

Lares and Penates: Recent Work by Ken Eastman

Minimal even austere, Ken Eastman's ceramics echo themes seen in architecture and in domestic vessels. For poetry critic Jane McCabe they have a more profound meaning.

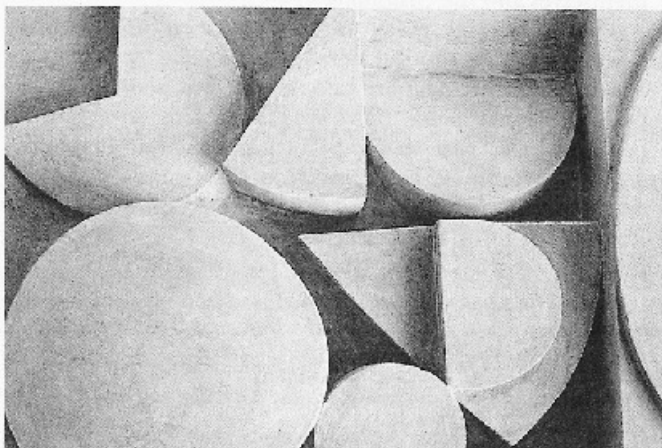
The stone's alive with what's invisible – Seamus Heaney

I have just been to Ken Eastman's studio near Leominster and came away startled and delighted. I usually write about contemporary poetry, and looking at Eastman's work in progress – a row of pots ranged on one long shelf in brilliant December light, I could see and imagine the relation between groups of words skillfully and miraculously brought together to make both meaning and music, and this equally skillful and inspired grouping of solid objects that collectively create the 'life of the invisible.'

Eastman's newest pots are all approximately the same size – eight-inch interrupted cylinders – and have an intense interrelationship. But each is distinct. One is angular, turning on itself, another is entirely round. One is ribbed, another pocked; some are completely smooth. Some are empty, others seem full. One has a kind of spout, another a sort of tubular tower built into its wall. The range is extraordinary. Together they make a statement larger than themselves. A statement clear, severe and elegant. No shouting here, no flamboyance. But there is wit and rhythm and a certain grounding that suggests significance.

Significance? Eastman might protest about the word. He once remarked, "There is no content here, they are not about anything. I love that." In another mode, Keats called his Grecian urn, "a foster child of silence". Eastman's pots are, in their way, quite silent. And they are somehow fosterlings. He talks about them with a curious mixture of detachment and enthusiasm. It is as if he had just discovered them with great surprise, as if someone had suddenly offered them to him as gifts.

Ken Eastman – 'Cheeseboard', detail, 1994, 42.5x32x14cm



These pots are partly defined by the kind of space in which they rest. They do not sit on plinths; pigeons do not sit on them. Their ancestors are cupped hands, a calabash, a shell, a skull, a gourd. Even if they end up in a museum, they will still belong in the home. Vessels, containers, beakers, they are meant metaphorically for food and drink, the lip and the spoon. Looking at them, we can immediately judge their capacity, how full they are, how empty.

Eastman's pots are *lares* and *penates*, household gods meant to protect us. As both shelter and fortress, they keep things in and keep things out. Although monumental in shape, they are never monumental in size. Two of Eastman's most recent ceramic pieces make this particularly clear. The first was commissioned by the De Witte Voet Gallery in Amsterdam, celebrating its 20th anniversary. Their brief was simple; the piece was to be monumental but not more than a 20 centimetre cube. Eastman has produced a fortified city, an unearthly blue, solid and enclosed space. But it suggests groupings of towers and turrets. And just as importantly, it hints at a complex interior space – tunnels and labyrinths. You can easily imagine a spiral staircase, even an underground parking lot. It seems to have many floors and functions, a public building built for public show and use. Within the prescribed limits this piece emerges much larger than its own life.

Equally, but perhaps less intentionally monumental, is Eastman's impressive 'Cheeseboard'. Slightly larger than the Amsterdam piece – approximately 45 centimetres square – it resembles it closely. The wedges and rounds certainly evoke Gouda and Edam, but they also create their own internal structural dialogue. The chocks rise to different levels; they are almost like landing platforms. Some are whole, others have been cut. The 'board' seems to contain them, but they also control its structure.

Both these pieces are about form, about the literal creation of space. But they are also very much about cities and cheese. And like much of Eastman's work, they will ultimately rest in a house. In an important sense, Eastman's pots are kinds of houses. The philosopher, Gaston Bachelard, writes, "The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace".¹ So, if a pot is a sort of house, who lives there? One answer is no one – just space. Another answer is possibility. And if, in Eastman's case, the answer is possibility, it is intentionally unrevealed; "the flower is always in the almond".² But Eastman's pots – open or enclosed – do suggest habitation; there is *something* there. They are secure houses, heavily grounded, deeply centred. Like houses, they are both autonomous and intimate – "something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them our original value as images".³ They are at once challenging and reassuring. The novelist Henri Bosco says, "When the shelter is snug, the storm is good".⁴ While Eastman's pots could hardly be called snug, they certainly afford an escape from chaos. And they do create interesting weather around them. Grouped together as they are on the



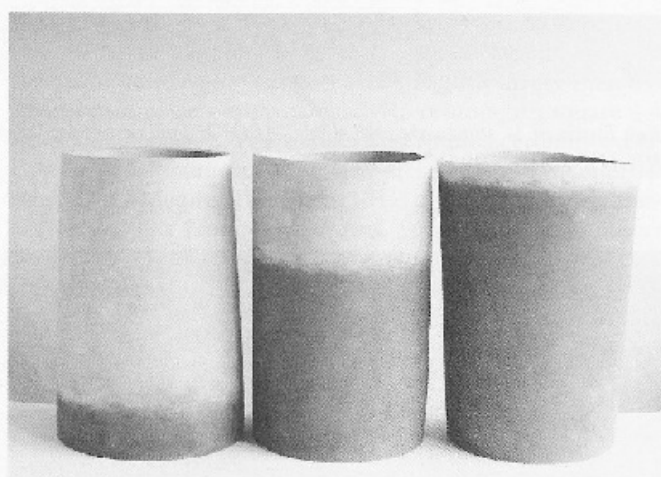
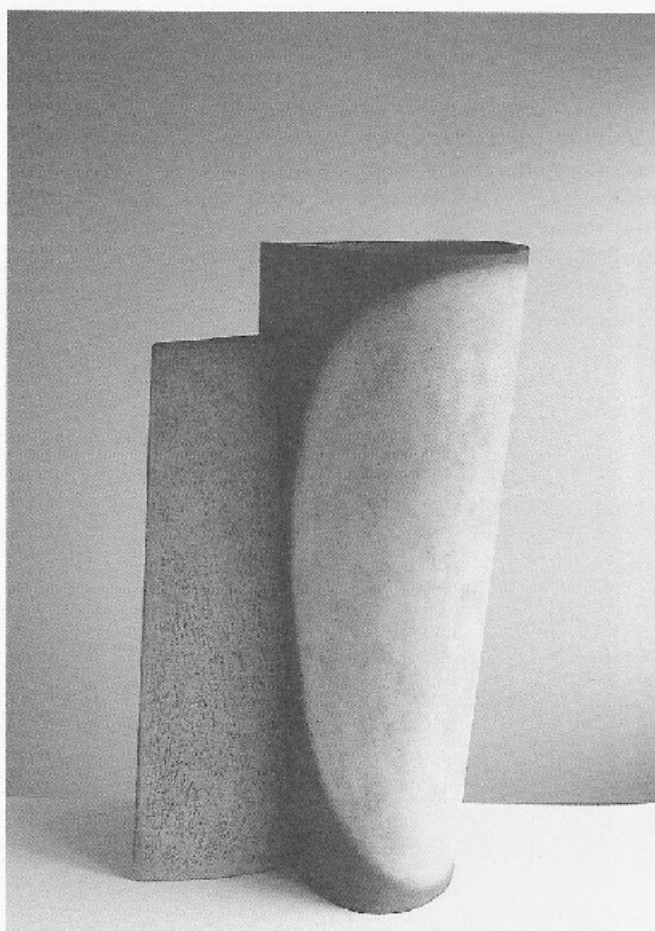
Ken Eastman – stoneware with slips ABOVE Two vessels for 'Shelf Life', approx. h.20cm, 1995 BELOW LEFT 'Untitled'. 1993, 33x45x29cm
RIGHT 'Place', 1995, 20x20x20cm





Ken Eastman's house and studio, 1993

Ken Eastman - 'Untitled', 1993, 34 x 27 x 57.5cm



Ken Eastman - 'Forms and Content', 1993, each vessel about 33cm high

shelf in the studio, all stand fiercely and separately away from each other and at the same time form a dynamic community. These pots *make* an inhabited space; "tout calice est demeure" (every chalice is a dwelling place)⁶. Even an emptiness becomes a presence; it is a definition of what is not there.

Of course this kind of abstract writing is full of pitfalls. When I write about contemporary poetry, I feel on somewhat safer ground. There is usually a tangible correlative and the language of literary analysis has much in common with the language of literature. When the American poet Emily Dickinson writes, "My Life stood - a



Ken Eastman - 'Swell Pot', 1993, 40x46x14cm

Loaded Gun", we can immediately visualise the metaphorical weapon; we know that it is made of metal and contains bullets; we know how it is held and that it can kill. So her way of writing about her life's unlocked potential makes literal, visual sense. We can imagine the release of the explosion both literally and psychologically. In one of his best known poems, Robert Frost writes about swinging on birch trees; in another poem, Wallace Stevens writes about ways of looking at a blackbird. We have seen birches and blackbirds. And although none of these poems is only or even mainly about guns or trees or birds, they do offer a literal frame of reference; the literal image and the abstract one come together.

Pots are a different matter altogether. They are absolutely tangible. You can touch them, move them about, even break them. And they are absolutely silent; they can be neither read, played, said nor sung. Pots are both fundamental and magical. They are literally made from earth, air, fire and water - the elemental gods. From them the living are fed and given drink; the dead are buried with them, even in them. They symbolise renewal and nourishment in life and in after-life. A pot is a beaker. And a beaker is also its own contents - mysterious potions, ointments, balms, cures and poisons. This miraculous combination of imagination and clay that is pottery brings the invisible to life. Ken Eastman's *lares* and *penates* will protect us. And they also offer the energy of that invisible life.

Technical information

The work is slab built using Y material (in past T material and C material). It is painted with layers of coloured slips, both on to greenware and bisque and fired several times to 1180°C.

Slip

China clay	50
Ball clay	40
Soda feldspar	5
Borax frit	15

This used on the unfired and biscuit pieces.

No glaze is ever used.

Firings are all oxidation in a kiln 2' x 2' x 2' chamber size.

References

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p.6.
2. Henri Bosco, *L'Antiquaire*, quoted in Bachelard, p.24.
3. Bachelard, *op. cit.*, p.6.
4. Henri Bosco, quoted in Bachelard, p.39.
5. Jean Bourdillotte, *Les Etoiles dans la Main*, Sequers, p.48. (quoted in Bachelard, p.55.)

Ken Eastman's new work is on show at Contemporary Applied Art, 43 Earham Street, London WC2 May 19-June 21.