

JACQUI PONCELET.

In a catalogue to a recent exhibition of British ceramics touring in the USA there appears a photograph of one of Jacqui Poncelet's pots upside down, its legs pointing upwards. The discomfort which this image arouses underlies the usual relationship which one has with her work. Jacqui Poncelet makes pots, the objects that she produces have an inside and an outside and an aperture uppermost. Within the remarkable range of forms produced over the last eight years this, at least, is a constant factor. This introduces a number of references, specifically those of function, of container and contained, and of the relation between hand and eye. Within these references formal relations, such as those between pattern and form, volume and silhouette, interior and exterior, are seen.

In the bone china work of 1972-76 through which Jacqui Poncelet initially established her reputation, a tension is developed between the clarity of the work and the relationship to the hand. It is within this tension that the surely marvellous qualities of pots such as 1, 2, 3, and 4 emerge. Something of what I mean by clarity can be seen by consideration of these works. It involves a perception of asymmetries, of balance, of a precise relation between lip and foot and of their being filled with light. All the works strike an apparently precarious balance, yet are sure footed and do not teeter; one does not, in one's mind, rush forward to save them. The balance is akin to that struck by a dancer on points or to the feeling of a drawn breath. The equation between precariousness, sureness and fullness gives a feeling of continuous renewal as if what one sees was always in the process of appearing or becoming. The clarity is intangible, stand-offish if you like, resistant to the interruption of touch. Against such resistance both the smooth texture, achieved by laborious final hand polishing, and the retained sense of the work as a cup both affirm its tangibility.

With any artist the exigencies of a working procedure or of a particular material often lead to changes and developments within the work as a whole. In working with bone china Jacqui Poncelet first produced a highly finished plaster model, took a mould from that model then cast from it, carving, piercing or staining the resulting pots. She would then return to the original model to cut out sections and to make fresh moulds, again carving, piercing or staining the resulting pots. Thus, any initial form ran through a whole gamut of states. With refinement any resulting form often became unstable without the introduction of a foot or prop as support. In the earlier bone china work an engagement is evident in properties of the material, in particular in its translucency when thin and in the asymmetries introduced through the firing

of thin walled pots up to their vitrifying temperature. The later work, increasingly unstable necessitating the introduction of a foot, begins to show concern with the relation between form and horizontal support, mediated through the foot. The move into slab built work is perhaps as a consequence of the realisation of this concern. The foot adopted in 5 and 6 for example is repeated as the rear wall in pots 7, 8, 9 and 10.

The majority of individual bone china pots are clearly containers; the pots are translucent and seem to be filled with, and hold, light; their smooth surfaces attract the hand. Between 1976 and 1977 Jacqui Poncelet effected a radical change in her working method, from casting to hand building with slabs, and in her materials, from bone china to earthenware. These changes entailed a change in scale and a loss of those particular material qualities which had seemed so central. A concern for the internal volume also disappears from the work until after her return from the States. What is substituted is a concern for the relation of front to back as against inside to outside. Thus a number of the pots forming her British Crafts Centre exhibition in 1977 were readable as a series of receding planes or as a group of objects seen one against the other [11,12,13,14 c.f. bone china 15]. In others the front plane, seen against the rear wall, seemed to depict a pot against a background [8]. Or a pot was formed from a flat silhouette [16]. The concern for the pictorial and for an illusory volume which this work indicates is certainly a part of what is in the air for contemporary ceramics. One could point to the examples of Liz Fritsch's British Crafts Centre exhibition in 1976 or to aspects of American West Coast ceramics of the late 60's and early 70's, for instance. It also reflects a consciousness of the current pervasiveness of the photograph in our acquaintance with the world, the experience of seeing three-dimensional objects as two-dimensional. The new work is marked by an increasingly bold use of pattern, either spread across the form or reflecting and amplifying the various changes in plane. However, it becomes clear that in the suppression of particular material qualities a certain richness had been lost. One of the last works made before her trip to the USA [17] with its hammered surface does, with hindsight, show a felt need to move the work in the direction of a greater variety of surface and to fuse pattern and surface.

In September 1978 Jacqui Poncelet took up a Bicentennial Fellowship and went to the States for a year, travelling and working. The initial five months of the Fellowship were spent in New York where she shared a studio and completed a series of pots which formed an exhibition at the Hadler Rodriguez Gallery in February 1979.

In purely visual terms New York presented her with an astounding variety of stimulation, particularly in the seemingly arbitrary assembly of pattern elements: from the fragments of grids juxtaposed in views of partially hidden

skyscrapers and their interacting reflections to the fire escapes snaking across building facades; from the layers of bars, grills and shutters covering the windows and doors of shops and warehouses in the downtown areas on a Sunday to the patchwork of cast iron sheeting and pavement lights along the sidewalks of SoHo. From the windows of her studio a view of the Empire State building, squeezed and distorted by imperfections in the glass served as a continual reminder of that richly textured surface which the city presented. She has also mentioned the exuberance of recent work by Frank Stella, seen in Castelli's downtown gallery, in this regard.

The fundamental innovation of the work produced in the States was in the use of three differently coloured clay bodies, making up a patterned block from which the slabs for the pots were cut and rolled. Together with the use of a wax resist to mask off areas in the glaze firing, this gave an enormous increase both in the variation of texture possible in the resulting surface and in the range of available pattern. These techniques, married to an increased sureness in the handling of three-dimensional form composed from flat sheets, result in the best of the pots achieving a challenging presence. For example, a work such as 18, with its clear cut outlines and apparent simplicity across which the dashing pattern of dots and stripes spreads, changes radically from view to view without ever appearing improbable or unlikely as an object; or works such as 19 and 20 where an abundantly decorated, almost garlanded, surface is coupled to a clear geometry based on sections of a circle, within which the opening is both disclosed and obscured ; or a work such as 21 where a squat inverted pyramid is positioned on two legs like pieces of cake or pie and where a complex and mysterious internal geometry is balanced by an extreme fineness of relation between foot and lip. From New York Jacqui Poncelet travelled to Los Angeles, taking in large sections of the American landscape on the way. In Los Angeles with access, thanks to the kindness of Paul Soldner, to the ceramics facilities at Scripps College, she resumed work. The concerns initially elaborated in New York remain, but mediated by the experience of the extraordinary and unfamiliar landscape of South Western USA and of vast distance and clear light (standing beside the road in Utah and being able to see, in all directions, mountains one hundred miles distant; as if one were to stand in Birmingham and see London, Liverpool, Cardiff and Lincoln by merely turning around). The impact of colour in this landscape was also of profound importance but it was not until after her return to England that colour began to play a central role in her work.

The last period in the States was spent in Seattle. Her working procedure remained, in terms of equipment, straightforward throughout the year; a rolling pin and a table sufficed, access to a kiln presenting less difficulty than finding somewhere to live. Jan Axel in New York, Paul Soldner in Los Angeles and

Margaret Ford in Seattle were more than generous in their time, equipment and knowledge. The work done over the year shows the continuous development of certain preoccupations, notably that of the relation of pattern to form. There are evident influences of place in the kinds of reference that each group of pots has. The experience of the desert I take to be important in the dry surfaces and pointed geometry of the Los Angeles pots; the lush vegetation of the Pacific North West and the fecundity of Margaret Ford's garden must surely be reflected in the extensive use of glaze in the Seattle pots. As previously suggested, although much of the earlier slab built work relies on a front surface being seen against a back plane which is also an internal surface, the volume enclosed remains largely inactive and uninviting. Most of these earlier pots and those made during her American trip are seen from the outside, as it were; important factors seeming to be 'in-front-of' and 'behind' rather than 'inside' and 'outside'. In the States Jacqui Poncelet's use of a material differently patterned on both sides precipitated decisions about the internal volume in the making stage. In certain of the American pots, for example 21 and 22 where the transition from legs or body to lip involves a complex and sensuous unfolding of the internal geometry, this implicit articulation of the internal volume becomes explicit. This renewed interest in the inside is a major factor in the production of the group of pots forming the current exhibition which are, in the main, seen, at least initially, from the inside.

In her recent work Jacqui Poncelet has been making use of a much larger size than previously and also of a predominantly horizontal format, whereas most earlier work tends towards a vertical format. In the bone china work a functional potential has been retained as central by virtue of an implicit relation to cup and to hand. In the new work, format, size and openness mean that one registers them as dishes having, at least, a functional potential. I have called attention to the clarity and tangibility of the bone china work as an invitation to touch tied to an extreme reticence about doing so. In similar ways in the work in the present exhibition there is, I suggest, a clear invitation for active engagement with the pots as objects of use. However, that invitation, once recognised, is almost immediately cancelled or confused by the complex discussion of colour, form, pattern, of interior and exterior with which one is as quickly engaged.

It can, perhaps, be said about visual perception that one's experience of the world fluctuates between that of flatness and that of depth. The paradigm for such fluctuations lies in the relation between hand and eye, between seeing and touching. I tend to the belief that such issues (the operations and contents of our perceptions) are central to considerations of the ways in which we conduct ourselves in the world and form our relations with objects and

with others. In particular that a confusion between flatness and depth, invitation and rebuttal, characterises our dealings with the world. Although such a belief leaves open questions about the nature of the meanings arrived at, it does seem to imply that one of the ways in which objects come to have meaning for us is by virtue of a certain elusiveness. I think of poems, where meaning spreads out from and returns to the lines on a page without ever being fixed. At one level one enjoys the elusiveness of Jacqui Poncelet's pots in relation to the numerous hats, shoes, boats, birds, fishes and shirts which they seem to contain, yet one is not inclined to make mistakes about what they are. At another level, for example in the oval dish with white rim (see page 13) or the comma shaped dish with orange rim (see page 15), that enjoyment is shifted to a more abstract level by the spread of colour and the interlocking of varieties of complex grids across the surface, the relations between positive and negative in the pattern and the fusion of exterior with interior by means of the edge. The operation of the edge is crucial. In much of the earlier (slab built) work and in the work done in America the edges had often been both uncomfortable and unresolved. In the new work (see for example the large oval dish with step page 11) this is resolved and the edge seems to function in three distinct but interrelated ways. Firstly, it acts to fuse exterior and interior by seeming to act as an element within the surface patterns of both. Secondly, the edge provides a taut and stable contour, focussing and clarifying a sometimes baffling form. Thirdly, the edge states in a matter-of-fact manner the material thickness of the work. A complex dynamic is set up in seeing the pots as somehow flat or transparent; the far and near edges seeming to work in with the lines of pattern of interior or exterior. In this integration, material thickness disappears. Yet the edge is also continuous and asserts itself as the lip or edge of a three-dimensional form of a particular thickness and with a functional potential. Tautness, the curve nowhere becoming flat, is essential to this assertion (see page 15). Thus the dynamic is set up between a two- and three-dimensional reading of the work, between flatness and depth, between eye and hand.

The putting together of work from slabs or sheets of patterned material is a procedure that seems to owe as much to textile traditions as it does to ceramic traditions. One could describe much of Jacqui Poncelet's technique in the pots that she made in the States in terms of the pattern cutting, stitching and fitting of garments. A similar description could be made of her current working practice, although the use of curved rather than flat surfaces has necessitated the additional use of humped and hollow formers. In terms of technique and considerations of pattern there are relations to, and conscious influences from, American patchwork, Navajo blankets and certain West

Coast African textiles and to Mexican, Guatemalan and Peruvian weaving and applique work.

In these textiles the combination of local traditions and the impact of alien cultures has sometimes produced an extraordinarily vital hybrid. Although such mixing is by no means new (for example the evolution of Gandhara sculpture from a mixture of Greek and Vedic sources) the instability of Western cultural traditions and the vast increase in both mobility and awareness of other cultures has made such mixing, a form of collage, central to our conception and appreciation of artefacts in the twentieth century. I do not believe that it is either far fetched or out of place to consider that the disjunctions of pattern on the surfaces of Jacqui Poncelet's current pots relate, in part, to specific influences from textiles and garments and also that, in conjunction with the uncertainty and equivocation referred to in relation to one's perceptions, profound issues both about the nature of individual perception and about the relations of culture, tradition and individual practice are raised.

My final remarks have to do with the continuity of Jacqui Poncelet's work, a question, if you like, of style. One might be hard put to it to regard the bone china work, the early slab built work, the American pots and the current dishes as being the work of one person. The kind of recognisability that, for example, Liz Fritsch, Alison Britton and Jill Crowley seem to enjoy, may appear to be missing from Jacqui Poncelet's work. Such a view is, I think, false. There are continuous concerns evident in the work. One of these, as I have tried to indicate, has to do with the relation of hand to eye, in all the multiple and far reaching implications that such a concern has. Another has to do with the relation of form to horizontal support. I have tried to show this in considering the early development of the slab built work. One example from the present exhibition will serve to indicate something of its continuing relevance. If one looks at the cup with half foot [3], at a slab built version of it [17] and at the small two-sectioned dish in the present exhibition their connection is, I think, evident. The realisation of such a connection throws considerable light on the use of double sections and stepping in some of the dishes in the present exhibition. It also can be seen to bear on some of the American pots [21].

As I said at the beginning, Jacqui Poncelet makes pots, however, as I have tried to show these are far from ordinary. There are aspects to her which I have not even mentioned, the work she has done at the behest of Martin Hunt and Ebbe Simonsen for Bing and Grøndhal Porcelain in Copenhagen for instance. There is much more that I could say about her pots. I hope though that I have been able to convey something of my very great interest in and

enjoyment of them over a number of years and something of the reasons why I think it is work of importance.