never feeling more alive...' utterly exposed yet still, miraculously, flying. There is a lot of that kind of pushing in my work – for me it is about feeling *creatively* alive, and for that a number of potentially chaotic elements need to coalesce in a 'just so' manner. It is like sculpting smoke. If I am wholly in control, I kill it. There are powerful other forces to respect, provoke, cajole...



Veiled/Unveiled. Strata Series, 2009-2010. Porcelain, Celadon, Jun, Lustre, Oxides, Stoneware. 24.3 x 19.3 x 15.3 in.

The kiln is a crucible of more than fire. It is a crucible of thought and imagination, of action and reaction, of dream and disaster. Everything melts. Everything. Including you and I and the earth – if you take it to a high enough temperature. So materials that melt and those that don't and the whole continuum between are all of minute interest to me. I am on the alert for metamorphosis and how fire changes material quality. Gravity too. We are all subject to gravity – think breasts and bellies and balls 'going southward' as we get older and pass through our own inexorable process of change. When other forces kick

in, that's where our power, such as it is, ends. Just as waves eat at a cliff, so

with glacial inevitability gravity pulls at the work in the kiln and materially adds to its outcomes in a manner quite outside my immediate agency but perhaps just within the grasp of my orchestration. So I set things up for the drama. Fluidity, movement, collapse – all are

strong forces. The kiln demands space for them and I answer, give it rein. I force the issue too. A blow torch is a fantastic tool for simulating grander forces on a small scale. I love the power of allusion. So though most of what I do begins its life on the potter's wheel, it is an absolute truth that I never know where it will end up. That is especially true of the piece you mention. Works of that scale – about three feet high – are a good canvas for really allowing the physicality of material to emerge. A big kiln is needed though. I can't work at that scale at home (yet). I haven't the resources. That piece emerged from a residency at Long Beach State University where the kilns are cavernous.

Castro: *Do you have several works in progress at a time?*

Mason: I like to work in series when I can. I have been severely limited in space for quite a while, but this will improve when the new workshop is complete. Space is needed to keep several pieces on the go. Working in series – maybe 6 pieces at a time – is a foil to preciousness. It keeps me moving, forces a momentum and stops my peering at the fluff in my navel too much (a practice I am wont to indulge in). It is useful for many reasons. Like some manner of aesthetic plate-spinning. I have a horror of the familiar, of complacency. Too many artists are ham-strung by fear. Working in series is one trick I deploy to stop inhibition from neutering my practice. One amongst others. Things interplay in all manner of unexpected ways if I am able to freely move between things. Everything can get very tight if I am just seeing one thing through from start to finish. I just said 'finish'. I never know when anything is finished...goes with the territory.

Castro: *How do other arts, literatures, and life in general enter the bodies of your materials? (i.e., Gass, other philosophers?)*

Mason: '...Enter the Bodies...': I like that. I am not in any way cordoned by clay. I am informed by many things. I am also appallingly badly read and constantly reminded of how little I know. But I know fuel when I see it. I am always on the look out for new leads. You mentioned William H. Gass, whom we mentioned in recent email correspondence. He is new to me and I suspect will become a long term source of nutrition. He does with words what I do with clay. Most people seem to limit their interaction with language to the merely transactional: that is to say, they use words simply to get things done and

this is a great pity, a colossal missed opportunity. I love the joust, the game, the seduction of



Dream Seed, 2011. porcelain, layered glazes, oxides and feldspars, lustre. 20 x 19 x 29 in.

words. For a soul such as Gass, words are a playground, a feast, a universe of possibility to render self real in the world, a window on the inner life, as physical and manipulable as clay, and so evocative, because the right word is so fucking sexy – uttered from the right mouth, gestated in the right mind, placed on the right lips, perceived by the right person and of course, at the right time...because serendipity is ever the jester of intervention. I seek kinship in my fuel; the reassurance that others have engaged and are engaging in the same experiential territory as I, irrespective of their discipline or era. I recently looked back to a teenage infatuation – Hermann Hesse. He knew about the poignancy and optimism of the creative act, the fruitless renewal of the search. Antoni Tapies is a hero – a fellow material sensualist if ever there was one, whose ‘inner images’ will always chime with my own. Lucio Fontana – master of the orifice: a revelation of fleshy ceramic splendour in clay and other materials. I often find that my allies occupy the sensual realm rather than wholly the intellectual. The two are intimately intertwined of course but there is an important distinction in outcome. Someone like Donald Judd, for example, has a clinical exactitude that impresses but does not move me whereas Francis Bacon’s sordid reality always gets me in the solar plexus. The conceptual, the cerebral, the emotionally cool, the distant: these qualities in art do not touch me as a rule. I am no minimalist, yet Serra’s monumental things (the one at LACMA is amazing) blow me away, as does Brancusi’s endless tower. That is to do with mass and scale I think. James Turrell’s *Sky Spaces* are another exception – they, and his light works, illuminate our inner arenas. As do Bill Viola’s deeply arresting video works. I am demanding. So the work from which I seek fuel has to enter me, penetrate the surface of me, creep under my armour and inveigle its way into my being, and take root there. Giacometti always does that to me – especially his paintings: unrelenting soul-laid-bare-search. He hurts. Joan Mitchell too – another great colourist and sensualist. And Rodin. Ugh.

It is in the febrile lines of Egon Schiele, in the saturated smearings of Howard Hodgkin; it is present in spades in a performance of Elgar’s Cello concerto by Jacqueline DuPre; it is in Ginsburg’s *Howl* and Dylan Thomas’s wordsmithed reveries, Monet’s Waterlilies (which are in truth a battle ground) and Rauschenberg’s anarchically organised bricolage and Jackson Pollock’s gesture-ballet and Rembrandt’s late self-portraits; it free-falls from Day Lewis as Plainview in *There Will Be Blood* and weeps from Von Sydow as Karlsson in *Pele the Conqueror*; it fanfares itself out of Michelangelo Buonarroti’s late crucifixion drawings, whispers and screams from Sylvia Plath’s poetry...and what is this ‘it’ that I refer to? Personal disclosure, risk, absolute engagement of self, complete commitment to the moment, wholehearted, balls-out, bare assed, no safety net immersion in the very ‘now’ of work...presence and absence, blood and guts, emotion: humanity in all its flawed brilliance. The Spanish call it the Duende – it is in Flamenco and The Bull Fight: proximity of death (aesthetic or literal), aesthetic prowess beyond bounds and beyond skill (Picasso

understood it, so did Lorca) – and I wish to hell we had a word for it. And by God I am on a life's mission to put it in ceramics.



Deep Time Event. Black Rock Series, 2007-2010. Stoneware, Porcelain, Dark Oxides. 20.5 x 17 x 16.5 in.

Castro: *In conversation with writer Richard Jacobs, you have described the ways that your making process involves forms that intertwine, puncture, envelope, squeeze, coax, pierce – your sensuous interactions with clay. Do you turn off your mind, or what is the mind/body relation as your body is interacting with the clay?*

Mason: It is not for nothing that clay is described as ‘body’! The great American educator/philosopher/artist (and sensualist) Mary Caroline Richards spoke of ‘bodying forth’ in art and life, and that is not just some vacuous Hippie utterance for her (she was prominent in the ‘60s and ‘70s and some parts of her opus, *Centering*, which was mostly written then, are a bit hard to swallow from today’s more cynical perspective). I am a sensualist. I ‘body forth’ in that my outcomes are wholly dependent upon my bodily intervention, of bodily charged experience. Body is crucial: for me it is an element wholly integrated into the act of making in clay and other materials. I am fascinated by the interaction between self and work, the no-man’s-land of skill and physicality and the energetic traces of touch – the evidence trail; where touch has been present; what is left behind. ‘What’s left behind’ – the work – does all the talking – reaches out to our fellow beings and connects to them. This act of communication remains both a great mystery to me and the most deceptively simple thing in the world. I just love it: the fecund space between the art work and the viewer. The majority of the artists I admire, whether they work in words or other materials, leave this

physicality in their wake, or the echo of it, or at least some space into which the viewer has to step with his or her own interpretive powers. When you perceive their work, you enter their space and know that they have been there. What more fundamental an act is there in art and life than to state, in what we leave behind us, 'I Was Here'? When it comes down to it, that is all I do. Being: what more potent motivation is there?



Crust Symbiosis, 2011. Porcelain, glaze, mineral, stoneware, lustre. 11 x 9.5 x 9.5 in.

I don't engage in body/mind differentiation. I have no Zen affiliations. Body and mind are equally present. But the condition of being 'present' is truly important. Fundamental. Even if I am absent. Now I am talking in riddles. Whenever I try to use words to open a sincere window on my own aesthetic practice, I find bathos and bullshit stalk the sidelines. I have to trust the personal truth of what I say has some persuasive weight. That's what I mean by being present: knowing the dangers and going ahead anyway. That is what happens in the Duende. I do it all the time in my work. So why not with words? In the writing with Richard Jacobs I attempted to speak from that place of 'tender genesis' in me, because what the hell is the point otherwise? I will never don a mortar board to speak of my work. It means too much to me to appear so removed from it. And my experience of it is too

filthy. Pseudo-academe and art-speak do not portray my reality. The attempt (to make work, to talk about it) is a kind of joyful hurt, and I want that to show.

This notion of 'presence and absence' needs more explanation. Absence is about letting go. It can entail an anti-skill state, a deliberate act of skill-vandalism, the active removal of control; destabilisation of the pillars of hard-won craftsmanship that somehow reveals a more vivid reality. But control is ever present, so the 'presence' bit is about still being there at some level, even at my most abandoned and then, in a kind of after-the-event reflection I

suppose, a clearing house process is started and the results, impacts and aftermath of the moments of 'absence' are all filtered and assessed for their efficacy. The deployment of different energies, the orchestration of moments. The only real yardstick for this evaluation process is experience. There are no road signs. Sometimes, no roads. But I know my experience gets richer and more complex the more I make, the more I engage in these obscure strategies. I take that as a reassuring sign. It is also a head fuck.

Castro: You also discuss being deviant and pushing the clay to a "place of unease." Why is this important? What is the relation between beauty and ugliness or deviance?

Mason: Artists are deviants. My activities in the workshop are profoundly deviant. The allusive power of the materials and processes I wield are pretty deviant. If I did to other people what I do with clay I would be committed to an institution for the criminally insane. I have referred to myself (in the Jacobs correspondence) as somewhat perverse. I have referred to 'extreme' practise of various kinds already, and sought to illuminate common ground. There is also a psycho-sexual element to be discerned. For example, I think an expert Kinbaku (Japanese rope/body art) or perhaps even an expert Western S&M practitioner would identify with what I do: the ritualised exploration of the boundaries between control and loss of control, consent and denial, extreme material juxtapositions, which is very similar territory if you think about it (but I don't rope bodies. I stress clay. Interestingly, the ancient Japanese – the Jomon Culture – *roped their clay* to profound and mysterious effect...)^[1]

I am gratified that my values in art are out of step with those evinced through the opacities of the contemporary art world and the choices of the bulk of the gatekeepers of taste therein. And my values, in spite of my references to various forms of deviant practice above, and the often challenging nature of my outcomes, are in truth pretty 'Old School'. Especially my value of craftsmanship, which is a Very Dirty Word eschewed by most exponents of "Modern Art." And I deliberately appropriate the word 'Beauty'. In contemporary and especially conceptual art circles this is anathema. You would never find the word 'beauty' on the lips of a cutting-edge contemporary art curator in some trendy Manhattan salon. My appropriation of this word is not exactly orthodox. It is wholly on my



Inner Life, 2011. Stoneware And porcelain, glaze , vitreous slips, lustre. 29 x 20 x 19 in

own terms. I relish the notion of subverting the vacuous 'Loreal' definition of beauty that pollutes contemporary consciousness. Beauty is at its most vivid when it has a bloodied nose. See the list of artists above for confirmation. I can do 'pretty' – I did it during that misplaced pseudo-modernist rut in which I was stuck in the 90s. 'Pretty' leaves me cold. I am not interested in the cosmetic definition of 'amplified prettiness' usually ascribed to the word 'beauty'. There has to be more to it than that; something on the line, something *at risk* for beauty to achieve its full, livid, breathtaking potential. That is the 'place of unease'. I mentioned the 'itch' above, and the 'place of tender genesis': both ways to grope toward describing the place inside me from which the work emanates. It is a vulnerable place, very close to me; it is the stuff of identity and going there has a cost for me, yet I have to go there again and again and again. I am driven to operate at the very edge of my ability because it is only there that I find the experience sufficiently challenging. I cannot simply rattle out what I already know.

So this no-man's-land between skill and abandonment, between presence and absence, between beauty and beast, is the only territory worth gunning for, because only there is the material rich, only there is the itch scratched. Sating and hungering. It is a self-perpetuating process. We don't satisfy our sexuality by making love, nor our appetites by eating. There is always more. Being disturbed is not necessarily a negative thing.

Great art should disturb us. I never want safety. We should walk away from an art work/performance changed in some way, our perceptions altered. And I am not talking about mere shock tactics. Some art is just like shouting louder and louder: you can't ignore it when you witness it but it is irritating as hell. Ultra-commoditised market manipulation such as that found in Koons and Hirst (and Warhol before them) doesn't turn me on either. I need work to creep in and arrest and endure and become part of my very breath. I only get remotely close to that in my own practice when I am not wholly in control and where other forces come in to play. Ceramics is great for that because I get to play with fire. I never seek to disguise the burns. I wear them with pride.

I am more interested in what comes back to me than in what I put in. Relationship/drug territory. If I am uncomfortable, I know I am close. If something I make freaks me out a bit, then the first thing I do these days is confront that fear and exhibit it, which invariably freaks me out even more. The act of exhibition is another act of disclosure, and a fraught one too. But nine times out of ten, the piece that does most damage to my fragile psyche and self-belief and most effectively tweaks the demons of doubt as I make it is the very one that will have the most positive response when I exhibit it. I always find that instructive. It ends up being a bit of a no-brainer – I need to be in that 'place of unease' because somehow it has the power to add weight to experience, to add substance to action. And, if nothing else,



The Universe Bleeds Too, 2010. Porcelain, Stoneware, Sang De Boeuf, Firebrick Inclusion. 21 x 19.3 x 18 in.

when working from a place of unease, of doubt, vulnerability and insecurity, I find resources of a certain workaday courage are fostered, which is always useful. There is always more to learn. That's where I want the work to be: flawed, in a state of forced evolution, where I experience the pith of my own resistance, tweak at my own boundaries, and carry on regardless. I have to make myself uncomfortable! Unless I go there first, how can I ever expect anyone else to? The work has to contain this sense of 'edge' or insecurity, whilst calling to the plethora of other, more substantial allusions inherent in ceramic experience (like geology, history, cosmology, symmetry, humanity). It is somewhere in this esoteric space of deeply self-indulgent and grubby and personal material inquiry that communicative potential somehow exists. But trying to articulate it in words is pretty arcane stuff that generally ties me in knots. Which is

of course why I make the effort. Because people never talk about this stuff. I call it 'the bowel-moving' of making art. It is far from the serene, elevated, rarefied, majestic image proliferated by many in the realm of the white cube. I am out and proud about the whole process.

By [Jan Garden Castro](#)