

A Marriage with Clay

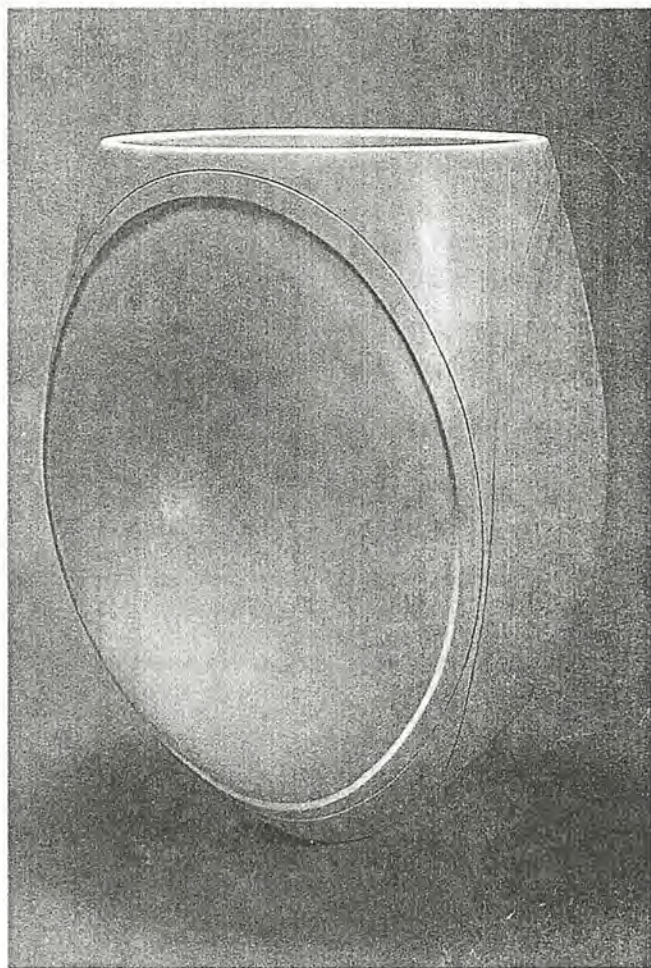
Sebastian Blackie puts the fine burnished ceramics of Antonia Salmon in a domestic and aesthetic context.

Modern ceramic practice is diverse. It is perhaps richest and most inventive in the range and combination of techniques that are currently employed; never-the-less in scale of production, type, function, feel and inspiration contemporary ceramics reveals an impressive variety in the face of limited worldly prospects. What sustains it? Obsession seems to be one of the few generic characteristics which identifies the studio potter. Because of this, the relationship potters have with their work may be of particular interest, their motivation surprising and their choice of forming and firing unexpected. Understanding something of the maker's approach can also expose a difference between what is intended and how it is read; the dynamics of consumption. To use someone's work, or indeed to write about it, is a collaboration in much the same way that a piece of live music is contributed to by both player and audience.

Antonia Salmon certainly admits to obsession. She laughingly claims that her 'Potter's Day' would be unpublishable. 'I get up. I work and work and work. I have lunch and go for a walk then I work and work and work. Then bed'. A monastic pattern reinforced by her small, well ordered studio located in the attic of her Sheffield home. As if to confirm this private process Antonia makes with her back to the large windows which give an inspiring presence of light and peace to the room. This may sound insular but Antonia has many other interests which nourish her life and in turn her work. She makes the unusual distinction that she is not a potter but a human that makes pots; long hours and solitude are essential to her making and this disciplined, aesthetic existence is certainly reflected in her ceramics.

Technically the work is fittingly straight forward. She uses either Valentine's Artil white, chosen for its smoothness and ability to cope with stress or 'T' material coated with slip. Some of the larger pieces are coiled. However, the wheel is very much the practical starting point for much of Antonia's work. Unlike many throwers she is not particularly attracted to wet plastic clay; for her the creative engagement is in modifying the carefully shaped leather-hard forms by cutting and construction. Others have described her work as well engineered and some of the work can be interpreted as owing their inspiration to precise mechanical objects such as optical instruments but Antonia denies any such influence. The controlled character of the pieces, in her view, arises from an inner compulsion satisfying a very personal sense of rightness.

Do humans have an affinity with particular materials and processes? Clearly some people who are highly proficient in one area of creative activity appear almost incompetent in another even when closely related. Michael Cardew described himself as a mud and water man as opposed to a fire man. It is interesting to reflect how the finish that some potters choose seems to refer back to an earlier stage in their works' making history. For example the shiny, running glazes of Takashi Yasuda are reminiscent of wet, freshly thrown pots whereas the semi-matt vitreous slips of Coper



Antonia Salmon - Deep bowl, h.25cm

evoked the sheen of leather-hard clay when his work's ultimate form was produced. Both give a specific sensual value which is different from the finished pieces actual physical state. Antonia's use of burnishing and smoking seems to make this reference. Unlike Coper, her pots thrown origins are eradicated and when she polished she not only nurtures the newly created form but also seems to discover it. In doing this she removes some of the qualities that signify that her work is made of clay. Most recently Antonia has developed a new surface which does not use the patina of smoke; a technique she has employed and refined for many years. Carbonizing the biscuit-fired work, although synthetic in terms of converting the clay to ceramic, never-the-less evokes the use of fire.

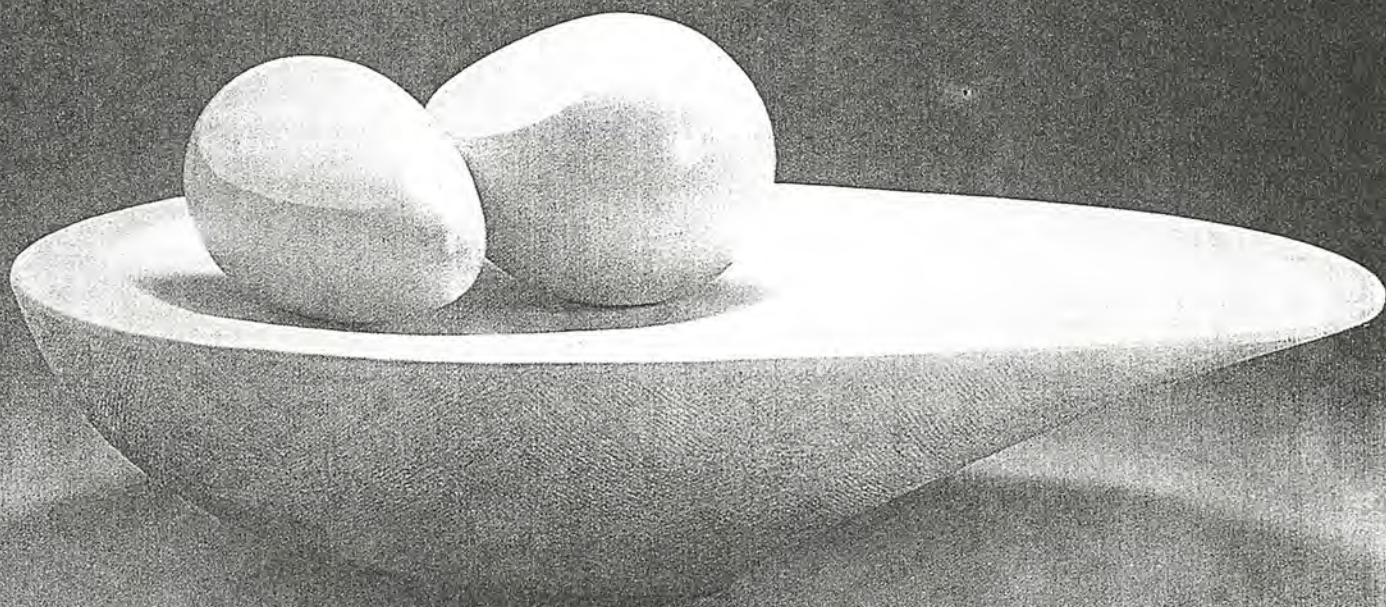
Antonia anticipates that the white terra sigillata type finish she has evolved may have repercussions on her primary concern with three dimensional shape; it feels, however, that it is just another step in a quest that has always driven her to make. The development of her pots, by her own admission, is painfully slow and arises from the process of working rather than some external imperative. She finds that terra sigillata, all too often, can look like plastic and her new slip required many tests before she recognised it as an appropriate compliment to the form and satisfied her personal sense of ceramic quality.

Although interested in ceramic work generally, Antonia does not consciously refer to particular potters or types of pottery. For example her use of smoking is not intended as a meaningful connection with smoked pots of other cultures. She responds to the presence of pots; their poise and



Antonia Salmon – ABOVE White Holding Piece, h. 16cm. BELOW LEFT Carved Dish, d 25cm. BELOW RIGHT Tall Necked Vases, h 16 and 20cm



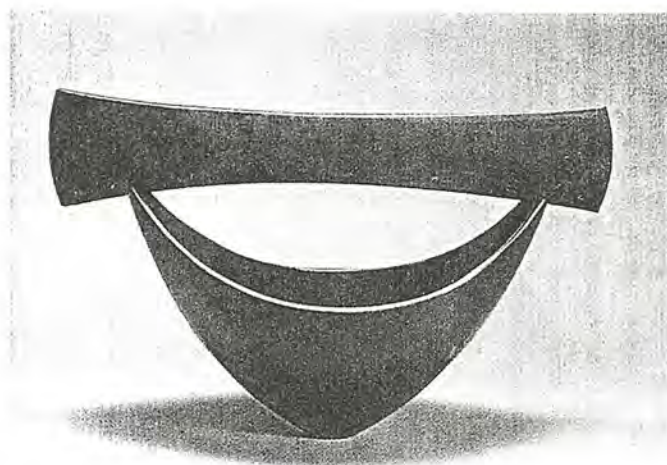


Antonia Salmon – Untitled d. 60cm

balance but also that intangible: their essence. These abstract qualities, of course, are also found elsewhere. She is inspired by architecture, sculpture, landscape, but her work is neither an illustration nor an analysis of this. A beautiful outline of a hill feeds her sensibility which in turn informs the decisions she makes when working with clay. She seeks to nurture a state of receptiveness to the inner qualities of the things she is drawn to. In the studio is a photograph of a Neolithic burial site. It feels as if it is both empty and full at the same time and its extraordinary sense of containment and inclusiveness, achieved by the simplest of means, is perhaps a clue to the qualities she wishes to imbue through her work.

Domestic ware implies utilitarian pots for eating and drinking but it should rightly encompass any work which belongs in the home. Perhaps because of the West's Christian/Judaic traditions we seem conceptually to separate the feeding of the body from much domestic ware. The pots have an intimacy and peace I associate with what one may desire, but not always find, in the home. They offer a kind of security and despite their precision they have a softness and vulnerability which as humans we rarely reveal outside this sanctuary.

Antonia Salmon's work looks contemporary but in many ways it seeks to reaffirm archetypal human values. Her choice of ceramic techniques, although quite traditional, is not significant but simply based on what best facilitates her process of thought in much the same way that a modern author might prefer to write with a pen than a computer. Her choice of clay, however, she describes as being like a marriage. She recognises that her work could be made in other materials and had a brief affair with stone carving which, if anything, confirmed her sense of fidelity to the ceramic medium. Like any successful marriage it is hard work and change, while both desirable and inevitable, offers no guarantees. Not just as potter's day; a potter's life.



Antonia Salmon – Open Boat Piece, h. 15cm

Antonia Salmon is showing at Bettles Gallery, September 30–October 18, and Chelsea Crafts Fair October 21–26.