

# Actual and *Allusive*: The Vessels of Ken Eastman

by Glen Brown



"Don't Let Go," 26 in. (67 cm) in height, slab-built white stoneware, with colored slips and oxides, fired multiple times to 2192°F (1200°C).

Although they convey the immediate impression of geometric precision, the clean-lined profiles and smooth planes of British ceramist Ken Eastman's works do not belong to the still and eternal forms of a purely transcendent system of spatial reasoning. There is too much implication of energy. His forms suggest what the absolutely perfect cylinders, cubes and cones of geometry become when they descend into the real world and are subject to forces such as gravity and the processes of erosion, humidification and desiccation. At the same time, they are not quite the equivalent of abstract forms immersed in the conditions of concrete existence, since they do not display the actual symptoms of exposure but only hint at them through analogy. Slope suggests slump; curving implies caving. They insinuate the onset of collapse but reveal no rents in the fabric, no cracks along the surface. As a consequence, they seem to take the inevitable results of a real-world existence and carry them back onto an abstract plane, fixing them in permanent form.

That form is monumental, which, in the case of Eastman's works, means not only that it possesses an imposing character but also that it suggests commemoration and therefore acknowledges the factor of time. Monuments are naturally built to withstand time—to resist its detrimental effects and so preserve eternally an aspect of an event, person or idea—but this very fact causes them to embody, in negative fashion, a conception of time. For all their materiality, their ineluctable presence, Eastman's works reference time. Their chalky concrete grays and dusky blues and reds are reminiscent of once brightly tinted stucco now dulled by years of intense sunlight, patinated by the settling of atmospheric impurities, and worn in places by the passing of generations of hands. These are, of course, only allusions. Eastman's works seize time by abstracting its effects, rep-



**"Nova," 16 in. (40 cm) in height, slab-built white stoneware, with colored slips and oxides, fired multiple times to 2192°F (1200°C).**

resenting them rather than manifesting them and in the process making time a rhetorical object.

As the crumbling, fermenting and disintegrating works of Joseph Beuys, the participants of the Fluxus movement, and the artists of *Arte Povera* amply demonstrated decades ago, time can be an actual constituent of a work of visual art or even its primary medium. Classical art, on the other hand, had for centuries exhibited an aversion to time, practiced parsimony in representing moving figures, and even harbored suspicion toward color because of its associations with shifts in emotion from moment to moment. Between the real-time processes of the art of the 1960s and the near banishment of time in the idealized compositions of the classical age lies a full range of art that acknowledges and even emphasizes time without actually integrating it into aesthetic form. Eastman's works clearly fall within this range, and more specifically among those forms of art that reference time not through representation of bodies in motion but through tropes such as metaphor, metonymy and even irony. Time is made a

conceptual quality of the work, figuring into its content rather than simply imprinting itself upon form.

Perhaps the most obvious indication that time is a conceptual quality in Eastman's work is the fact that he is a vessel maker who produces objects more sculptural or even architectonic than potlike. His forms, in other words, are vessels but cannot rightly be called by the names jar, bowl or vase because they manifestly lie outside the realm of utility that such terms imply. In some cases, there are gaps in the walls of Eastman's vessels. In other cases the sheer size of his pieces renders them impractical for any kind of physical service. These formal traits—from a utilitarian perspective, liabilities—are deliberate clues that the objects are allusions to the idea of a vessel rather than themselves working forms. Eastman's vessels are actual but are constructed to dissuade entry into the time-based realm of daily use, and so they do not acquire the real marks of time: chips, stains, grime and dust. They are not intended to be perceived, perhaps not even imagined, in physical use; their movement is unequivocally

recognized as implicit rather than real. Although there can be no confusion about the conceptual status of his sculptural vessels, Eastman has gone so far as to create, in a series of works titled “Vessel with Content,” Constructivistlike models of the vessel: skeletal forms that convey the relationships of surface, mass and volume in a working pot but cannot be described as vessels in any but an abstract sense.

The abstraction of a vessel is conducive to metaphor because it involves concepts of containment that are held in common with abstractions of other forms in the world, in particular those of the human body and architectural structures. While some examples of Eastman’s works vaguely evoke the conceptual relationship between containment and the body—most notably the paired forms and groupings of vessels that suggest dialog or other modes of communication—the concept of containment primarily emerges in analogies between the vessel and architecture. Especially in his more recent forms, Eastman reveals an admiration for the designs of postmodern architect Frank Gehry, who is known for his treatment of buildings as curvaceous, collagelike functional sculptures. Because



**“On Road 9,” 15 in. (37 cm) in height, slab-built white stoneware, with colored slips and oxides, fired multiple times to 2192°F (1200°C), by Ken Eastman, Herefordshire, England.**

in abstraction—outside the realm of actual time—assemblage is generally impossible to distinguish from disassembly, Gehry’s work can be perceived as alternately additive and deconstructive. Eastman’s vessels often betray a similar condition of ambiguity.

His surfaces, painted in a combination of slips and oxides, and subjected to multiple firings, are, for example, built up in a process that ironically ends by suggesting reduction, or, as he puts it, “a stripping away to reveal what was meant.” The comment is illuminating because there is ample reason to describe Eastman as a colorist, and color has, at least in the Western tradition, typically been associated not with the essence of things but rather with mere appearances. Color has been characterized as an alluring surface trait, a showy mask, a provocative foreground rather than a sober background. The subtle hues of Eastman’s works are, however, distinctly recessive rather

than assertive: more like light retreating from a dark horizon than a prismatic dazzle mounting at mid-day. It is not, in other words, the obtrusiveness of his palette that makes him a colorist but rather the constitutive role performed by color in the development of his forms. Color is not conceived as an embellishment to pre-existing, and therefore primary, structures but rather as a facilitator of structures that skip the stage of primacy, that are, from the moment that they come into being, compounds of color, surface and shape.

In ignorance of the specifics of Eastman’s painting process one might be tempted to describe his vessels as composites of multiple canvases bending in space. The analogy would be misleading, however, since it does not adequately account for a key dynamic in the works, a relationship separate from that of color and surface. While Eastman’s two-tone gray vessels may be evocative of Mark Rothko’s late, pathos-laden compositions, and the soft transformations of hue in his red or blue vessels might seem to echo ethereal passages in Jules Olitski’s canvases, they are responding not to problems of color in a two-dimensional field but rather to a relationship between color, the illusionistic space of surface and actual volume. In a painting on canvas the third dimension is only an appearance, a consequence of negating the real flatness of the painting and the surface on which it hangs: an effect, in other words, of mentally opening a window in the wall. In Eastman’s works, however, not only does color inhabit two-dimensional space, gliding along surfaces with the bending of planes, but it also passes through and, in a sense, fills three-dimensional space from interior to exterior. It is volumetric, contained, like real space itself, by the vessel walls rather than merely carried on them: it becomes a fundamental content of the work rather than a superficial aspect of it.

The fact that such complex issues of content and concept should be explored in Eastman’s work in reductivist terms is the mark of an analytical rigor that has been relatively rare in the recent history of ceramics: certainly much rarer than one would expect given the precedent set by theories of painting, and even sculpture, at the middle of the last century. The place of his work at the forefront of contemporary British ceramics, and indeed contemporary ceramics in general, may be taken as a sign that a certain will does exist, after all, within the ceramics community to assert the conceptual value of its traditional forms rather than just to take them for granted or, worse still, reject them as obsolete. By adopting a conceptual practice, yet resisting what is today an increasing pressure on conceptualists in the field to abandon the vessel for established art-world formats such as the installation, Eastman has not only produced visually potent forms but has contributed significantly to the conceptual fiber of contemporary ceramics as a whole.

*Works by Ken Eastman will be shown at Barrett-Marsden Gallery ([www.bmgallery.co.uk](http://www.bmgallery.co.uk)) in London, February 23–March 24, and at Galerie Marianne Heller ([www.galerie-heller.de](http://www.galerie-heller.de)) in Heidelberg, Germany, April 22–June 3, 2007.*

*For more information on Ken Eastman, see [www.keneastman.co.uk](http://www.keneastman.co.uk).*