

A photograph of a long, brightly lit hallway with a polished floor. Four hand-painted ceramic vessels are placed on the floor, receding into the distance. The vessels are decorated with abstract, colorful patterns. The lighting creates strong highlights and shadows on the floor, emphasizing the perspective of the hallway.

MEDITATIONS

ASHLEY HOWARD





J&J
RAWLIN



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MEDITATIONS

ASHLEY HOWARD

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FOREWORD

ASHLEY HOWARD





I began work on *Meditations* in 2014, intending to exhibit in Guildford Cathedral the following year. Fate intervened when building work on the cathedral took far longer than anticipated. The situation was beyond my control, but seemed strangely in tune with the ethos of the project.

Let me explain. The contextual background to the exhibition is the notion of meditating on what will be will be, and of letting things unfold in their own time. I am only one element of the process by which the exhibition material is realised. The delay, therefore, was something I simply had to accept as part of something much bigger.

This is my second exhibition in a cathedral. For *Ritual and Setting* in Winchester Cathedral in 2009, the work I made was large. For *Meditations*, the work is far smaller. The only way I can measure scale is by my experience of the world: what seems tiny to me is the size of a galaxy in comparison with a sub-atomic particle. This time, I have not attempted to compete with the scale of the cathedral; rather, I have offered modest stations for small objects on which the viewer may focus.

The long road to *Meditations* began in 1981, when I was 18. My pottery teacher Gill Brown took a small group of students to see *Essential Cubism* at what was then the Tate Gallery. It was my first experience of an exhibition, and I was enthralled. Towards the end of the day I chanced upon the room that contained Mark Rothko's *Seagram* murals. As I crossed the threshold into the space I experienced a power that was both awe-inspiring and peaceful. I witnessed how those who entered the room were immediately hushed, and moved slowly and respectfully towards the benches where they sat to contemplate the work.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard introduces the chapter 'Intimate Immensity' with the words of Jules Valles: '*Space has always reduced me to silence*'. These words encapsulate the spiritual experience I was given that day; an experience I chose to ignore. For the next three decades I tried to do everything in my own way, which did not work. In the last few years this has changed.

I have always been drawn to sacred spaces, whatever the religion or creed that inspires them. An element of this is how such spaces affect people and influence their behaviour within them. I do not believe that immensity of scale is necessary in order to produce a sense of awe: a small Japanese tea-house can provoke the same response as a vast cathedral. The room



that housed the *Seagram* murals was far smaller than a cathedral, but seemed to instil a similar reverence in its visitors. Perhaps, then, the way in which a space is composed is of more importance.

Meditations is about exploring spaces within space, the experience of specific spaces and the resulting spiritual contemplation – something that is both intimate and immense – which may arise. As a potter who uses the wheel I pull up a skin of clay in order to envelop a space. The pot needs this space to exist even if – as with some of the pieces in this exhibition – the space is completely enclosed. I like the idea that the space is still there.

Between 2001 and 2003 I completed an MA at the Royal College of Art, where Emmanuel Cooper suggested that I should try porcelain and enamels. I could see their potential and was excited by the opportunity they offered to examine surface and its relationship to form. Over the next few years I made forays into the area, but without any real commitment.

I made the core of the work for *Meditations* during a residency at Japan's Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. This was my third visit to Japan, and it set me on a new path. It offered me the time, space and inspiration to examine surface, colour and composition and I was able finally to build on the foundations laid during my post-graduate experience. My work has continued to develop, so *Meditations* is essentially a visual record of the source of what I am producing now. Recent examples highlight this development and sit alongside the work begun in Shigaraki.

I am fascinated by different influences and the way in which they can be used. The influence of Japanese ceramics on British studio ceramics is well documented. In my 2014 project *Shima Kara Shima E (From Island to Island)* I had moved towards the interpretation of influence as opposed to the replication of influence. This is a fluid dialogue, but it is of primary importance to me.

I have touched on spirituality, but it is difficult to express how this affects my work. All I can say is that I have progressively given up the notion of making my work; when I consciously become involved things usually go wrong. I practice surrender of ownership to the extent that I feel my work comes from somewhere else. It does not always work but it is rewarding when it does.

YELLOW INTERIOR
2018



SEALED URNS
2014





A TIME AND A PLACE

ADRIAN BLAND





Although somewhat reductionist, since the late nineteenth century craft has so often been seen as operating in opposition to the ever increasing speeds and alienations fostered by industrialisation, consumer culture and an easy materialism, defined by what Paul Greenhalgh has referred to as 'a heritage of anti-industrial activity' (Greenhalgh, 1997: 105). Into the twenty-first century, this positioning continues, with Matthew Crawford noting that "the tangible elements of craft were appealing as an antidote to vague feelings of unreality, diminished autonomy, and a fragmented sense of self" (Crawford, 2009: 28) and Mole Leigh, in an essay that posited time itself as a tangible aesthetic value within craft practice, suggesting that, 'hand-crafting is becoming an increasingly pertinent 'touchstone' in Western society – providing a bearing for the spirituality that many feel is diminishing in mankind owing to the conditions of modern culture' (Leigh, 2002: 37).

Within such assessments, perhaps a key issue here is that of time, and the control of time; we live in a world of ever-increasing demands, of (digital) clock-watching, and of low boredom thresholds – faster. Craft production, by comparison, has been seen as 'the freedom that is attainable when one is in a position to direct the content, pace and quality of the way one earns a living' (Dorner, 1997: 14) – slower. The same might be said of its consumption; the crafted object invites a visual and tactile reward that needs to be earned – slower. It is perhaps within this framework that we might place *Meditations*, Ashley Howard's latest exhibition of pots within the auspices of Guildford Cathedral, where the intimacies of the vessels are met by the grandeur of the edifice, and must first be found.

This is not Howard's first encounter with such an environment; in 2009, concerned with notions of the ceremonial vessel, he exhibited *Ritual and Setting* at Winchester Cathedral; this was a sequence of more imposing (in their scale, at least) stoneware and porcelain vessels that, according to catalogue author Amanda Fielding, 'appeared to grip the surface of the floor' (Fielding, 2009: 13). Here the scale of the pots is more domestic, more attuned perhaps to a living room than a cathedral, yet the intention of the setting remains constant, whereby the space of a gallery can be contrasted with the place of a cathedral.

In his appraisal of the ideal modernist gallery, the 'white cube', Brian O'Doherty highlighted their 'limbolike status' (O'Doherty, 1986: 15), within which 'their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes' (O'Doherty, 1986: 15). Such spaces, with their 'negative vibrations' (O'Doherty, 1986: 76), it is suggested, make bodily experiences 'an intrusion. The space offers the thought

that while eyes and mind are welcome, space occupying bodies are not' (O'Doherty, 1986: 15). Such spatial experience might be contrasted with the places suggested by Juhani Pallasmaa in his seminal critique of the hegemony of vision within contemporary architecture, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. In this book, the author posits that, in comparison, 'significant architecture makes us experience ourselves as complete embodied and spiritual beings' (Pallasmaa, 2005: 11), and that, in their expression of age and history and human use, 'natural materials – stone, brick and wood – allow our vision to penetrate their surfaces and enable us to become convinced of the veracity of matter' (Pallasmaa, 2005: 31). In positioning the range of pots in a variety of discrete locations throughout the cathedral setting, within which the patinas of the interior become an enrichment to the experience of them, the exhibition here at Guildford Cathedral serves to emphasise placement, peripheral vision turning to focussed attention as each pot is unexpectedly discovered and then examined within an environment that encourages us to feel 'rooted in the continuity of time' (Pallasmaa, 2005: 32). Here pot and place complement each other perfectly in their expression of the 'depth, subtlety, overtones, variegation (and) diversity' (Pye, 2007: 19) of workmanship and surface.

But what of the pots themselves? Ashley Howard has been working as a potter now for over thirty years. Initially (and perhaps still) a 'mud and water' man, enamoured by clay and the wheel upon which vessels are first thrown and then hand manipulated towards highly personalised ends, the influence of practitioners such as Colin Pearson instilled an attention to form that emphasised proportion and balance, and it has been form, particularly the form of the vessel, that has most captivated him, evident in his expressed passion for 'the parcelling up of some space' (Howard, 2018) in which the relationships between interior and exterior volumes are at the very heart of the making process and the individual aesthetic decisions directed towards each individual pot (perhaps this is another way in which space becomes place): after thirty years, Howard is well-versed in form; initially it was all about the form. Building on this embedded knowledge, what is demonstrated here in *Meditations* is perhaps the more recent concern with surface, and particularly with surface decoration and narrative, first broached after Emmanuel Cooper had suggested a fusion of porcelain and enamel, and resulting here in a confident and maturely considered dialogue between surface and form in which narrative possibilities are pushed to the fore, and decoration emerges as the fingerprint of an individual, an agile juxtaposition of singular judgements. A personal vocabulary.

Howard himself has spoken of his early reticence with regard to decoration, his holding back from being a 'potter that paints' (Howard, 2018), and for some time his idiosyncratic mark-making remained bound within the sketchbook. Such reticence was perhaps first confronted technically, with research into the right materials and processes, the right temperatures, to push the mark-making into the pot, so that the surface is not sitting on the form, but rather becomes integral to it, and the pot retains a ceramic integrity that somewhat refutes the notion of clay as canvas; 'the glaze has pulled the marks right in' (Howard, 2018).

And what of the marks themselves? Well, it might be worth pointing out that they are made in contemplative silence, Howard's beloved musical tastes (jazz, blues, electronica) internalised so that the mark-making might possess rhythm or suggest soundscape, but never overtly so.

In the act of throwing and manipulation, music often fills the studio, and becomes an accomplice to form, but the silence seems necessary to the emotional build-up before brush first touches the unglazed surface, and the surface is stroked.

In this, Howard references his own love of Japanese culture, and particularly the attentions to movement that result in expressive, gestural brush marks, 'that meditative build up, that mental preparation, and then the stepping off, the letting go' (Howard, 2018). Initially somewhat visceral, then, the mark-making and decorative inclusions then proceed in a somewhat more reflective frame of mind, as mark follows mark towards what Howard himself refers to as 'composition. I really do try to tie up the beginning and the end, the outside and the inside' (Howard, 2018). What results might then be considered an open text, an unresolved narrative, a new story for both maker and audience in which meaning is always elusive. The surfaces come to seem redolent of Kandinsky or Klee, whereby the longer one looks, the more a narrative might be discerned, or conjured up; the act of slow looking always provides a reward and there are always identifications to be made, associations to be had. A patch of brilliant yellow becomes a sun, a stroke of muted blue a distant mountain. Possibly.

In this particular series of pots, the very idea of narrative association is perhaps inevitable, the hints furnished by the enamels augmented by the blue-and-white transfers, industrially produced and imported from China and Japan. Here the implications of landscape, both wild and inhabited, are more literal perhaps, born of their intended applications, yet Howard's aesthetic modulations refuse any singular reading, and the sighting of a group of trees, or the movement of a wave, can come and go as the eye travels across and around the surface; horizons are never quite established, yet vistas might be imagined. Together with the pencilled lines and the brushed marks, here the familiar willow pattern motifs are consumed within a broader personal language, and become part of something bigger, something more difficult to grasp. You could get lost in a landscape like this.

Installed here in Guildford Cathedral these pots, with their lustrous surfaces and bright flashes of colour, punctuate the interior space and invite the viewer on a journey of discovery, each stationed pot offering up a moment of reflection, or an opportunity for reverie. In a world of pressing demands and easy gains, the opportunities to both make and look slowly, to even get lost in the process, can come to seem ever more valuable to us. As Mole Leigh puts it, 'perhaps the appeal of the overt chromanual craft object as a commodity is heightened by the idea of possessing someone else's time – as an object of desire it embodies the essence of sustained human endeavour, symbolic of human effort in an effortless age' (Leigh, 2002: 40). In exhibiting this latest series of pots in Guildford Cathedral, Ashley Howard is both expressing and inviting meditations, whereby the acts of making become reflected in the acts of visual encounter. In a setting that emphasises tranquillity, is rooted yet expansive, 'the present and the absent, the near and the distant, the sensed and the imagined fuse together' (Pallasmaa, 2005: 45).

'In memorable experiences of architecture, space, matter and time fuse into one singular dimension, into the basic substance of being, that penetrates our consciousness' (Pallasmaa, 2005: 72). In *Meditations*, pots and place come together in an unexpected yet harmonious spatial encounter, and our time, for a while at least, becomes our own.



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SEALED URNS
2014



SEALED URNS
L-R: PATHWAYS, NIGHT FIRE
FRONT: RED GATE
2014





IN THE HABITATIONS OF THY MAJESTY

THE REVEREND CANON DR JULIE GITTOES





Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of thy majesty and glory, world without end.

These words by the poet-priest John Donne may be uttered as a prayer; a meditation; an evocation of our mortal and immortal longings. His words express great imaginings that exceed human imagination. In my conversations with Ashley Howard about *Meditations*, Donne has offered a thread of inspiration and connection: Howard, like Donne, is interested in exploring that which is intimate and immense; our experience of the world and of spaces that prompt contemplation.

Donne invites us beyond extremes of darkness and dazzling, noise and silence, to reach tentatively for one equal light; one equal music. It sounds so familiar, and yet so other. He invites us to a place of habitation: a dwelling place where fears, hopes, endings and beginnings are held as one; where we are more fully ourselves.

In the naming of his pieces, Howard also engages in wordplay of apparent opposites that are, paradoxically, true. He continues to stretch our imagination as he creates and enfolds space. His work compels us to pause and to ponder, playfully yet prayerfully echoing the Christian devotion of the Stations of the Cross. With his ceramic 'stations' he redirects our gaze and calls our attention. We are brought to the habitations of majesty and mystery; here we dwell.

In his foreword to Junichirō Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, Charles Moore says: *One of the basic human requirements is the need to dwell, and one of the central human acts is the act of inhabiting, of connecting ourselves, however temporarily, with a place on the planet which belongs to us, and to which we belong.*

Guildford Cathedral is one such place of habitation, a place inhabited by young and old across successive generations. It belongs to the architect Sir Edward Maufe, and to those whose trades and skills brought his vision of light, height and space into being. It belongs to those who fired the clay to make the bricks, and to the brick-givers whose generosity enabled the completion of the building. It acts as a place of connection in times of joy or sorrow.



Connections are made between visitors, musicians, schoolchildren and worshippers; between academics, artists, young carers and the curious: connections between their human loves and love divine. It belongs to them and to us, who dwell but a little while on this earth.

Dwelling, inhabiting, connecting and belonging: such human requirements are about more than physical place. In crossing the threshold of this cathedral, we are caught up in a moment of awe and wonder. This, perhaps, is a 'house and gate of heaven': a place where we experience neither darkness nor dazzling but one equal light; white or golden, shadows shifting. This earthly habitation is one of activity; noise and silence; hopes and fears; beginnings and endings. Yet do we glimpse 'one equal music', or 'one equal eternity' breaking in? There might be an inner hush as peace descends; as the pace of our movement slows; as a sound hangs in the air; as a vibrant enamel catches our eye; as we pause and stand to gaze.

In *Meditations* Howard refuses to compete with the scale of this place, and in so doing helps us to inhabit it. He has created columns of colour and light, sealed urns and open vessels. His potter's art of enclosing, creating and occupying space connects us, in Moore's words, with the 'very edge of the infinite'. He invites us to inhabit the scale and awesomeness of the sacred space of this cathedral church in a new way, which is both intimate and immense. His work prompts us to ponder our own smallness and fragility; to meditate on our potential and beauty, and to dwell on hopes and memories: contained, unseen and spacious.

Howard has described the way in which his work flows as a result of letting go, and in *Meditations* we are gifted the treasures of that endeavour. It is a glimpse of what is not fully apprehended: 'no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light . . . in the habitations of divine majesty'.

It has been humbling, joyful, inspiring and profoundly moving to have been part of this journey. It seems apt to end with a text which roots Donne's heavenly longing in the reality of our human flesh. As Paul the Apostle said: *For it is the God who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*

12 Corinthians 4:6-7

SEALED URNS
2014



YELLOW INTERIOR
(DETAIL)
2018





REVEALING THE UNEXPECTED

JAMES & JESSICA RAWLIN





When you are interested in contemporary ceramics, you are always discovering something new. A technique that you have not seen before, a form used in a new way, an artist who has escaped your notice.

In early 2016 we were planning a four-handed exhibition of new ceramics to be shown at Aldeburgh, on the Suffolk coast. We had decided to find an artist from each of the four corners of the country and when thinking about the South and South East, we had come across Ashley's work referenced online. After an introduction from another potter friend, we arranged to visit him and discuss the ideas for the show.

The work we had seen was mostly in stoneware, roughly shaped vessels with ash-coloured glazes. When we arrived for our visit, Ashley very obligingly offered a body of this work for our show. However, he also wondered, rather timidly, if we might be interested in looking at some newer work, work which at that point had been shown to hardly anyone outside the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham (UCA), where Ashley is a part time lecturer. This body of new work was in porcelain, enhanced with splashes and blocks of bold colour, journeying lines and the occasional burst of gold lustre. Its character and voice called out to us immediately and whilst it was not at all what we had gone to see for our exhibition, we decided then and there that we would show it.

After that first showing in Aldeburgh, where we discovered the particular harmony that his work has with old wood and afternoon light, we have been delighted to continue working with Ashley and to be able to watch the development of his ceramic work. His increasing confidence in the choice of forms he creates and the use of colour and line to bring them to life have been a constant delight and we eagerly await the results of each firing. Indeed, so do the growing number of collectors who have added these captivating pieces to their homes, many of whom have been fulsome in the praise that they give to these special works and their apparent ability to inhabit a space bigger than their physical dimensions and to create a presence that can alter a room.

This quality of his work was highlighted very acutely during the exhibition *Exploring the Vessel* that we held in September 2017 when Ashley's ceramics were shown in a domestic, albeit rather grand, London home setting. The pieces were presented alongside paintings and drawings by William Scott, one of the giants of British art in the post- 1945 world and,



incidentally, a great friend of Mark Rothko, a painter whose particular personal importance to Ashley has been noted elsewhere. Placed here and there, high on a mantelpiece or on a low table, alone or in groups, the dialogues that were created between the ideas of painter and potter were incredibly moving.

Ashley's works are resolutely individual, their mood and temper shifting drastically even within a group of similar size and form. Some sit very quietly, some whisper, some demand attention. They carry his ideas and give them a physical shape. As each piece emerges from the studio it becomes part of a larger family spread across new environments and collections and here in Guilford Cathedral we see the work confront both past and future in setting and company.

L-R:
BEYOND DREAMS
RIGID FLOW
ABOVE THE CLOUDS
2018



LIDDED JARS
L-R: HOT SPOT
WHITE DREAM
PENETRATED CLOUD
2014





SHIGARAKI

ASHLEY HOWARD





In 2014 I spent the summer on a residency in Japan. The residency was at the Institute of Ceramic Studies based at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. Since its inception in 1992, the Institute of Ceramic Studies has provided an opportunity for ceramic artists from around the world to work freely in the environment of Shigaraki. The experience gave me the time and space to explore new ideas, especially with regard to colour and surface, and to develop these towards the work I make today.



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