

Ken Eastman left the Royal College of Art in 1987, having first trained at Edinburgh. There Eastman had mainly worked in raku, developing an eye for decorum in pottery which owed a good deal to those Oriental standards interpreted for us by Bernard Leach; vessels spring up from a base, the handle is applied just so, the lip is shaped just so. When he arrived in London he was understandably anxious to experiment. As a potter working at a distance from the design-for-manufacture end of his department, Eastman was a little at odds with the current ethos of the college. Hard times in education have made for an emphasis on a resolved product and resolution was not really a priority for Eastman at that point. For instance he had a longish tussle with sculpture – some straight sculpture, some sculpture using clay. In his final year the problematic nature of this enterprise – making sculpture in the ceramics and glass department – led him to confine himself to one ceramic activity, which was painting on a single unvarying platter shape. This turned out to be a valuable discipline: he began working on the sequence with gestural vigour, very much in the spirit of

TOWERS OF STRENGTH

Ken Eastman's slab-built vessel forms are rich in architectural references and painterly decoration. Tanya Harrod explores the curves and hollows that define his work

PORTRAIT BY PHILIP SAYER

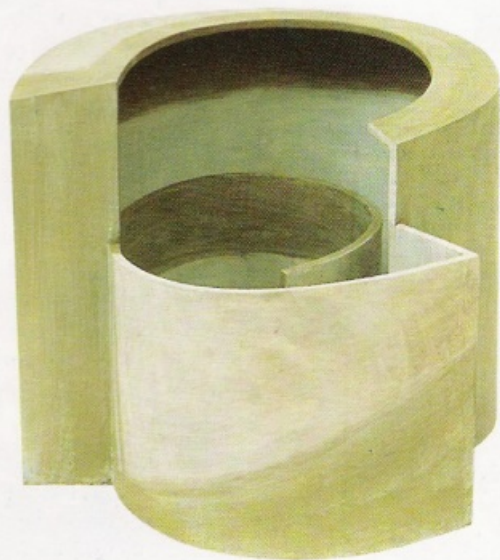
Gillian Ayres, whose work he greatly admired at the time. He ended up using a repertoire of considered abstract shapes which worked well in the self-imposed format.

Eastman's latest work suggests that this rigorous programme conducted in his final year has paid off. He now slab-builds up from a base of irregular form – the kinds of shapes he explored two-dimensionally when he worked on the rectangular platters. These are developed three-dimensionally so as to create a couple of

juxtaposed forms. A curved hollow form will lock against a solid lozenge for instance. But turn the pot over and the unity of the thing is revealed in the smooth continuous base. Incidentally, although Eastman is by any standard an individualistic potter, his conventional craftsmanship is meticulous. For example, the base will always be beautifully finished and may even carry some unexpected design. What he seems to want to exclude is a sense of accident, of confused intention.

This question of firm intention is important to Eastman. He has a particular regard for the sculpture of Tony Cragg whose fastidious eye and ability to make 'something completely new and at once completely everyday' suggests a special standard for the potter. For example a vessel is unquestionably an everyday object but in his piece *On the Savannab* Cragg manages to create a group of vessels that look undeniably strange and also entirely resolved and inevitable. Eastman wants to work with that achievement in mind – avoiding the quirky and novel and trying to keep matters direct.

Eastman's student essays in ceramic sculpture taught him something about the possibilities of the vessel: it was a question of scale.



Untitled, 1990, 41 x 48 x 36cm

All Ken Eastman's pots are slab-built with grogged white stoneware, and painted with several layers of oxides and coloured slips



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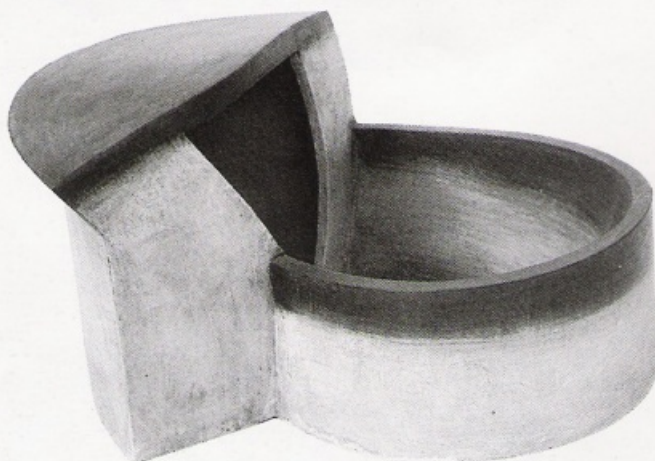
However big his sculptural pieces were, because they were limited by the ceramic medium, they ended up looking pretty small. And of course a pot, a vessel, immediately conjures up a domestic scale. It is an area mostly abandoned by sculpture, with a few honourable exceptions. Thus the pot reigns supreme as a form of abstract sculpture that can exist outside the gallery. This is the arena Eastman now explores.

Through making vessels Eastman has developed an apposite abstract language. Shapes interlock. Voids and solids jostle. Double walls give a monumental feel. Then there is the matter of decoration. Much of the resonance of Eastman's work arises from the way he paints the pot. His forms already have a strong architectural air, though he would regard any piece that was too overtly about architecture as a failure. This suggestion of architectural activity – of earthworks, of sea walls, of the piazza and the Colosseum – is reinforced by the pale matt mural kind of surface Eastman creates. He uses different kinds of marks, made by applying slips and oxides, with two main but rather different intentions. These might be simply described as 'painting the pot' and 'painting on the pot'. This distinction, which Eastman makes himself, opens up all sorts of profound problems faced by both painters and by potters for centuries. It is, crudely, the difference between consolidating

the picture plane, the support, and knocking an illusory hole in it. Thus Eastman's rather crude use of zig-zags and patterns of a couple of years ago have been abandoned. He continues to employ a solid bit of colour that will suggest shadow, literally reflecting the way light falls on an inner wall. Its intention seems poetic. And now there is also a whole group of powerful shapes, sometimes enclosed by a rough, darkish line, sometimes floating freely. These shapes suggest an interest in non-gestural abstraction, in the considered shapes William Scott and Roger Hilton (both artists Eastman admires) could put down on canvas. And then there are solid areas of powdery colour used dramatically – often to code a solid shape that will curve into or cut across a single sweep of oppositional enclosing wall.

All this sounds, or I have made it sound, complicated. But Ken Eastman's best pots have a classical stripped-down purity about them. He has worked out a fairly rich vocabulary but with each pot he only tries to say so much. That is something we are used to in certain contexts – in a big abstract painting for instance, or in a Sung jar. It is the essentially harmonious art of saying more with less. □

Ken Eastman, the artist's first one-man show, is at Contemporary Applied Arts, 43 Earham Street, London WC2, 5 October to 3 November. For Stockists, see page 64.



Untitled, 1990, 44 x 38 x 28cm