

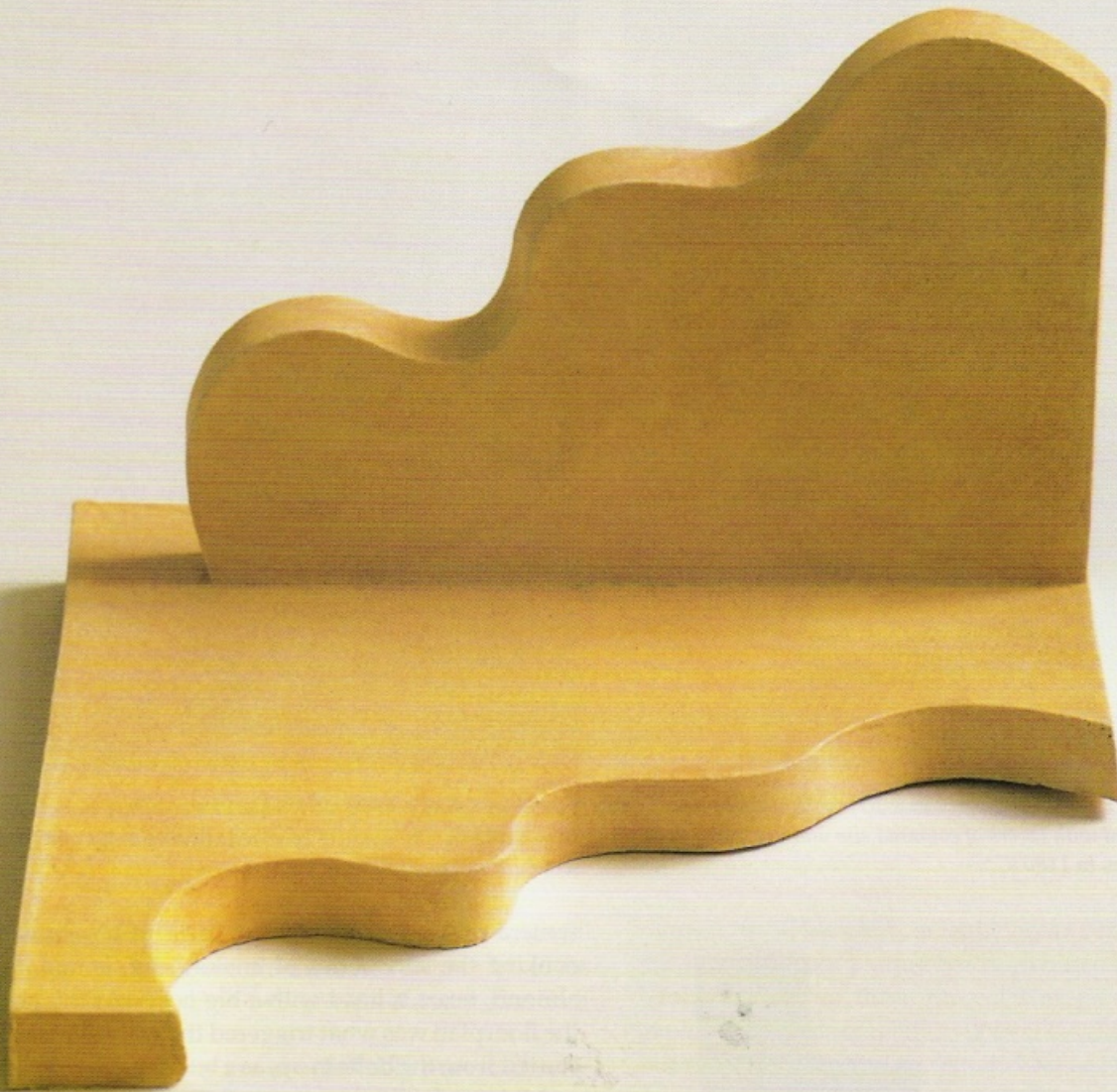
Cut-out Series. 16 x 16 cm. White stoneware clay, painted with layers of coloured slip and oxide and fired several times to 1180°C.

Ken Eastman: Folding Forms and Closing Spaces

Article by Alison Britton

THE SENSE THAT WORDS MATTER TO KEN EASTMAN makes for an intrepid feeling as an author embarks on another piece of writing about him. Being careful to try and make a good fit of language to form (because it will be acutely read and sized up by him at least) the words should perhaps also be more pruned and honed as his forms in clay become increasingly plain. A haiku of single syllables might soon be the most appropriate comment.

I have written about his work from time to time in the past decade, since we met first at the Royal College of Art in 1984 when he was a new student and I was a new tutor. When Eastman was a student he played around seriously with different ideas. The scope of things to be tried out in a ceramics department in a climate of change at that point in the early '80s was open and optimistic. You could make anything, call it what you liked, and there seemed to be an alive audience.



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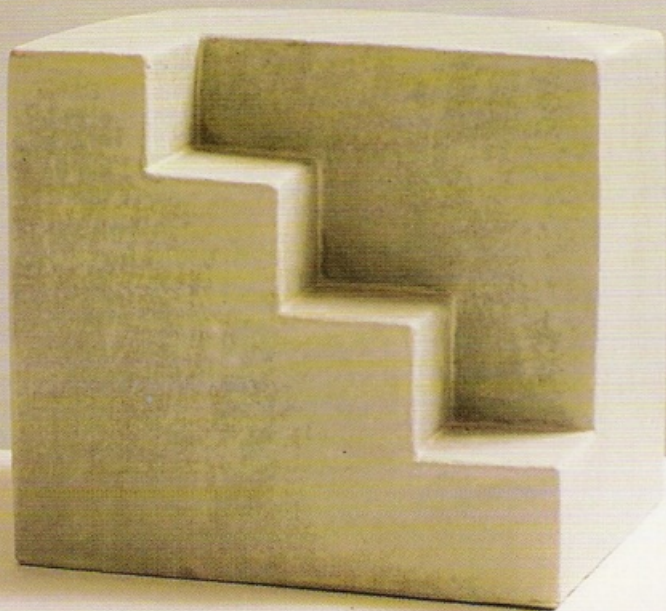
Eastman was enjoyable to teach, he always made a lot and was ready to dismiss half of it in long discursive tutorials, with much punning and verbal banter.

At one point he made a rather literal series of depictions in painted clay relief of work on his allotment, digging and hoeing, like loose versions of a Medieval calendar of seasonal labour. A group of square plates that followed these became more abstract and were painted with stylised derivations of landscape and vigorous vegetation. But it didn't seem to me that he left the RCA on a crescendo. Some of his earlier bold sculptural ambitions had gone into temporary hiding.

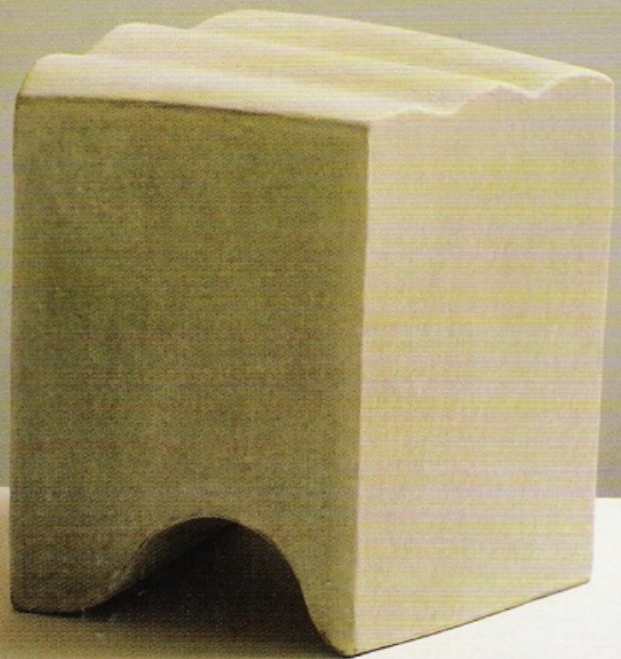
A strong grasp of three-dimensional form came suddenly and surprisingly a couple of years after he left college. Shape seemed to fall into place; he found a way with it, into a territory that was new. A pot he made in 1989 was striking for its allusions to larger architectural space, while maintaining an obvious pot identity. The main focus of the form was inside the pot, where the inner layer of the double wall was partly cut away in a big arch under the rim, casting strong shadows, drawing the eye into darkness. This arch gave the pot a 'building' reference and an ambiguous sense of scale. One might have been

looking into an enclosed courtyard, or on to the stage of an amphitheatre, rather than into a flat-bottomed lap-sized basin. The pot succeeded, against the odds, in seeming large and small. It is hard to give a sense of light and airy architectural space in a form that remains overtly a pot. There is a fine distinction to be felt or else something that is just a little clay model of a building appears. To my mind it was the loose decorative scale of the painting on the outer wall of the pot, a brushed zigzag line, that brought it back to ceramics. It was a calm, curious and stimulating object.

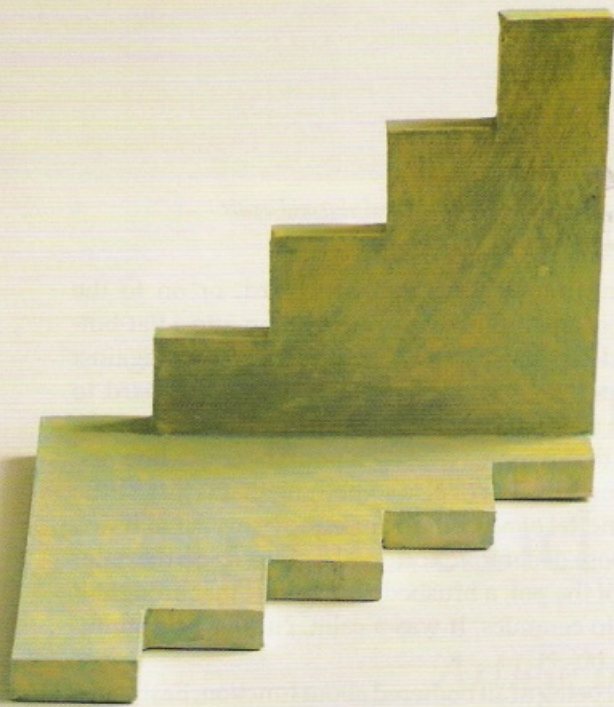
Not being at all bothered about function, Eastman's work with the pot form has been a consistent route into increasing abstraction, playing both with form and surface. That is what is potentially special about ceramics – you can have body and dress, sculpture and painting, essentially connected. Painting has always been a strong card for Eastman; he can be lyrical on the sheer walls of his objects sometimes, and he is not afraid to work on the surfaces. A piece may be in and out of the kiln a number of times. He has developed a versatile matt surface slip that can be brushed in thin layers on raw or cooked clay, and vitrifies.



Familiar Object. 1998. 16 x 15 x 15 cm. White stoneware clay, painted with layers of coloured slip and oxide and fired several times to 1180°C.



Familiar Object. 1998. 15 x 14 x 16 cm. White stoneware clay, painted with layers of coloured slip and oxide and fired several times to 1180°C.



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Eastman has been paring away at his forms and his themes in the intervening years. In a Contemporary Applied Arts exhibition leaflet of 1990, I thought a simple word list helped to conjure up the visual connotations of his work. It was as if I was revving up to

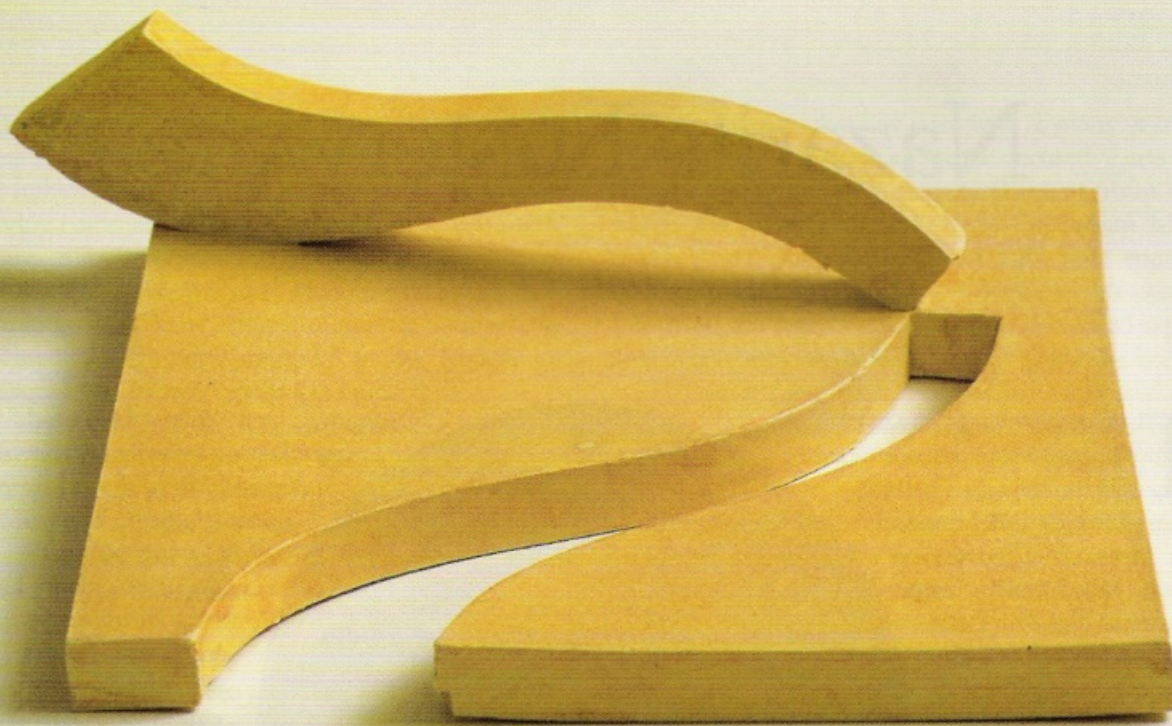
write a poem. I described the bases of his forms as evoking the silhouettes of 'melon, egg, lemon, axe, almond, heart, a head with a big nose'. At this stage the floorplan was what triggered the whole vessel, he started from the bottom up, as a builder does.

A later series of pieces, after Eastman had taken the dramatic step (for a potter) of enclosing his forms, roofing them in, the new smaller sealed pieces suggested images of a range of familiar though disparate things: a cheese, a drum, a funnel, a split log, the pimples on industrial flooring. These pieces were shown in groups, lines, often, like words in a sentence.

I did wonder at one point in the development of his work if he was rushing towards pure boiled-down form rather than coming to it through a breadth of exploration and experience. Minimal work takes courage. The process of concentrating an idea, subtracting features, going for essence, has the possible pitfall of oversimplification and emptiness – trying to reach the equivalence of the few words of late Samuel Beckett texts. Should Eastman leave more to strip away when he is old and grey? The problem for all simple ambiguous abstract forms is a kind of baldness that could be misconstrued.

In an exhibition of work at the Angel Row Gallery in 1998, Eastman showed three new series of pieces that came closer to installation than he had done before. He has been engaged in discovering how smaller pieces can still make a strong visual impact in a large space, can hold their own.

I am taken to see work in progress laid out in the borrowed, brand new village hall near where he lives. A large number of smallish elements are



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spread out in formal arrangements. His ideas are still developing. While we are there he reverses his plans of where best to show two groups of work, the floor versus the plinth.

Some of the forms are unbelievably pure and accurate for ceramics. The clay has hardly deviated from the arcs and right angles he built. The god of the kiln, who offers unpredictable characteristics of fusion and transformation, is unemployed. Melt, bloat, warp, slump and bleed are all words for things that might happen to clay and pigment in a firing, and could be blessings or curses. There is none of that here. It is an antithesis of rural pottery, indeed this is urban work in border country.

The first series consists of tile-sized cut-outs, perhaps 40 of them eventually, all different. They are sharp square shapes of dense finely grogged clay, cut into and bent or joined to stand up in silhouette, like an oak leaf, an arch, a roof, a slice here, a twist there. Their pastel colours are surprising and beautiful – orange, yellow, beige, pale turquoise. The thickness is tile-like but there is a hint of MDF (medium density fibreboard) in the deadpan visual effect, which is quite a humorous thing to do with clay.

The second series is composed of about 20 small hollow individual blocks, loaf sized, the colour of fog. They are neat and firm and even and seem much more robust and serious than the cut-outs. The forms they take are familiar but mysterious – bits of building, domestic shapes, steps, cliffs, moulding, things on a table, some looser plains of more organic form – “like a ferret in a bag”, he says. Recognition is veiled. There are clues, a bothering sense that shapes should be

meaningful. This series is really about forgetting the familiar. Eastman's father has been much in his mind in the making of these pieces. This piece of work explores symbols of memory loss and a confused definition of what is known. What clues of ordinary life might still be readable through such a distracted and distanced state, small objects put in a big empty space.

The third series of work is not yet clear, here in the village hall, but will involve more painted colour and open container forms. Larger, looser shapes, he thinks, with a softer handling of clay, and some disparate fragments joined. So it seems that the process of formal purification is not the only route; Eastman does retrack and remix, becomes less simple, more playful, jumbles the pieces again for fresh interest.

Ken Eastman's tendency is to an abstract extreme within ceramics whether he is making a pot or an installation. Though the earlier pieces were thought to resemble buildings, his interest was more in comparing volumes and raising questions about actual spaces. Music, the most abstract of all art forms, can cut out a sense of subject and be only about itself, which he appreciates. But music is suggestive too, and open to interpretation. Installation brings Eastman's ideas closer to music. In the spacious play between object and audience, his new work offers powerful forms.

Alison Britton is a ceramic artist and writer from London, UK. This article is adapted from the catalogue essay for Ken Eastman's exhibition at Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham, UK, April/May, 1998. Ken Eastman is represented by the Barrett-Marsden Gallery, 17-18 Great Sutton Street, London, EC1V 0DN, UK.