

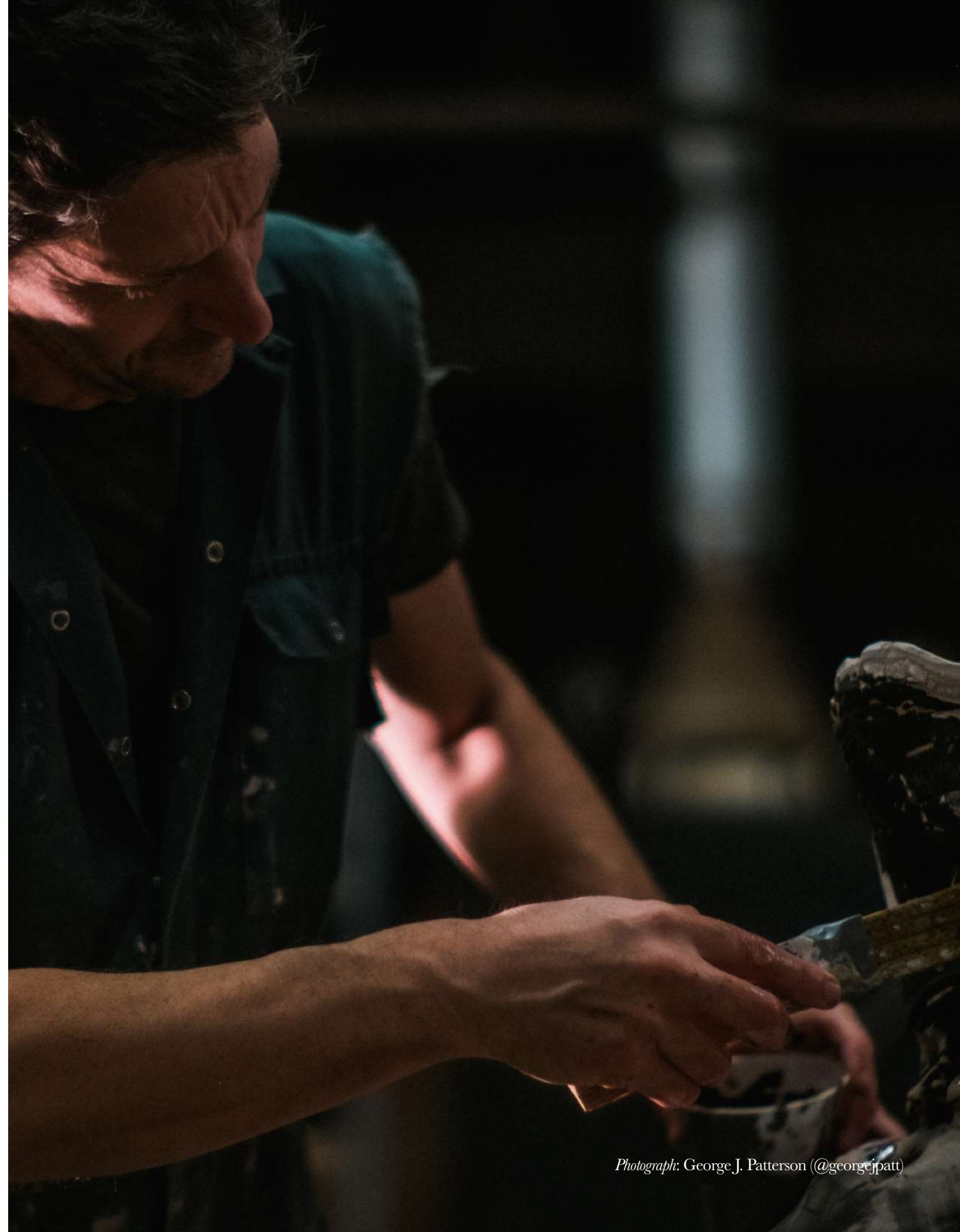
Gareth Mason:
A Decade in Cahoots

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Photograph: George J. Patterson (@georgejpatt)



APPETITE / A PRIMAL DELECTATION

Gareth Mason

Jason Jacques is a man of fulsome—and broad—appetite. Perhaps that is what he saw in me, or rather, in a little pot of mine, which he happened upon in the Museum Bellerive, Zurich in 2010. Like its Chinese exemplars, this vase was delicately poised, symmetrical and copper red glazed. Unlike them, its flawless crimson gloss was caked with an unfitting porcellaneous crust, cracked and fissured like some unlikely ice floe over lava. I am a fan of serendipity, be that of the fiery kind, as occurs in the kiln, or the human kind, as embodied in this encounter. One has to earn the blessing of both, in my experience.

Appetite is an intimate business, concerning our personal needs and what turns us on, and ultimately our sense of self. What was it about that pot that arrested Jason and prompted him to email me? The triggers of aesthetic arousal are many and varied. My work's dissonance (which I have also described as 'warped baroque') was evidently the right wavelength to whet Jason's appetite; a corollary to his established trade in his beloved European fin de siècle wares, but with a distinct twist. I consequently became his 'first living artist'.

This elusive 'twist' goes to the heart of my attraction to clay. No one medium holds a monopoly on art's penetrative punch. What imbues an object with the ability to stop a person in their tracks? It needn't be a 'lightning bolt' moment—it could just as easily be a slow-burn—but something changes when our sensibilities are interrupted this way. I confess, gunning for this aesthetic territory is like sculpting smoke, so when someone is thus unsettled by my work I take the affirmation gladly.

You see, I like a 'Trojan Horse' that tickles settled notions. Art's gatekeepers have a long scoffed at emergent forms, only to ultimately concede that art's lifeblood needs their revitalising nutrient. Hence my belief that the pot can rival any agent of 'otherness' from the pantheon of cultural endeavour. I suspect Jason would agree. He and I share a sincere relish of informed mischief and drama. But our real currency is a primal delectation: humanity's enduring fascination with 'visionary' things. Here is the stuff of aesthetic longevity, where the fiercest, most uncompromising beauty can be sought, and J and I are nothing if not seekers.

And so our paths have intertwined. We have used this decade well. Having crowned his achievements in antique ceramics with trail-blazing advocacy of contemporary work, Jason is set to continue surprising, disrupting and delighting the art world's future appetites. For my part, our short decade in cahoots (and my thirty-five-year immersion) has far from sated my appetite for the pot. 'Mud and Fire harbour such bewitchment—so deep is their reach, so tight is their bond—that their under-currents and potentialities are set to agitate my inner workings for the rest of my days.

Time passes, enriching my 'not-knowing'. Time strengthens my resolve for what's to come. Mine is the kind of sensibility that only brute knowledge—clay under the fingernails—can reveal. After all, I am a sensualist at large, with work to do.

A FRAME FOR A VOID

Grace Nkem

When one is asked to visualize a prototypical clay vessel— for instance a celadon gourd, a blackware olla, an attic krater, or a raku chawan— seldom does the mind's eye conjure an image of a vessel caught in the midst of collapse.

If the aforementioned forms are each in their own way angelic and beatific then Gareth Mason's pots present us with a biblical vision: flaming forms poked full of eyes that look through you as they turn in on themselves, shining golden trumpets included (see page 107). All of the apocrypha of pottery is included— shifts, sags, cracks, collapses, asymmetries, and the explosive inner-workings of kilns. In fact, it sits front and center in Mason's work, which manages to appear monumental even at the smallest scale.

Literary and theological metaphor aside, the real conceptual muscle behind Mason's oeuvre lies in his vessels' refusal to act simply as vessels. They all have their own affect— some are capable of standing on their sides, others lean over glamorously, and many proudly display puncture wounds. Plus, there's always a wonderful languor in the lips: it's no wonder the vase is often cited as a metaphor for the human form.

This sometimes partial and often total renunciation of function is a straight-forward means of reorienting a viewer's understanding of what a pot can be. But it's Mason's methodology and complete mastery of the medium that's ingenious. He is reframing the form known as vase into a space for conceptual and formal exploration. For the same reason a person cannot wear a couture gown into a bathroom stall, many of the vessels in this catalogue don't hold water.

The irony, of course, is that porcelain's brittle strength and fickle functionality is precisely why it's prized across cultures. It is also why, unlike a painter for instance, an artist working with clay fights an uphill battle against the connotation of the medium whilst popular cultural imaginary resists change. Sisyphus and the Pot, if you will.

But if Cézanne and later The Cubists managed to break painting down to its essence, the flatness of an ever-present rectilinear support, and subsequently set the scene for the explosive birth of the historical avant-garde, then Gareth Mason is unequivocally the ceramist with the vision to break a pot down to its most basic attribute: a frame for a void.

After all, there's a reason the interiors of his vessels matter as much as the exteriors. But that's just formalism.

There is a dimension to art that escapes denotation, which is perhaps why we can't stop writing about it, let alone making it— we're working to obliquely divine those ideas for which we have no words. The pots in this retrospective have an astounding richness in texture, form, and visual density. They are expressive, transcendent, and give the eye endless room to roam— it's artwork that generously rewards sustained attention.



1. platinum ^{out flow} side piece	27 x 27 x 25
2. Red accretions	23.5 x 34 x 24
3. Cannon - side blasts	37 x 30 x 25
4. Turned 1 wing - 'Guinnell'	28 x 20 x 18
5. Barrell (w/ Wonders)	29 x 25 x 18
6. 'Cockrell' flask	26.5 x 22 x 21
7. Satin red eye	23.5 x 17 x 17
8. Sub scoria (red fall)	43.5 x 23 x 22
9. Red Clutch	39.5 x 30 x 25
10. Symbiosis? satin/crust	32.5 x 28 x 28
11. Hodgkin	34 x 22 x 22
12. Receiver (tall)	57.5 x 27 x 28
13. 'Passage' kite - 2 wing	30 x 32 x 20
14. Clasp orbit	31 x 25 x 19
15. Pressure Ridge	34 x 28 x 26
16. late 'Keyhole'	38 x 22 x 22
17. Pale ^{Body} with dark blade	36.5 x 33 x 19.5
18. Laden load	32 x 29 x 27
19. Insulator flask	33 x 28 x 14
20. off pouring	33.5 x 18 x 18
21. Green globular double wing ACC'ELLERATING PARTICLE	22.5 x 29 x 14
22. Cherry Byte	14.5 x 19 x 19

24. 'Inwardly Turning'	21.5 x 12 x 12
25. 'Glistening'	22 x 21 x 21
26. Globular, feldspathic	21.5 x 20 x 20
27. 'Undone'	43 x 34.5 x 13
28. Red/Mang wing ^{"CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO"}	39 x 34 x 14
29. Yolk resist	31 x 21 x 18
30. Hourglass	32 x 21 x 20
31. Red Gash / shadow chased	54 x 27 x 17.5
32. 'Trophy'	48 x 37 x 28
33. Goldlocks	43.5 x 23 x 18
34. Crustacean ^{celadon/crust}	28 x 20 x 22
35. Tarso	54 x 40 x 40
36. Clusterf**ck	40.5 x 24 x 31
37. Frost flux	41.5 x 17 x 13
38. Slate envelope	33 x 16 x 16
39. Narrow Neck dark 'Past Present'	33.5 x 23 x 22
40. Accretion red organ	38.5 x 30 x 25
41. 'Lissom Form' ^{open website enclosed}	35.5 x 22 x 5 x 14
42. Dark Hourglass	34 x 22 x 22
43. Stickerbook ^{'Allergen'} Hodgkin	31 x 29 x 32
44. Green meteor crust broken ^{fab} brand cross	40 x 28 x 28
45. Broken Strawberry	33.5 x 24 x 24

'Seeing is Having', but this is not about possession. There is truth to the idea that the artist becomes what she sees, what he deeply regards. And of course what that really means is we become what we feel; what we allow in, what we permit to penetrate our fleshy bluster and resonate internally, take root there. For good and ill... In a very real way, 'we are what we eat'. And looking is loving.

-Gareth Mason



I covered new ground and achieved things that I did not anticipate. I stared down the familiar demons of doubt when they reared their ugly heads, nothing new there. But I made objects nonetheless that surprised and gratified me...

-Gareth Mason







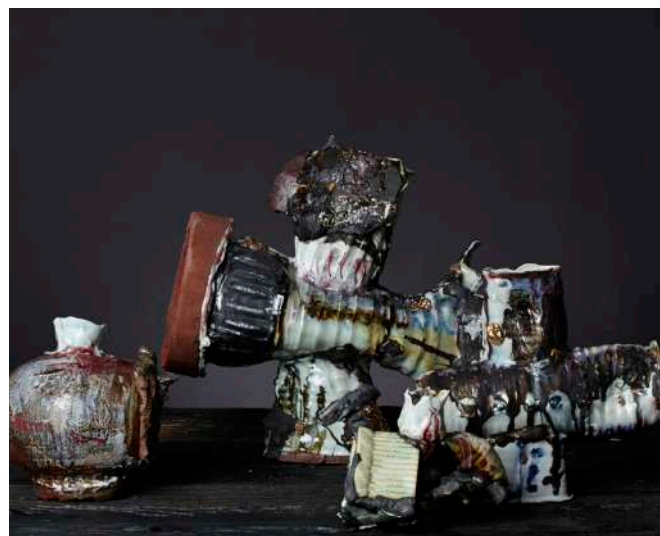


Photograph: George J. Patterson (@georgejpatt)

Peter Voulkos, unleashing his sex mojo on writer Rose Slivka, sent her into “Ecstasy of Saint Teresa” spasms of lyrical ecstasy, as she exclaimed:

“To watch Peter Voulkos bear down on a mound of clay and draw up the walls of the spinning cylinder is to watch power, great strength, total balance, absolute control, the rhythms of the man and his clay at one with each other, pitched precisely to the clay in his hands.”ⁱ

To watch Gareth Mason bear down on a mound of clay and draw up the walls of the spinning cylinder is just the beginning. In place of Voulkos’ leonine energy, slashing and gesturing with manic expressionist hustle, Mason is an elastic band,



pitched in a dialogue with his clay that is by turns intimate, destructive, and above all, questioning. If Voulkos was a slashing lecher with his clay Gareth Mason is the earnest (but freaky) Vassar college coed getting affirmative consent with every exploratory movement of his body. Both get the job done, but only one is both Di-



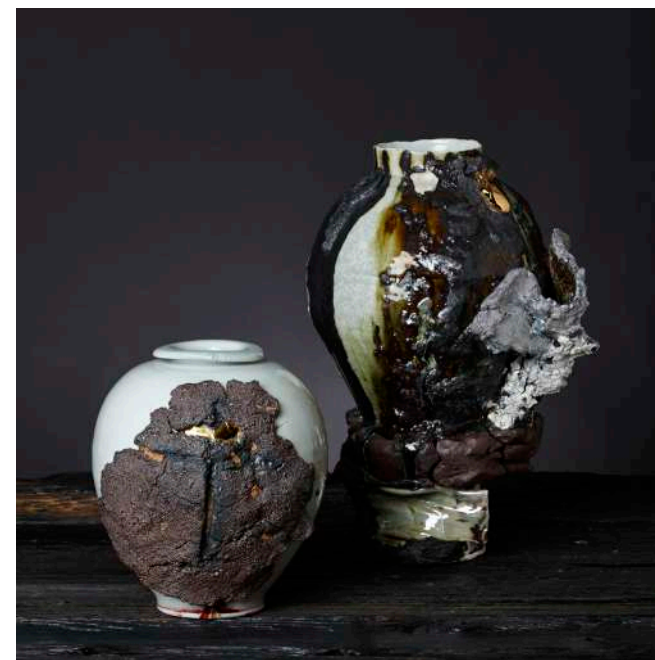
onysian and polymorphously perverse.

To watch Gareth Mason bear down on a mound of clay is to think about the body. A finished Gareth Mason piece is an exhaustive vellum codex of the human body and its relationship to space, gravity, and the bodies of others. Pure porcelain commingles with base stoneware. Clay/flesh defies and succumbs to gravity as it is coaxed/pushed/pulled/stretched/squished/twisted/pressed into shape. Forms swell/shrivel/burst, and blood, bile, and phlegm circulate, pool, and drip. Sang de boeuf hangs in stalactites.

To watch Gareth Mason bear down on a mound of clay is to think of the passions that flowed through the vibrating synapses of his forbears. From the fevered creation myths and conjured golems to Bernard Palissy’s furniture, ablaze to fuel his all-consuming kiln. Porcelain standing for something; the bloodlust of collectors for their porcelain rooms and the alchemists toiling under pain of death to conjure enchantment in their crucibles.

To watch Gareth Mason bear down on a mound of clay is to hear the fevered improvisations of a player locked alternately in combat and colloquy with their instrument. Even though his taste in music is suspect (prone to biting his lower lip and bobbing his head to wizard-caped prog bands and hairy music laid down in cocaine-dusted shag carpeted studios), he is the very embodiment of hot jazz—call up Ornette Coleman, colossus of skronk; every exhalation draped in dissonance, festooned with flaws and conflict, all Leon Thomas pygmy yodels and Pharoah blowing biflected incantations to the earth.

Clay, like Jazz, has always been a hot medium. People patient enough, dumb enough, or with no other option have long fought against the kinetic limitations, gravity accidents, and misfortunes of the fire that come with the territory. Not Mason, possessor of a wicked bebop vocabulary of primal mud gestures handed down to his lizard brain by ec-



static cave shamans shaping inert clay into chimeras: his every fingerpress is countered by clay’s cussedness, is a pas de deux of the grit of the maker and the grit of immemorial material. Historical and hysterical, hand to earth. These are no streamlined vessels, towering with tailfins and aloof with chrome. Gareth Mason



percolates and shapes outside the confines of comfort, more Shiva than Vishnu.

Old orders crumble, new arise, the maestro improvising across the entire emotional megacosm—from awkward first fumblings through sweat-slicked consumption. Carnal flux.

*Garth Johnson
Paul Phillips and Sharon Sullivan Curator of
Ceramics
Everson Museum of Art
Syracuse, New York*

ⁱ “The Demonstration.” Peter Voulkos: a Dialogue with Clay, by Rose Slivka, Little, Brown and Co., 1978.





Copper Red - celadon glazed 1430cm
interior Quianlong 1725-35



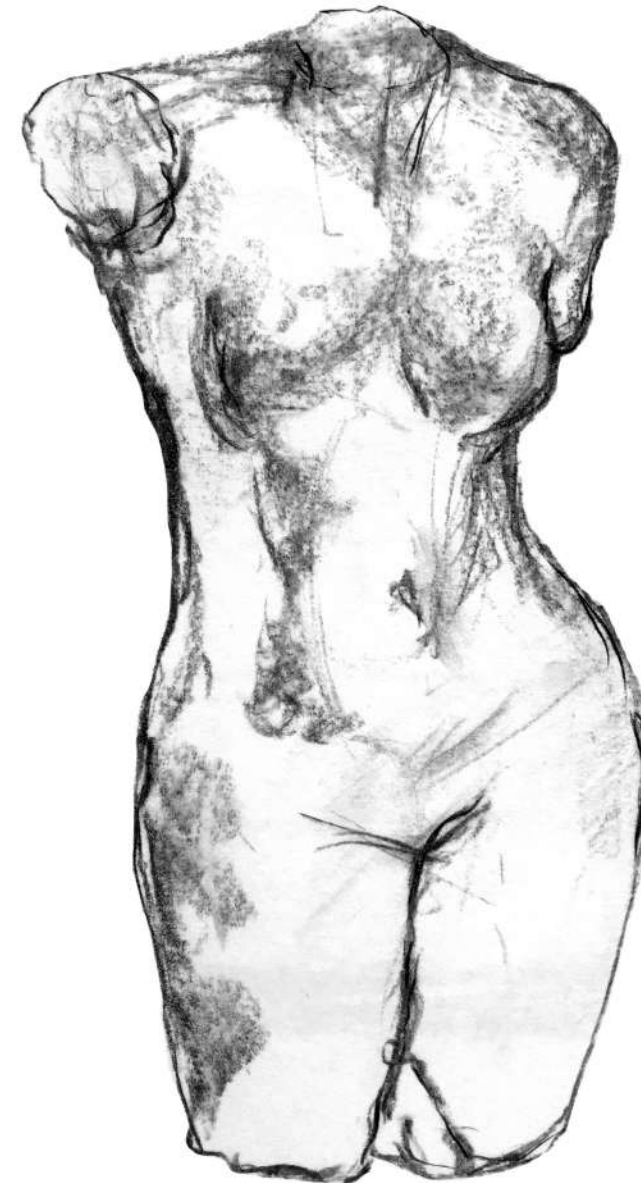
Mason possesses impeccable skills—which he purposefully commandeers and redirects in novel ways in order to reflect his own increasingly restless spirit. In Mason's hands, ethereal white porcelain is commingled with common stoneware clay and manipulated into forms that simultaneously evoke both body and earth. Forms swell and glazes ooze and bubble and drip. Throughout history, clay has often played a starring role in creation myths... Mason has embraced clay's sensuality whilst never losing sight of its universality.

-Garth Johnson



I love pottery's anthropomorphic resonance, revealed in terms such as belly, foot, neck, shoulder, lip: pots have always been close to the body.

-Gareth Mason



300 BC. Aphrodite - Roman copy.

In contrast to your able use of your highly informed hands as your precise tools and instruments of manoeuvre and making...I seem to have an awful lot of fingers on each hand and I can't seem to get them to cooperate and coordinate in any meaningful strategies to accomplish tasks that you apparently accomplish with a highly endowed body wisdom...The one place I do best is in the garden. I like dirt, digging in it, planting things in it...I just like dirt a lot. That makes a difference, doesn't it?

-Richard Jacobs

Yes, of course you and I have a love of dirt in common. I call mine Mud, Clay, which is a different but equally magical material. So it follows that much of my talk is 'dirty'... Dirty talk is fearless talk, licentious, mischievous; talk eschewed by those concerned with politesse...

...The sensory image is brought about by the intelligence of the hand, in other words it is 'read' bodily. Thence it is immediately translated to the intellect, where, if I (we) don't watch out, the ever-distracted conscious mind chases it away...

-Gareth Mason

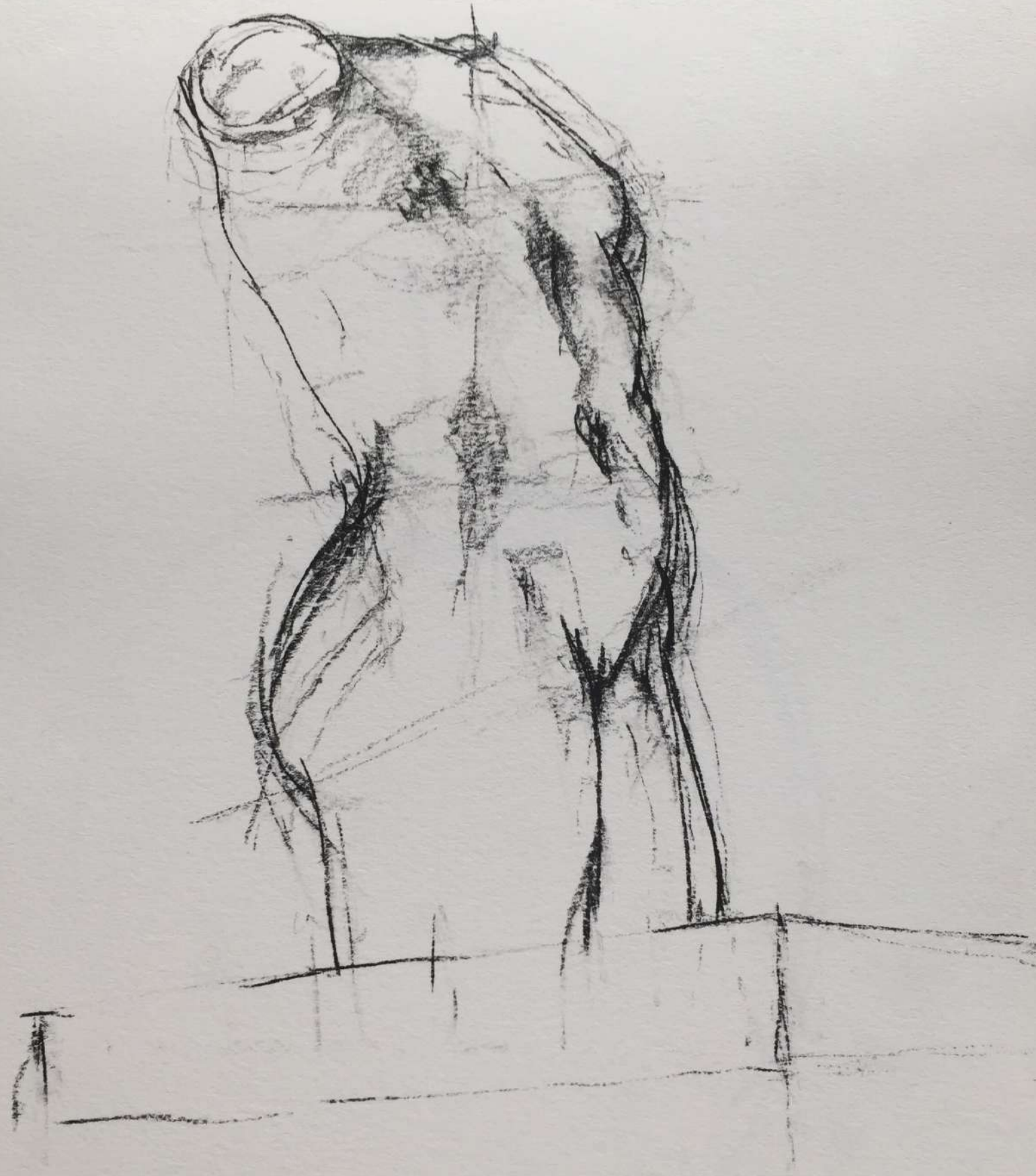
From 'Making Sense', an unpublished epistolary exchange between Richard Jacobs and Gareth Mason, 2019



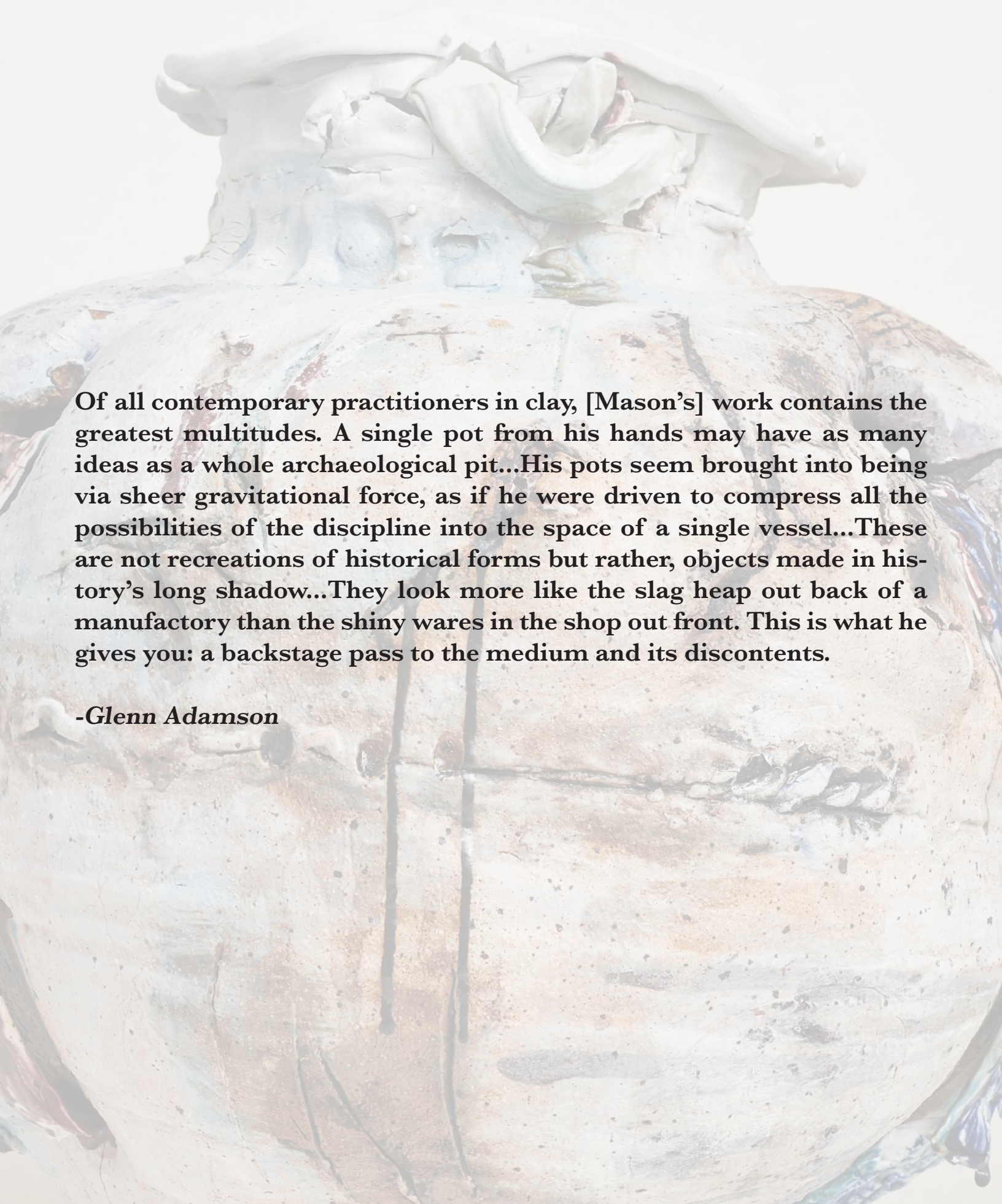












Of all contemporary practitioners in clay, [Mason's] work contains the greatest multitudes. A single pot from his hands may have as many ideas as a whole archaeological pit...His pots seem brought into being via sheer gravitational force, as if he were driven to compress all the possibilities of the discipline into the space of a single vessel...These are not recreations of historical forms but rather, objects made in history's long shadow...They look more like the slag heap out back of a manufactory than the shiny wares in the shop out front. This is what he gives you: a backstage pass to the medium and its discontents.

-Glenn Adamson









Etruscan Villanovan Funerary vase w. cup/lid 900-800BC



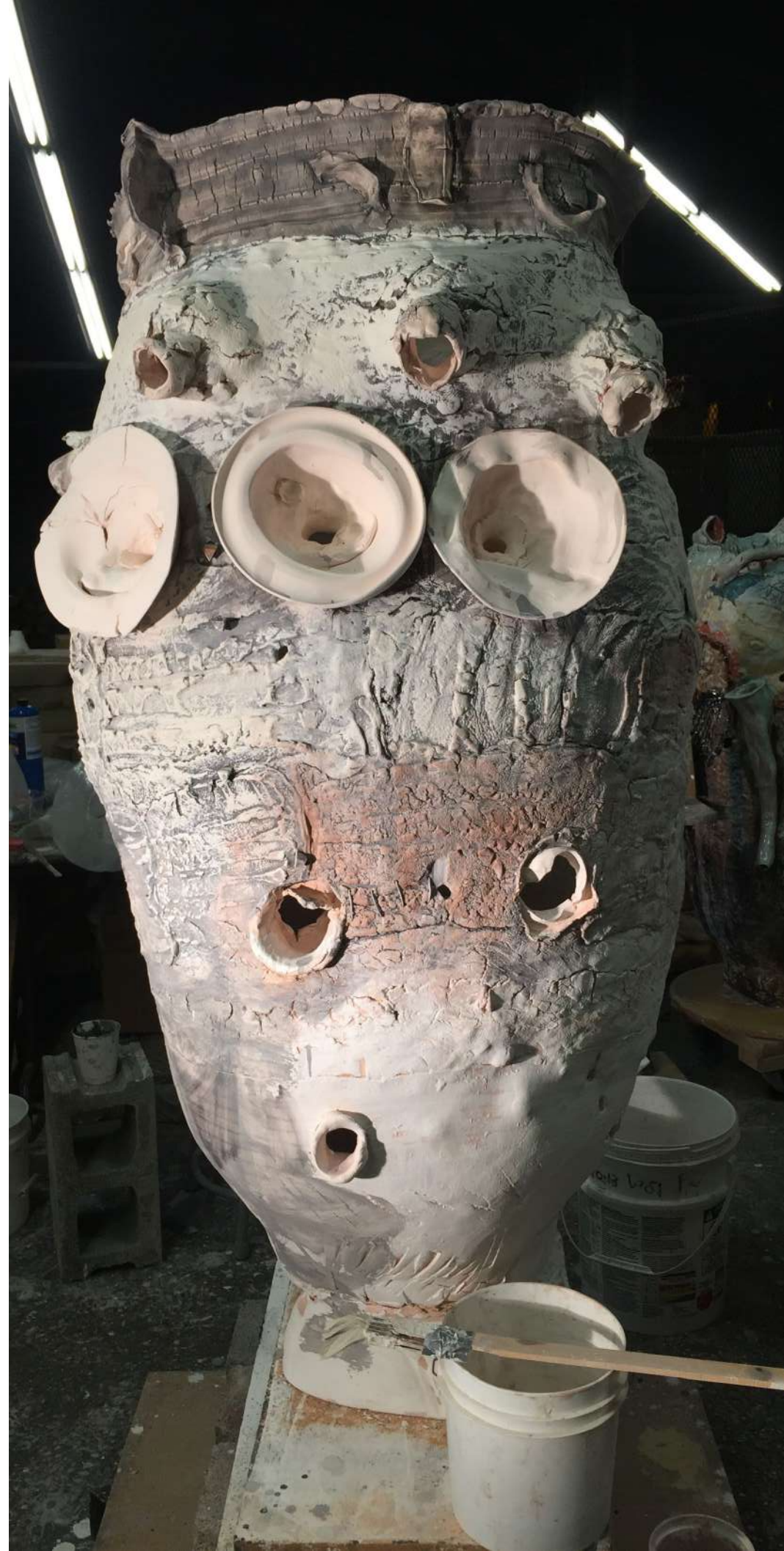
In transformation, qualities, undaunted
 (Embodying a state of constant flux;
 Entombed within my offering; ghosts, haunted)
 Reveal their hidden natures. And the crux
 Of revelation this practice assays
 Is just to deepen wonder, to remind:
 Believe it—we can sometimes break our stays,
 Eschew our locked quotidian confines.
 For there, beyond the membrane of our skin
 The sensual realm awaits. We know its call;
 Deny it though we may, it is our kin
 (Its murmurings entrance us after all).
 Earth, sea-change, growth: writ large in all I see,
 Transforming what once was to what shall be.

-Gareth Mason









The visceral simile of glaze and glistened surfaces: scarred and broken clay, torn and blistered, fissured, stained, cauterised and cratered as war-torn earth; these unpalatable qualities scream their dissonance out and I want them live, present and apparent to the eye. I feel no responsibility for the comfort of those who encounter my things but it matters to me that they should feel; I care about their experience, their secret selves, their 'sapio-sensual' selves, their capacity for what Antoni Tàpies described as 'Inner Images'.

Dig deeply enough and you will find our every comfort bathed in bloody misery. My way of reconciling this to myself is to expose myself fully to the aesthetic discomfort of what I do and to hope that some of that flawed human experience translates to those who behold it.

-Gareth Mason

From 'Making Sense', an unpublished epistolary exchange between Richard Jacobs and Gareth Mason, 2019.

As a child, I would mentally accelerate the tides to the speed of a humming bird's wing, to visualise the earth's long ages. My palette; eroded rock, mineral; is profoundly ceramic in character, as are our fiery origins. These ground ores have become more than mere expedients; they are my conceptual anchors, analogous to inconceivable events of epochs past that humble us to the core, thence to our emotional states and common fragility, our humanity and the essential optimism of the creative act.

-Gareth Mason



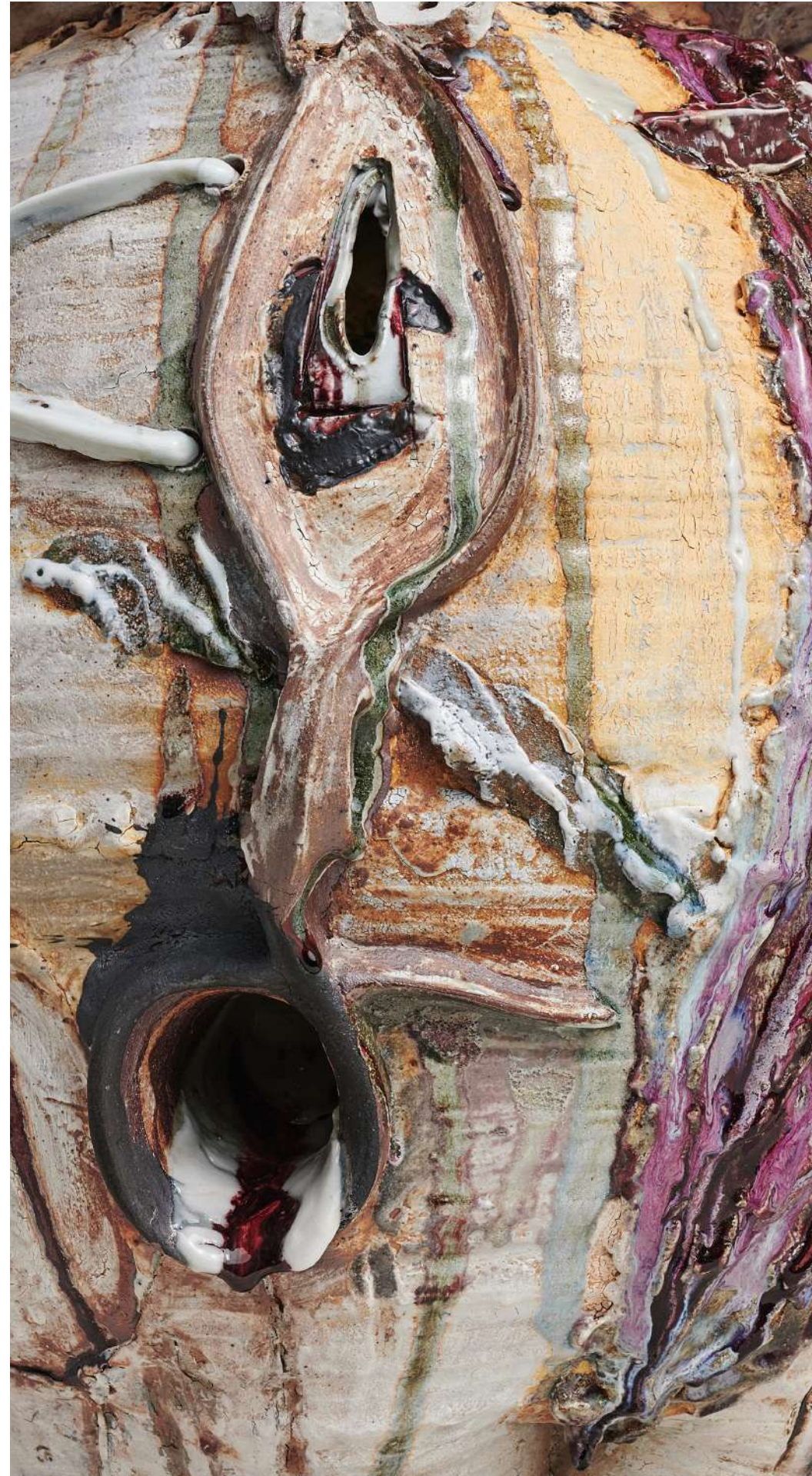






Material-as-emotion; matter-as-voice; gesture-as-language: these are about the sensorial augmentation of thought. This is why I am so aesthetically greedy. Vicious, voluptuous, passionate; I want a wounding beauty. Viewed from the perspective of the senses, material qualities have distinct voices, and I pursue them all.

-Gareth Mason



Gareth Mason's visually stunning and unorthodox forms, glazes and constructions are astonishments. Their deep philosophical and mytho-poetic underpinnings make them irresistible for collectors...Part of what puzzles and attracts me to Mason's ceramics is that each abstract work has a strong, individual personality. Many additionally allude to traditional ceramic vessel forms. They seem alive -- with past, present and future lives.

-Jan Garden Castro,
art historian & author







William Blake said, "all sublimity is founded on minute discrimination." And he should know. Minute particulars, details... I am an obsessive, a detail-fetishist, a fanatic, because no matter how forensic the gaze that encounters my work, I want to reward it. And detail is a worthy conduit to the sublime.

-Gareth Mason



Words not only replicate summaries of fact but also capture the sensations of feeling. I really have to work to achieve that as a writer and the artistry is as complicated and sublime as any other crafted art form.

-Richard Jacobs

Words are as malleable as clay. As slippery too. But the right word is so sexy, isn't it? Finding it, applying it, meaning it. I freely confess a love of words but cannot help feeling that to access them I am focusing through the wrong filter. Clay is a largely wordless medium for me and I have only half jokingly said in the past that words are my second language. Yet I love them. And I believe that the 'act of translation' between material experience—ceramic experience, the sensorially led brilliance of material intelligence—and words is a worthwhile endeavour. I stray into fairly obscure and inarticulate territory. I favour the first person, poetic, lyrical, even hyperbolic, over the neutral, academic and precise. I risk falling on my face when I speak publicly and elsewhere in pursuit of genuine communication. In that respect, my engagement with words and my engagement with clay are identical activities. The medium, if you truly love it (whatever it is), deserves to be stretched beyond the point at which you are comfortable with it, deserves to be respected and utterly disrespected.

-Gareth Mason

From 'Making Sense', an unpublished epistolary exchange between Richard Jacobs and Gareth Mason, 2019.







Rather than pushing towards a specified outcome, it feels more like I am following a lead. What exactly does that mean? I am inclined to reject 'design' (in the sense of pre-planning) in favour of the moment, as it evolves under my fingers. My interventions, compositions, judgements along the way are all sense-led. Felt. Sometimes this is a subtle business, others, it verges on lunacy. I obey impulse. And I manipulate it. In the moment. But what is this 'moment' exactly? 'Unfolding experience'. 'Events-as-they-occur'. Being alive to them. Feeling them. The moment and the evolving work at hand make their needs clear, but it is necessary to 'listen'. When I am listening, the way forward reveals itself. Sometimes it is apparent from the outset, sometimes later, after a prolonged period of pacing, of banging my head against a wall, running screaming from the building, a stiff scotch, or just time. There is no template, only feeling, response. This requires trust.

-Gareth Mason



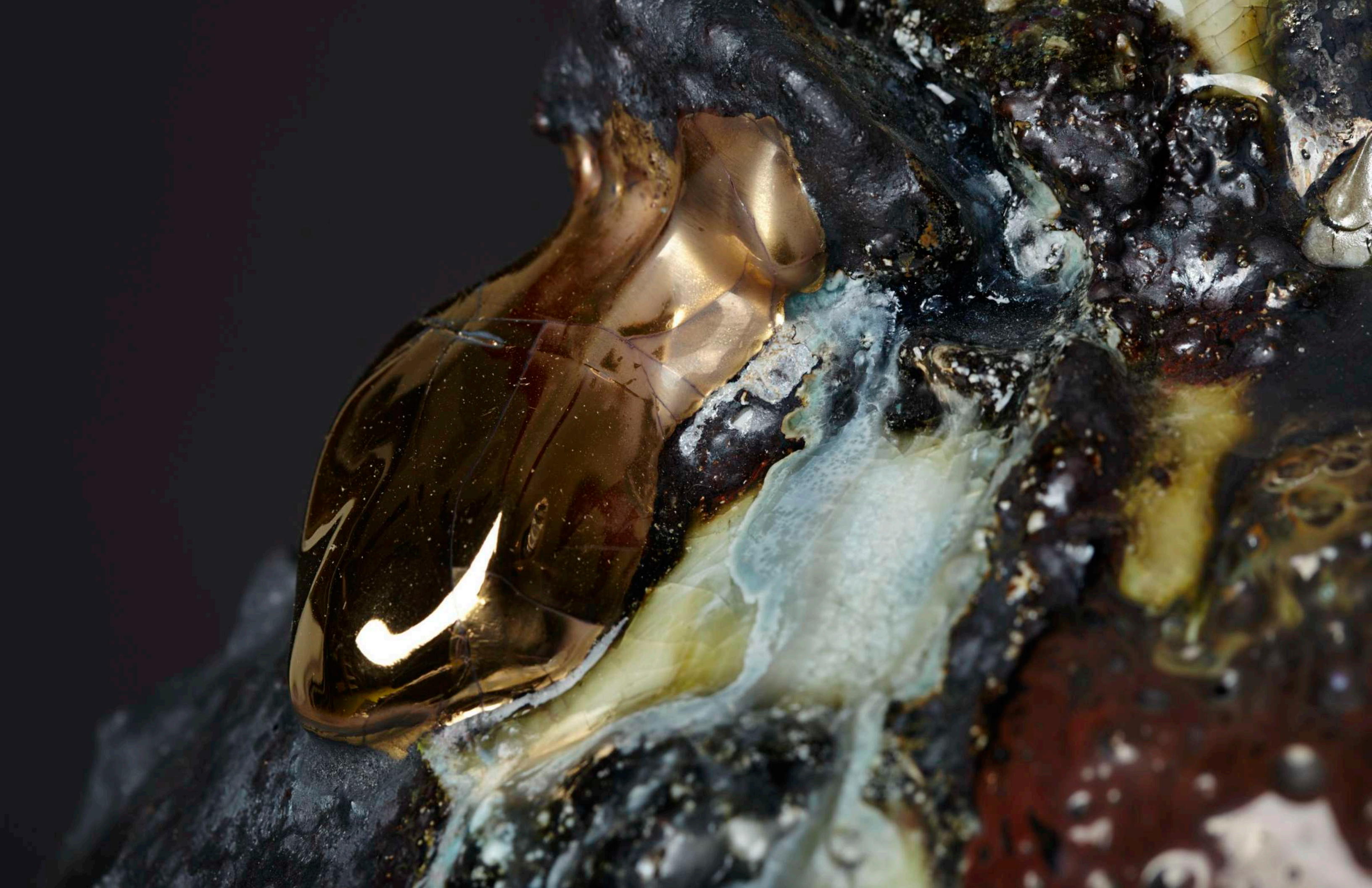




I am a pig-headed, recalcitrant, stubborn, tenacious miner-of-dreams—up-turning rocks, peering into dark corners, sifting the silt, digging the dirt—who absolutely will not let go of a work once started. I will pursue it beyond the point of destruction if necessary, practising my own brand of aesthetic CPR to keep resurrecting it in order to dredge every drop of potential from it until the deed is done. No short-cuts, no instant gratification, no-way out...no avoidance of the stark truth that I am unequal to the task and that the only way to do justice to this is to embrace the incomplete, faltering nature of the endeavour, to recognise that nothing will ever be 'resolved'.

-Gareth Mason





A word or two about the White Mud

Gareth Mason

Porcelain's story is deceptive. It trades on myths. It is true that it has blood on its hands. For centuries it was a carefully guarded Chinese secret, richly prized in 'The West' as much for the miracle of its survival through the Silk Road's savage privations as for its status-enhancing adornment of fashionable salons. Strife and espionage was its stock-in-trade until its formula was finally cracked, so the story goes, in the furnaces of early eighteenth century Germany. There, its mystique was profitably perpetuated in an enduring marketing miracle; to this day its prestige is as powerful as ever, and truly, its taintless luminosity carries compelling aesthetic allure. But I no longer buy-in to its precious reputation; I will not tap Porcelain's blue blood to add reflected glory to my own ceramic endeavours. Porcelain is no longer rarefied in my world. My interest is altogether earthier. Porcelain is one component



of my aesthetic offering, one carrier of sensory indulgence amongst others. I accord it no privileges nor will I restrict my appetite to forms that it has occupied so ably in the past, much as I may love them. I am far too aesthetically greedy for that.



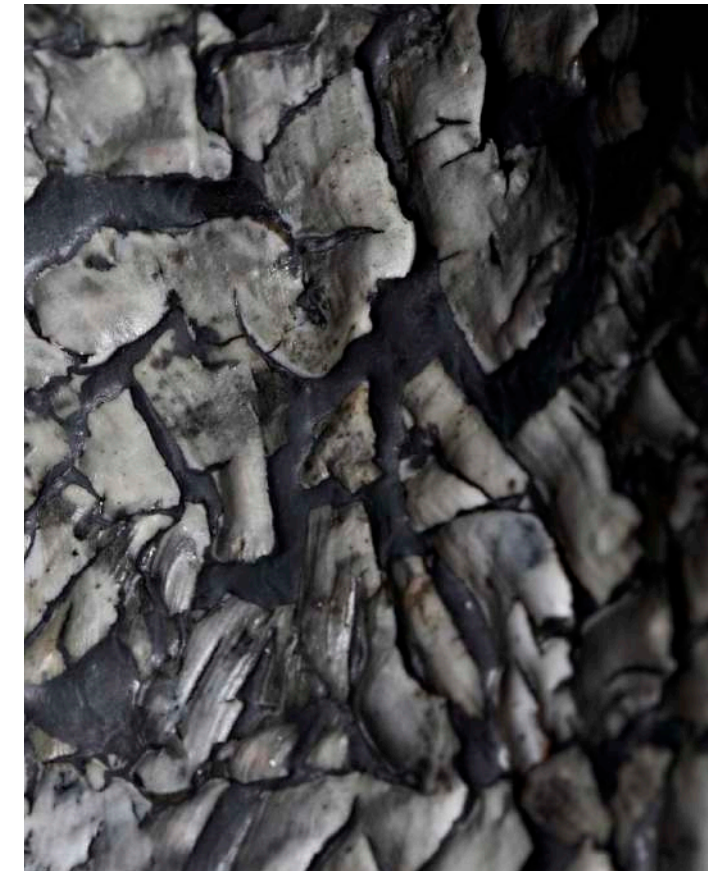
Porcelain is of course eminently deserving of my respect, and has earned it, as I openly admit, through long practise and dogged acquaintance (not for nothing am I wont to declare, "porcelain is a bitch and then you die"). But, owning my contradictions out and proud, I deny it my unquestioning allegiance and as a mark of this, I accord it the honour of the most disciplined and sustained disrespect that I can muster. Because porcelain is not as polite as people think, it can handle a more intrusive sensory exploration than gentle custom would have us believe, it has deeper seams to mine, a harsher beauty than mere 'prettiness' to unravel. So mine has become a strenuous homage, a cruel tutelage that goes both

ways, for I'm as much its apprentice as its master. I encourage its communion with the 'lower castes' where, consorting with coarser clays of rougher-hewn beauty, it abandons its flawless lineage, diluting its pure blood in promiscuity and corruption: in my hands porcelain falls from grace. But not completely. I break its fall (as it breaks mine), and engage in a discerning befoulment, exposing it to a fuller flavour of many-hued existence, where rarity is not the only virtue, whiteness not the peak of elegance and where the time-honed credulity of its whispering admirers no longer holds its custom-



ary sway. And from this prone position I find that it more-than-whispers back with such unlikely confidences as would shock its ardent past confederates. It is the willing agent of its own disillusion.

Thus emboldened by the gamut of Ceramic Experience as I live it, porcelain emerges defiant of staid convention, wearing its scars with pride, having in-



dulged in darker rites not countenanced by its precious forebears or its prissy counterparts. Thus unburdened of polite expectation, it is charged anew with vivid and unsettling communicative potential, to speak of other things, to stir other feelings, to set reminiscent and allusive embers a-glowing in the poetic imagination hitherto thought unfit for so 'proper' a material. I delight in popping porcelain's bubble of pretension, then releasing it back into unsuspecting society with an added sting in its tail, better equipped, for all the deceptions of its chequered history, to forge an identity more reflective of the here-and-now; no longer preserved in the aspic of inherited politesse, but robed in a more fitting raiment of unfolding and flawed majesty, as befits the tumult of our times.

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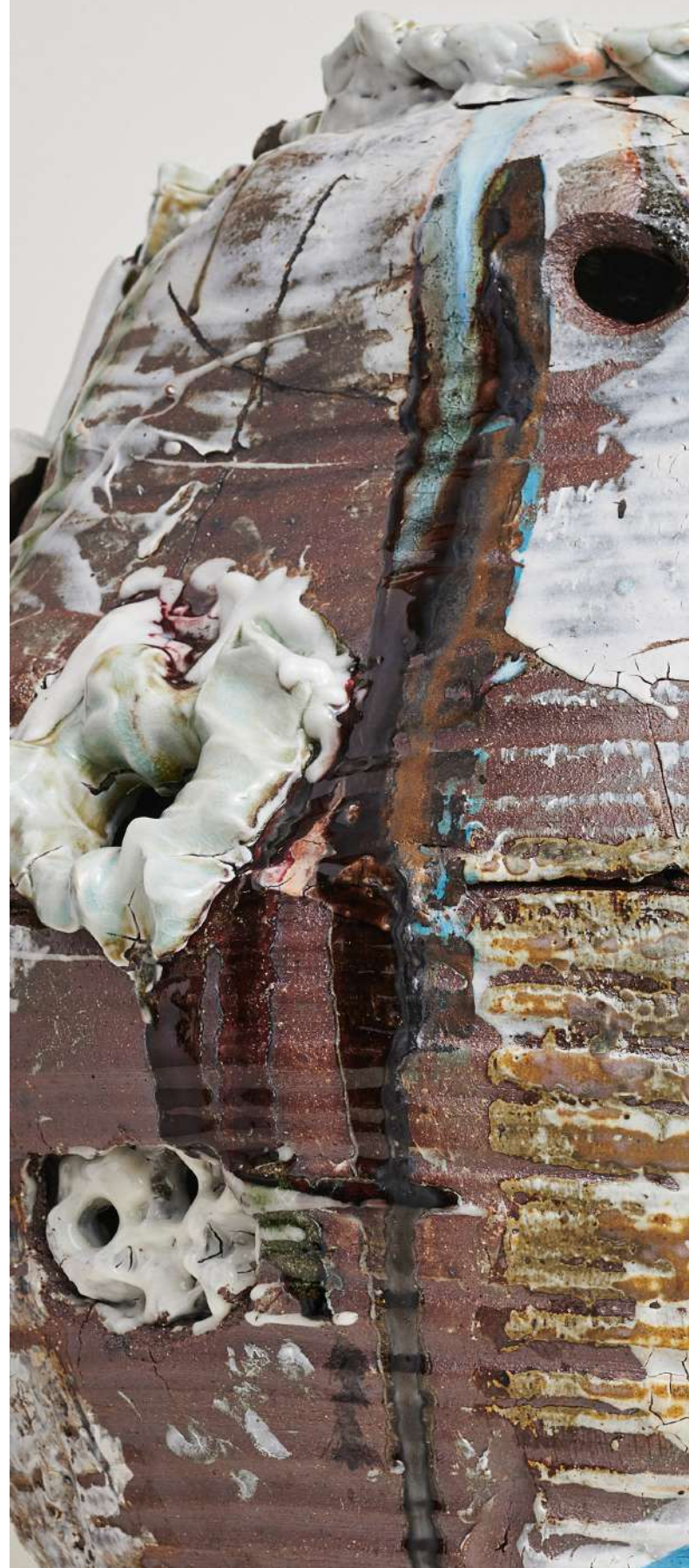


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Mason [takes] an unconventional approach to the process of making...with multiple kiln firings and periods of rumination...a tumultuous life. The serenity and calm of [the Korean Moon Jar] is replaced with a surface deliberately scored, the ceramic body a hard-fought amalgam of clays rather than pure porcelain...dialectic engagement rather than Confucian certainty...stirring and iconoclastic.

-Professor Simon Olding







There is no telling when that moment of new awareness will present itself.

Elusive though it is, it can emerge to me at any stage of my muddy adventures and its dawning moment refreshes my awareness, like a mini 'reset'. For me, that quality of 'freshness' is always in forward-motion; it arrives and quickly recedes from me, and I cannot consciously catch up, for to think on it extinguishes it. Enriching itself through my evolving experience, it uses the fuel it finds there to generate new fuel. This is enticing; it provides impetus in a kind of idea-and-experience-fusion: I want it. But 'wanting' chases it away.

-Gareth Mason

THOUGHTS, etc.

Gareth Mason

The Kiln and ‘The Other’

For me, the kiln holds no truck with common meaning: it vetoes the proselytisation of the ‘known’. The kiln is my bastion against worn-out thought. It promulgates supremely uncommon meaning. A moth to its inferno, it is the crucible of my ‘otherness’, a link to potentialities more feral and exotic than the regulators of our domesticated world. Although the kiln’s transformations have their basis entirely in ‘known’ physics and are embedded within perfectly rational, orthodox chemical processes, they nonetheless demand of me an investment of so much more than mere utilitarian cause and effect. But ‘mere utilitarian cause and effect’ is exactly what my work is predicated upon—I deal in practical metamorphosis: materials get hot and thereby they change. It seems so simple, and it is! Yet my engagement could not be farther from the ‘merely’ utilitarian. The kiln speaks to the magical and the visionary, where the signifiers and anchors of everyday perception lose their way-marking power, leaving me rudderless, in wonder. Thus uprooted from ‘reality’, I am compelled to draw upon lesser-trodden regions of my psyche for reference: in the absence of any compass, I fabricate my own from the conjurings of my ‘mind’s eye’. This is the stuff of the inner life. The kiln’s metamorphoses murmur and yell from a place within me that runs deeper (and darker) than the quotidian. I want access to the phantasmagoria that ‘functional’ consciousness keeps safely cordoned away. In his 1956 essay, ‘Heaven and Hell’, Aldous Huxley described these ‘Antipodes of the Mind’ and they shimmer, mirage-like, at the fringes of my experience and perception. The Kiln is one of my portals to the Antipodes. It opens my virus vault, agitating its contents within its blistering walls to run their small riots and write them large upon my surfaces. Eventually, my pots enter their long stasis in our world, super-cooled but nonetheless inciting fiery collusion. The potential for free-form connectivity is latent within us all; we should all desire it. We all deserve it. Many of us fear it. The fact is, the ‘Antipodes’ of which Huxley speaks are Here and Now, surrounding us yet veiled by the everyday equanimity upon which our civility depends. Everyone needs an occasional break from civility. I value the kiln’s uncivilising influence in my life. Art can perform truly transformative acts. We need art’s capacity for ‘otherness’, to fracture and augment the mores and obligations of workaday thought and feeling. The kiln interrupts the neutering aspects of my ‘normality’: it makes my ‘unreal’ real. Long may it continue to do so.

Huxley’s ‘Antipodes’

Adapted from an email exchange between GM and the South African artist Belinda Bignon.

“Like the earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazon Basins... Like the giraffe and the duck-billed platypus, the creatures inhabiting these remoter regions of the mind are exceedingly improbable. Nevertheless, they exist; they are facts of observation; they cannot be ignored by anyone who is trying to understand the world in which he lives [...] Such metaphors express very forcibly the essential otherness of the mind’s far continents, the complete autonomy and self-sufficiency of their inhabitants. A man consists of what I may call an Old World of personal consciousness and, beyond a dividing sea, a series of New Worlds—the not too distant Virginias and Carolinas of the personal subconscious and the vegetative soul; the Far West of the collective unconscious with its flora of symbols, its tribes of Aboriginal archetypes; and, across another, vaster ocean, the antipodes of everyday consciousness, the world of visionary experience.” —Aldous Huxley, *Heaven and Hell*

I love the way Huxley’s measured analysis calmly and vividly sublimates some pretty hard lived and irrational experience into reason. The intersection of reason and instinct, of ‘Old Brain’ and ‘New’, fascinates me. Because if nothing else, it is through reason that our best hopes lie (as a race I mean). Yet reason never suppresses the beast within, and in some cases, can liberate it. For me, reason never wins the argument, if you get what I mean. Reason has to intercede, if the ‘argument’, (the matter at hand, which is usually pretty fucking obscure if it comes to my practice) ever has a hope in hell of surfacing into the world in anything like a form that is intelligible to my fellow beings. For me, ‘reason’ is a conduit to intelligibility, not the ‘raison d’être’.

Reason is the moderating or translating influence, and a kind of gate keeper, but I strongly feel its neutering impact sometimes. Inhibiting forces are invidious and numerous, and the ‘reasoning’ impulse is a strong one, which I am trying to suppress as I write. I want the ‘flow’ of consciousness to be uninhibited, whatever material I am using, whether words or clay or fire or gravity or whatever, but there has to be a moderator because where otherwise would judgment be?

‘Visionary’ experience—the business of ascetics in their retreats to stone cells and hermits to their caves, the business of the privations of the flesh endured by medicine men and the religiously inspired, privations of starvation (fasting) and of poisoning through ingestion of toxic and hallucinatory substances, and of physical feats of extreme endurance, of trance-inducing repetitive activities and vocalisations (Sangoma ritual, of which you spoke) and of good old flagellation and pain; the monk in the tower with his cat o’ nine tails and the nun with her barbed belt, the punishment of the ‘sinful flesh’, a ‘transport-through-torture’. These trials have exactly that in common: that they are ‘trials’, some physical and psychological tribulation which acts as the agent of transport, effectively setting up the necessary electro-chemical conditions in the human brain for some subtle (or not so subtle) short-circuiting to occur, thereby allowing the veils of normal perception to be lifted, affording the practitioner privileged access to ‘otherness’. That human beings should seek to decalibrate their brain chemistry in this way is an extraordinary thing, an activity with surely no parallel in this biosphere.

This is not to mention the multifarious other means by which we seek to trick or kick-start our consciousness into other states; the immemorial ingestion of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana; plant matter altered through the agency of mastication and saliva or yeasts; poisons from the glands of reptiles and countless other distillations and fermentations to induce alterations in mood and outlook. Chemicals without number derived from cactus to rainforest psychotropics and fungal hallucinogens... From the Victorians’ poppy tinctures to today’s coca-derived snowstorm, humanity continues to consume uncountable pills and powders by means of ‘street’ or ‘prescription’. It seems there is no satiating the contemporary appetite for ‘medication’. We are a pharmaceutically inclined race. And by no means all state-altering triggers are external. We are walking chemical plants in our own right and our very behaviour can adjust the internal workings of our own chemistry with no external agency. Endurance athletes know all about altered states, and practitioners of yoga and meditation, martial arts, ‘extreme sports’ enthusiasts, jumpers-off-cliffs or divers-in-caves, or, following De Sade, Masoch, Nin etc, those who indulge in feats of extreme sexual or fetishistic activity, whether prolonged and ‘tantric’ or embellished with external aids: Kinbaku or bondage, S&M, the extraordinarily fine-balanced interplay of submission and control, the knife-edge of ‘consent’: All ‘Mind Games’ have their root in our intricate neural wiring: a touch of stimulation here, a shade of pain there... the interplay of the physical and the mental, of mind and body, the interconnectedness of body, of sense/senses/sensuality and emotion and the underpinning of all within the fantastical tyrannical oversight of the labyrinthine organ that lurks wantonly in the darkness between our ears.

So human beings tweak their brain chemistry in the hope of encountering the mind’s antipodes. We have an enduring belief that there is ‘more’ and we go to elaborate lengths to engender that ‘more’, to bring it into existence for ourselves. Are we essentially dissatisfied, existentially, as beings? Such constant thirsting and hungering and thirsting anew... for all our searching and inventive means, we can never sate the void.

I feel it keenly, and I am sure that you do to. It is in large part what drives us. Though my (our) artistic practice is hardly psychotropic, there are without doubt moments of transport within it. Some are focused to a fine laser point in time, as the moment of opening a kiln, or the ‘release’ found in gesture—bodily gesture, movement, the relinquishment of control; as in relishing the elasticity of gelatinous material, flicked or poured, certainly the metamorphosis of the kiln, or the deliberate use of the left hand, or various other ‘tricks’ to foil the illusion of control... These performative moments are spurs, firing the neurones, creating synaptic reward-leaps akin to those triggered through ingested chemical stimulation but we do them to ourselves.

These are the dopamine moments of art, allied to risk, to abandonment; handing over the moment to another force, throwing it open to the fates; indulging the ‘Duende’; leaning into a space beyond or outside the scope of our deceptively silky ‘skills’. Operating in that place, albeit fleetingly, has its own addictive draw. But it is foolish to chase it. I can’t generate that place. But I know it is there, I experience it momentarily from time to time, so it hovers, tantalisingly outside my grasp. Addiction is such an invidious phenomenon, we want to dwell in the state of transport, but good grief what an erroneous desire! One more ‘fix’, out with the spoon and the tourniquet and the needle again...cooking up another shot... Can you imagine a state of perpetual orgasm?! How quickly the most fervent desire turns to the most desperate agony. Fleeting though they may be, I want such glimpses of the possibility of transport as I may get in this life to be exactly as they are, like apparitions; I want them to remain in their rarefied enclave, out of my child-like grasp; the stuff of misty evanescence, just occasionally giving me enough of a ‘hit’ to spur me forward but never revealing their full splendour and terror. This is the pushmepullyou of practice; the pleasurepain, darklight, blissblight; the treacherous navigations; the perennial unattainability and absurdity. Sculpting smoke. Everything, *everything* is illusion.

—

The Heart of Fire

Determined (for the gains are so hard-bought,
 Whilst orthodox opinion holds its throne),
 I seek to capture unfamiliar thought
 In deference, still, to words already known.
 The intellect’s well-reconnoitred path
 Prefigures unfulfillment. So, dismayed
 And gagging on its barren aftermath,
 I’m drawn back to the senses, unafraid.
 For there in fiery metamorphosis
 Unbidden, maskless, in its element,
 Such change is loosed upon my consciousness
 As to upset my very fundament.
 If Mind’s Antipodes are your desire
 Then look no farther than the heart of fire.

—

Thoughts on Otherness

I am attracted to the idea of ‘*Is-ness*’; a slippery and marvellous business, about which I know little but sense a lot, which has to do with the arena wherein the duality between what we call “things”, and what these things inherently, objectively “are”, breaks down: a place where there is, “...no distinction to be felt between what a thing ‘is’ and what it ‘signifies’” (A. K. Coomaraswamy): in other words, a thing that simply ‘is’; a thing that defies definition and also needs none, so obviously and completely does it exist in and of itself. Huxley has a gorgeous phrase that is relevant here: “...the autonomous otherness of nature”, which is to say, nature’s stunning—and utterly final—indifference to everything we as a race can ever ascribe to it by way of signifiers. I bow before that thought; its stark, bald, terrifying truth and sheer wonderment. I extend Coomaraswamy and Huxley’s thought to include the idea of the ‘autonomous otherness of THINGS’, which I confess I find very attractive.

I know that I will never make anything that eludes definition, and that is not what I mean, nor is it a viable goal. Rather, I want the things I make to savour of ‘autonomous otherness’; for their otherness to be suggestive, fertile, to take root. This quality’s transportational power will vary in intensity depending upon how settled, or subtle, or malleable are the viewer’s notions of the world; upon their propensity for indulgence in ‘the other’; upon their acquaintance with and willingness to nurture and indulge their own poetic imaginations.

The Pot and The Body

The innate poetry of ceramic history—of the vessel, the pot, jar, vase—is a living seam, woven into all I do. Pots carry evocations of ritual, containment, touch, nurture and especially ‘body-ness’, because the pot has always been close to the body. We are marvellously embodied beings. Within, between, around and through ‘body’ is the mysterious genesis of all we behold. To me, clay is ‘body’ in more than name. The vessel is itself ‘embodied’ and I entertain the most tender rituals of bodily intervention in my mud-dealings. For me, the pot is a site of drama, ambition, indulgence, struggle, risk. Capturing moments is an intimate business. I implicate the viewer in small taboos, piercing the vessel’s ‘skin’, inviting sustained, close inspection. I confer interpretation upon my fellow beings, trusting that their poetic imaginations will complete the process that my materials and the magic of ceramic transformation begins. After all, the imagination is the site where art takes place. Clay is a wanton recipient of bodily energy and I revel in this, inviting the inner sensualist to bear witness. Our anthropocentric natures cannot but oblige, for good or ill. I love the helpless autonomy of genuine aesthetic response. My work reflects my wonder at the unabashed privilege of being part of the sensual world.

All Their Glory (absurdity and joy)

I am something of an addict when it comes to my practice. I keep crawling back. Truth is, I have not tried too hard to kick the habit. I enjoy my affliction. It is hopeless. Once ‘tasted’, ceramic experience is too resplendent, too evocative, too bountiful; it needs to be savoured to the fullest extent of the senses. Some pots just move me, unaccountably. What can I say? Museum encounters are emotional events for me. However, I am by no means unquestioningly reverent, in spite of my profound respect for the rich heredity of ceramics. Somehow, I need my pots to be on the brink (of collapse, of non-existence...), not as some artspeak, metamodern, post-ironic commentary—it is way too personal for that—but as a physical, observable fact: my things have been subject to in-your-face, experiential, scar-inducing phenomena. I sustain them beyond the point at which they should expire. I really fight for them. It’s brutal. It is the sheer resurgent lyricism of ceramic experience that moves me. BUT, though I treat clay (and especially porcelain) to some quite shocking discourtesy, don’t mistake all of this “abuse” for an absence of love, or the kinky sublimation of some sadistic bent (OK it is a bit kinky sometimes). It is not a very ‘Art World’ thing to declare, and I am really not one for sappy declarations but here goes: I love making pots. They’ve earned my love the hard way and are unapologetic manifestations of it, in all their glory. Tough love sometimes, admittedly, but what true love does not benefit from that? My over-indulgence in their trial-by-fire is a testament to my devotion: the rapt process of their coming-into-being, the manic pyromancy of it, is an insanely beautiful thing to be in touch with. Feral beauty. It’s a deep joy, a searing joy. A form of fastidious adoration! But the joy of my ceramic life is nuanced, a many-hued spectrum, from its unabashed Volupté to its radiant calamities, all of which befall my hands and heart. A warped autobiography. It’s wildly unreasonable. I am wont to say, keep your integrity close, keep your absurdity closer. But there you are, such is the stall that I set out. I’m not coy, this is a warts and all experience: a maddening, exhilarating, bitter-sweet roller-coaster love story.

D U E N D E

Paraphrased from Federico Garcia Lorca's 'Theory and Play of the Duende'

The Duende delights in struggling freely with
the creator on the edge of the pit.

Angel and Muse flee

Where the Duende wounds.

Trying the heal that wound that never heals

Here lies the strangeness—the inventiveness—
of the artist's work.

Demand not form but the marrow of form.

Rob yourself of skill and safety

Banish the Muse and be helpless

That the Duende might come and

deign to struggle at close quarters

Then your voice, no longer at play,

worthy of your pain and

your sincerity,

Will be a jet of blood.

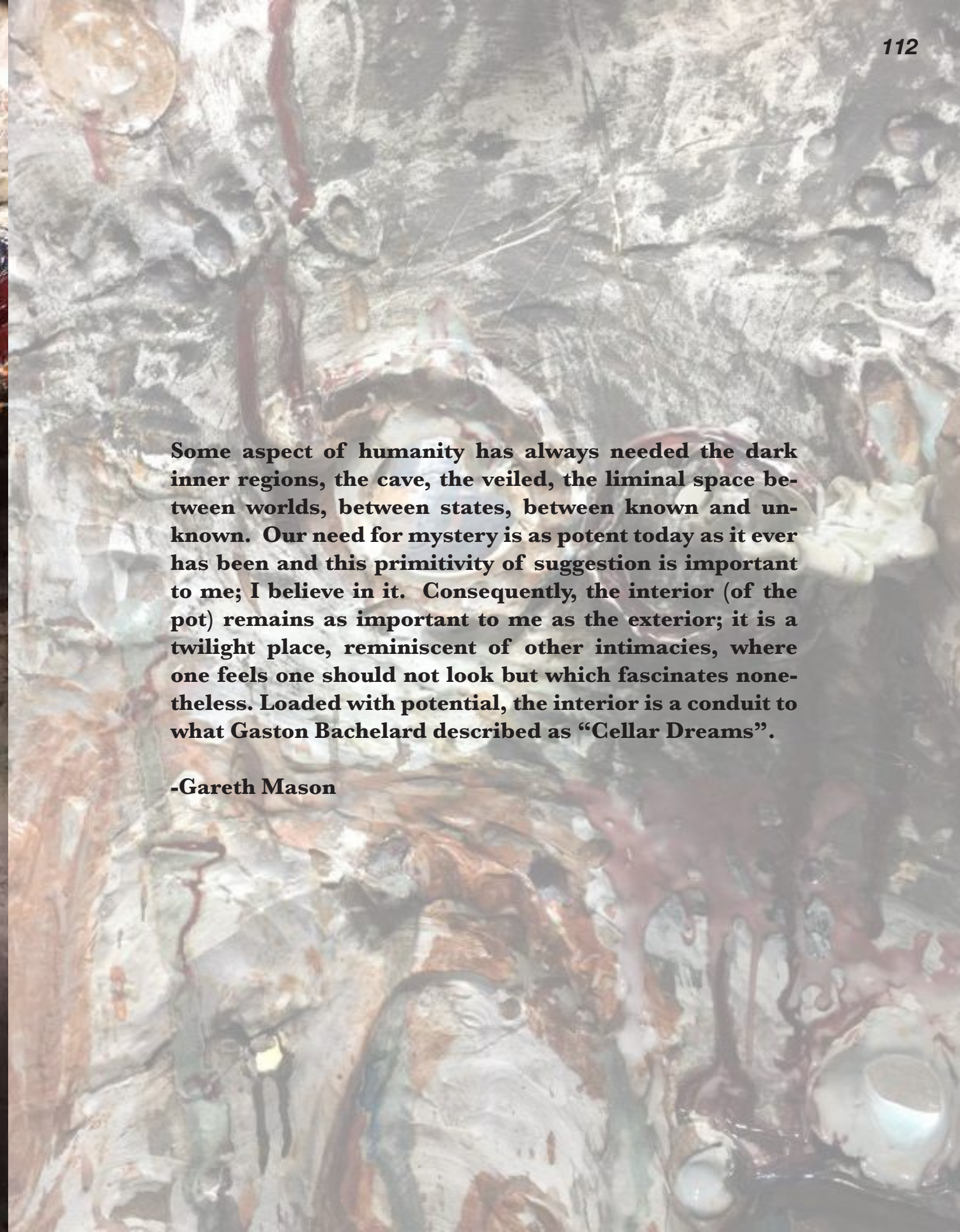






Some aspect of humanity has always needed the dark inner regions, the cave, the veiled, the liminal space between worlds, between states, between known and unknown. Our need for mystery is as potent today as it ever has been and this primitivity of suggestion is important to me; I believe in it. Consequently, the interior (of the pot) remains as important to me as the exterior; it is a twilight place, reminiscent of other intimacies, where one feels one should not look but which fascinates nonetheless. Loaded with potential, the interior is a conduit to what Gaston Bachelard described as “Cellar Dreams”.

-Gareth Mason





Acknowledgements

Though I work alone, nothing I do is ever achieved alone. Far from it. Our gratitude to our fellow travellers is easily overlooked, so I make a point of regularly reminding myself, especially on occasions such as this, what a spectacular privilege it is that I get to do what I do, and how my allies along the way matter so very much.

Jason Jacques has, this last decade, facilitated both the stage upon which my muddy adventures have played out, and, significantly, their audience; after all, art is nothing if not communication. I am proud of the distinctive presence he has established in the freakishly competitive contemporary art arena, of the unforeseen positives that continually issue from this and of the part my work has played. I cannot over state the emboldening impact that his proactive representation has had on my practice and life. Long may our paths entwine. The excellent team at Jason Jacques Gallery were Herculean in their efforts to pull this catalogue together. Maty Sall-Lewis, Quoc Ly and Grace Nkem are stars. I'm honoured to have this tenth anniversary exhibition with the gallery, along with such a comprehensive accompanying publication.

Late Summer of 2019 I spent two months as Visiting Artist in the ceramics facility of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, making some of the work that appears in this show. Syracuse is also the home of the iconic Everson Museum, where Ceramics Curator Garth Johnson made a mighty leap of faith, hosting my University endeavours in a solo exhibition earlier this year. His first-rate insight and constant good humour were a boon, as is his written contribution to this publication. Garth's steadfast advocacy of my work is especially meaningful given his steady trajectory as a custodian of excellence (with ever-growing influence) in the field.

These two events in Syracuse were significant professional landmarks for me. I was heartened by the unfailing support I received and I want these people to know that their good will, fellowship and sometimes brawn (!) was greatly appreciated: Margie Hughto (whose constant warm hospitality to this stray British potter meant so much), Peter Beasecker (for his can-do, problem-solving faith), Errol Willett, Sharif Bey, Joanna Spitzner, Chelsey Albert, Britt Thorpe, Drew Davis, Emma Kaye, Ron DeRutte, Sara Felice and Holly Greenberg. George Jake Patterson took some striking night photographs, several of which are printed herein. The Laguna Clay Company generously provided materials sponsorship, for which I thank Bryan Vansell, president and owner. I also offer my grateful thanks to Elizabeth Dunbar, CEO of the Everson Museum and DJ Hellerman, the Everson's Curator of Art and Programs.

Just four more: Marcin Stromiejski, Chief Preparator at Jason Jacques Gallery and tirelessly efficient agent of Getting Things Done. Belinda Blignaut, my South African mud-and-word-sister. Professor Richard Jacobs, pottery collector, crank, lifelong educator, winsome interlocutor, friend and prolific Writer to Dead People. And lastly my wife Katherine, for reasons way too mushy to put here.

— Gareth Mason, September 2020



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