

Ruth Duckworth and Ken Eastman at Marianne Heller, Heidelberg

With “Ken Eastman and Ruth Duckworth”, the Marianne Heller Gallery in Heidelberg will be mounting - from 22 April to 3 June 2007 - an exhibition which raises all manner of intriguing questions. One of these pertains to the current standing, in Germany, of Duckworth, a German-born artist who left the country of her birth while still a teenager. She is represented in both public and private collections and it was perhaps during the 80s that she was most collected, although her porcelain pieces have always been popular. In Heidelberg a variety of work from different periods of Duckworth’s long career will indicate something of the great contribution she has made to ceramics and from Eastman will come recent work which, while still exemplifying a faithfulness to the vessel, has now become an ever more interesting exploration of the sculptural form via the vessel.

This essay, arising from a lengthy discussion with Eastman, considers, in the main, another of these “intriguing questions”, namely, the younger artist’s thoughts and feelings about having a dual show with a potter whose work, since the Second World War, has been so tremendously influential. Furthermore, there is the fascinating point concerning what the nature of the artistic dynamics arising from this juxtaposing of the works in clay made by these two potters, might be.

It is an exciting experience to listen to, and converse with, Eastman, his images can possess an unexpected and revelatory clarity, his physical actions vigorously recreate the experience he is recounting. But it should be made abundantly clear at the outset, that while Eastman finds a great deal to admire in both Duckworth and her oeuvre, there is nothing of awed reverence or nervous apprehension in his attitude. This absence of qualms and misgivings is in fact a complimentary recognition of the fact that the considerably older Duckworth has, in the younger man’s eyes, achieved greatness, but without self-aggrandizement and noisy proclamations.

One of the first topics that came up in our talk, was Eastman’s recalling that while a postgraduate student at the Royal College of Art in London (1984 – 1987), he had telephoned Lucie Rie and asked if he and a friend might visit her. They found her to be charming, rather self-deprecating (“I suppose you want to see the Copers?”) and someone whose work and manner were very much “of Europe.”

During the course of his undergraduate studies at Edinburgh College of Art, Eastman had had teachers from the United States of America, and he himself tended to “look towards” that country. As a young person his contacts with Duckworth’s work were “sketchy”, but he always felt that, for him, she was “profoundly an American” (in contrast to the manner in which he experienced Coper and Rie as being “European”) and although it was Peter Volkos whose work particularly fired him up, he was nevertheless aware of the importance of the position which Duckworth occupied.

Therefore it was a real delight for Eastman when, years later, at the SOFA (Sculptural Objects and Functional Art) Art Exposition in Chicago, he saw Garth Clark showing around a tiny, elderly and rather quiet lady who was not only interested in the skin and surfaces of two small, “quiet”, iron oxide slab pieces by Eastman, but also asked to meet their maker. However, it was at a Millennium event in Amsterdam that Eastman attended a talk given by Duckworth and realised that the diminutive personage whose head only just appeared above the podium, was, for him, a name which had always carried a clarity and consistency and that, by having “set such a standard”, had become a huge figure within the context of ceramics.

Thus it is that Ken Eastman is looking forward tremendously to seeing what happens when his work and Ruth Duckworth’s are put together, for, as he says “I have wanted this exhibition to happen very much.” But at the same time, and this is a singularly important consideration, for Eastman there is no sense that showing with Duckworth is a threat, nor is it in any way hampering or inhibiting. He feels no need for his work “to speak with a special voice” in the presence of pieces made by this eminent ceramist. Vis-à-vis this show shared with such a “huge figure”, Eastman can say without either any touch of self-modesty or suppressed *amour propre* “I do not feel ‘How can I match that?’”, but adds that this might well not have been the case ten years ago.

One should, however, bear in mind that Eastman himself is no novice or newly-graduated tyro, but a potter whose sculptural output is to be found internationally in exhibitions and in public and private collections. His slab-built vessels have been awarded many prizes including the “Premio Faenza” (Italy, 1995), the Gold Medal at the World Ceramic Exposition (Korea, 2001) and the “President de la Generalitat Valenciana” award at the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennale Internacional de Ceramica” (Spain, 2001).

Eastman has several pertinent comments to make on the nature of group and dual shows, remarking on how frequently the former do not solve the problem of “muddle and mish-mash”, whereas the latter partake somewhat of the nature of an arranged marriage achieved via the agreement of the partners. Such a “marriage” suggests the existence of a relationship of some kind between the two parties, although examples of this union as it is contracted between human beings manifest how many diverse forms such a “relationship” can take.

This is not the first dual event in which Eastman has been involved at the Marianne Heller Gallery, for in 2002 he and Lawson Oyekan were co-exhibitors in a show entitled “Ceramics as Expression”. Talking about this shared exposition, Eastman points out that a significant part of the “relationship” was the fact that their work was so dramatically different, “so many light years apart”, that this meant that there would be no problems. As regards sharing a platform with Duckworth, Eastman is aware that while he does not make work which at all resembles hers, the distance between their creations is nevertheless considerably less than was the case when considering his productions alongside those of Oyekan.

In The New Ceramics, Peter Dormer says that Duckworth “helped to make British potters more aware of sculptural possibilities in clay,”<sup>1</sup> and as Eastman’s vessels are profoundly concerned with sculpturally exploring form and volume and surface, this is perhaps one of the reasons why her work and Eastman’s work will be able to share a podium in a manner which will prove both exciting and illuminating for the audience.

One of the distinguishing attributes of Duckworth’s clay to which Eastman has a tremendous response is the manner in which she handles her material, and “allows it to sway and crease and bend.” He stresses that these creases and bends are emphatically not gestural, they are “allowed” by Duckworth, and thus could be seen as being a manifestation of the quality of “awareness” in their maker’s character, for it is indeed the artist’s knowledge and cognisance of what they are about which enables them to “allow” the medium to express itself thus. It is to sculpture that Eastman turns to find further instances of this same quality, and proves his point by bringing in a large volume of the work of the Spanish abstract sculptor, Eduardo Chillida.

This practice of “allowing” the clay to do what it wants to do is of the greatest importance to Eastman. But if, when working with the clay while it is wet – as is his *modus operandi* – one gave the material unrestricted freedom to do what it wanted, one would only achieve a hopeless mess of collapsed clay. It is these moments when he is pulling up the rolled-out clay which are so vital a part of Eastman’s creative process. This brief space between chaos and control is when he is most intensely aware of making, from this seeming disorder and confusion, something which will have its own still resonance.

It was on a website ([www.epl.org/library/duckworth.html](http://www.epl.org/library/duckworth.html)) where Eastman found “a lovely quotation” of Duckworth’s: “I think my work has changed over the years. It is less romantic and at times much harder, and I don’t mean its texture. I am still working because nothing else interests me quite that much and it stops me from being bored. It is still a challenge and I have to earn my living.” These words, particularly the straightforward, down-to-earth approach which is suggested in the two final sentences, appeal deeply to Eastman and are yet another one of the reasons why he feels so excited about, and sympathetic towards, this alliance in Heidelberg. Ruth Duckworth and Ken Eastman have both given us ceramic art works which are never strident, but always powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Dormer, *The New Ceramics*, (1994 revised edition). London: Thames and Hudson, p 14