JASON WASON
Silent Witness

Exhibition 6th September - 4th October 2014

WWW.LEMONSTREETGALLERY.CO.UK
An all-seeing eye

When I wrote a previous introduction for Jason Wason’s exhibition, ‘A Devil’s Box of Tricks’, (LSG August 2010), I suggested that ‘his visual language evolves slowly, with each pot wrought from his disciplined imagination’. For me the key word in this sentence is ‘wrought’, as there is a real sense that Wason’s body of work is drawn and shaped from his encyclopedic knowledge of the ancient pots produced in China, Korea, New Mexico, India and medieval England. Of course being knowledgeable is one thing, knowing how to apply knowledge is something quite different. To fully understand Wason the potter, one has to acknowledge the profound admiration and respect he has for the history and culture of these countries.

He is restless, obsessive and endlessly productive. His energy levels are high, constantly fuelled by the need to resolve his current project. He is psychologically unable to take the easy option or play safe. This need to move on and ask new questions is perfectly conveyed in a statement by Chuck Close, the American photorealist painter and photographer, ‘Far more interesting than problem solving is problem creation’. This perceptive observation begins to throw some light on Wason’s attitude and creative ambition.

His vessels are immediately recognisable and differ in many ways from those by other contemporary makers. Each vessel, packed with diverse cultural references, requires concentration and interpretation. With a dark, unsettling presence they are the antithesis of the cool, neutral pots designed to blend in with bland contemporary interiors. The scrubbed and scoured surface of the square dish with chamber, on page 8, with its central multi-layered conical chamber offers a subtle contrast to the underlying geometrical precision of the overall structure. The ‘glow’ from the central chamber responds to minor modulations in the surrounding lighting conditions. Although consistent with Wason’s relentless engagement with different forms of containment, it is also conceptually suggestive of something much grander, such as a utopian cityscape. When he states that his boxes and vessels are ‘designed to protect imagined treasures, worldly or spiritual in nature’, Wason seems to imply that the mysteries and darkness of containment can be viewed as a metaphor for the fragility of the inner self. Perhaps further confirmation of this can be found in the ‘Lost Soul’ pieces, with their unsettling mix of hope and despair. Is this a journey towards redemption or a final hopeless journey towards oblivion? This multiplicity of narratives and our desire to engage with these narratives remind us that, as individuals, we are all the product of a complex history.

Each vessel within the ‘Templetop’ series is permeated with an array of historical traces. Alluding to Buddhist temples in India and Thailand, they seem to demand reverence. The viewer is challenged to take time to respond to an innate serenity. Wason has a remarkable ability to embrace and then re-interpret such a diversity of cultural influences. This alchemy avoids pastiche and somehow brings a new potency and contemporary relevance to our understanding of ceramic history.

The ‘Warmongering’ series is angry, overtly political and accusatory. Whilst it would be easy to link it to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, the work actually began some years ago and is not a direct response to the current violence. There is a real sense of shock when one is confronted by the anger and aggression of the message ‘Stop calling dead children collateral damage, you fuckers’, scrawled around the rim of a beautifully crafted pot. Surely these pots have a unique place in the remarkable panoply of contemporary ceramics? Wason’s explanation of why he chose to make these works is revelatory: ‘To me these works are a response to the obscenity of many and diverse nations, including our own, whose inability
to evolve a structured peace through negotiation will allow them to feel justified in dropping ordinance on strangers, men, women and children, and blowing them limb from limb. Somehow I am also trying to explore a resolution, or at least some sort of positive outlook, to such issues through other works in the show. They are small touchstones to humanity.”

Whilst the overall concept and structure of his vessels are carefully considered, Wason has always been particularly sensitive to the tactile quality of the object’s surface. His attitude to glazes is noticeably uncompromising: ‘I don’t use glazes. I play around with all sorts of materials some of which are used as ingredients in a traditional glaze, but the notion of putting a coat of glass over my clay has never really interested me. The clay itself is the skin of the object, and so I tend it and work with it until it reveals the character that I have in mind for the object in hand.’

He is a passionate and critical citizen of the world, with an endless curiosity and respect for the ‘other’. His personal integrity ensures that the pursuit of new ideas is based on a deep knowledge of where we have come from and how pots have evolved. For him, the past is not a closed door. His inventive intertwining of the past and present, combined with a subtle blurring of histories, enable him to create vessels that demand a new level of engagement between viewer and object.

Determinedly independent from the art world, Wason has never been one for making future plans. ‘I prefer to focus on the here and now. The now, that elusive omnipresent now, is tangible and if I can make a half decent job of dealing with that, then the future seems to take care of itself, which of course turns up right on time’.

Looking back on Wason’s career one quickly becomes aware that here is someone prepared to play the long game. The early years were challenging, with a lack of recognition and periods of financial hardship. Despite this, his dedication to his craft seems to get stronger year by year. Simple talk about his ‘maturity’ would be to miss the point that, from his perspective, it is always better to travel than to arrive. Wason’s pleasure in the twists and turns of his creative journey – from the Leach pottery to the ‘warmongering’ pots – would suggest that there is much more to come.

His output now attracts serious attention round the world. In addition to collectors who regularly pursue his work, he has been invited to show in an impressive number of international exhibitions.

Of particular note was his inclusion in the “Contemporary British Ceramics” exhibition at The Mint Museum, North Carolina, USA (2010). The following year he had a one-man show at the Mashiko Museum of Ceramic Art, Japan. Mashiko is renowned as the town where Shoji Hamada lived and worked. By utilizing some of Wason’s earlier work, already in their collection, the Mashiko Museum created a retrospective exhibition showing examples of his work from 1985 to 2013. Also in 2011 Austin Desmond Fine Art, London, held a three-person show featuring Wason, Janet Leach and Bill Marshall. (Janet and Bill were important mentors to Wason during his early days at the Leach Pottery in St.Ives.) More recently, in 2013, the Pangolin Gallery, London, invited him to show in their major exhibition of large-scale ‘Sculptural Ceramics’.

Wason is an outstanding craftsman, driven by passion and strong beliefs. His originality, his skills and his willingness to pursue his own vision have all contributed to the creation of a challenging and engaging artist. The range and quality of work in ‘Silent Witness’ will undoubtedly make us think, and at times make us uncomfortable.

Professor Alan Livingston
August 2014
Flada
16 x 50 cm

Temple Top Vessel
45 x 52 cm
Lost Soul
25 x 43 cm
Low Slung Vessel
24 x 14 cm
Red & Gold Studed Bowl
33 x 54 cm

Temple Top Vessel
63 x 48 cm
Shedi
24 x 36 cm

Black and Gold Lidded Vessel
42 x 54 cm
Textured Jar
16 x 16 cm

Meeting of Minds
25 x 45 cm
Plaza
12 x 48 cm

Temple Top Vessel
30 x 44 cm
Studded Bowl
13 x 22 cm

Red & Gold Jar
19 x 19 cm
Low Slung Vessels
25 x 44 cm
1974-1976  Set up crafts community in Dumfrieshire, built a kick wheel from the back wheel and half shaft of a Morris 1000 van, and learnt to throw.
1976-1981  Leach Pottery, St Ives.
1981-  Own studio, St Just, Cornwall.

Exhibitions
2014  Silent Witness, Lemon Street Gallery, Truro
2014  Crucible 2 An Exhibition of Sculpture at Gloucester Cathedral, curated by Gallery Pangolin.
2014  London Art Fair, represented by Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.
2012  'All Fired Up', Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.
2012  Running Ridge Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.
2011  Cornish Crafts Association, Truro Museum.
2010  The Circle is Unbroken, Lemon Street Gallery, Truro.
2010  'Japanese Connections', Rufford Art Centre, Nottingham.
2010  'Japanese Connections', Tate Gallery, St Ives.
2010  Journey to St Ives, Kinship between East and West, Leach Pottery, St Ives.
2009  National Museum and Gallery, Liverpool.
2009  'Japanese Connections', C Square Gallery, Nagoya, Japan.
2009  Raku exhibition, Tate Gallery St Ives.
2008  'Ten Pieces', Tate Gallery, St Ives.
2008  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2008  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2007  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2007  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2007  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2006  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2006  SouthWest Arts Council, grant to work and study, New Mexico, USA.
2005  SouthWest Arts Council, grant to work at EXPO 2005 at Seihoji Kiln Park, Seto, Japan.
2005  SouthWest Arts Council, grant to open European Connections, Holland in particular.
2004  Ceramics Review 18.
2004  corridor connection, Holland particularly.
2004  Raku Horizon, stamped by Raku, fired at Leach Pottery St Ives.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.
2004  Six Chapel Row, Bath.