**Ritual and Setting: Ceramic Review**

**Ashley Howard, Winchester Cathedral, March 2009**

**Review by Gareth Mason**

The Retrochoir of Winchester Cathedral holds the largest area of medieval tiles in England, dating from 1240 – 1300 with some modern restoration. This deceptively humble red earth patchwork undulates gently from the subsidence of long ages, and from it ascends a Gothic stone structure with proportions worthy of nine centuries of awe. This potentially overwhelming setting is where Ashley Howard has chosen to locate his new forms, the latest incarnation of his ongoing enquiry into ceremonial vessels and spaces. These font-like pieces are more hand-hewn than wheel-formed and their captured softness is redolent with feelings of shaping and changing, and especially of human touch, the enduring traces of which are tangible on every surface of this great interior. Their placement in this context suggests an intermediary possibility, offering an enriching confluence of secular and ecclesiastical contemplation.

Our Cathedrals used to vibrate with life’s colour. Roughly half of the exhibition is made of porcelain, which shimmers in the Cathedral’s soft late winter light, creating a dazzling base for the applied motifs that Ashley has sourced variously from the interior. Fleur-de-leys, stone vaulting, griffons: chromatic imagery deftly peppers this work in slip, enamel and gold lustre, in remembrance of past enrichment.

The porcelain has a sombre counterpoint: Broad, low-walled crucibles in coarse dark clay; corporeal and scarred as of ancient hard usage yet quiet, self-contained. The three that inhabit the south isle of the Retrochoir have accrued a mysterious pertinence, like sentinels, patiently abiding.

Far from the thimble insignificance that this resounding space could impose upon objects placed within it, these works are active occupants, rich with visual and tactile cues for reflection. Their subtle dissonance does its job, inviting you to look within and around them. Thus prompted to navigate this space anew, especially the medieval surface upon which these forms dwell, the eye is refreshed by the links it makes on its travels and rewarded with each new encounter. Neither Installation nor Intervention, these works represent a fitting new layer to Winchester Cathedral’s evolving palimpsest; they have come home.

Through this exhibition, Ashley Howard has made a substantial statement, advancing the identity of ceramics as an art form. In this regard it is an event of national significance.