

A flare for clay



Known for her smoke-fired ceramics, Jane Perryman's career has spanned some forty years, winning her international acclaim. As the artist stages her latest project, a major new multimedia installation, *Moira Vincentelli* reviews her career

THIS PAGE: *Containing time, detail*

Ceramic artist Jane Perryman has travelled a long way from her revolutionary idealism as a student protestor at Hornsey College of Art in the mid-to-late 1960s, but her commitment to certain core values has never left her. Perryman's early training was in slip-casting and industrial design in ceramics, but that did not satisfy her and so, for six years, she went into teaching. When she took up pottery again it was with the rhythmic action of coiling and burnishing that she found her pace. Then, in 1979, a scholarship to the Keramisch Werkcentrum in Holland offered an inspiring international atmosphere, and it was there, for the first time, she saw a burnished and smoke-fired object. Four years later she moved to Cambridge. It was timely. The interest in hand-building and unglazed clay in contemporary ceramics was gaining currency. Subsequent significant moments included her meeting and friendship with the potter and activist, Elspeth Owen, and a memory of seeing a demonstration by the Sudanese potter Siddig el Nigoumi at ICF Aberystwyth – here was an important connection with alternative traditions in world ceramics.

Conceptually, Jane Perryman's work is rich and nourished by other endowments that she brings to her life as an artist. A fine photographer, elegant writer and skilled craftswoman, she is multi-talented, but focussed. The round-bottomed bowl so characteristic of her work seems to be an apt metaphor for her balanced and centred approach. It is no surprise that she is a skilled practitioner and teacher of Iyengar yoga. A growing interest in the subject led to another turning point – her first visit to India in 1989. At Pune she saw village potters, and in New Delhi she witnessed the wonderful collections of the rich terracotta tradition of India, so little appreciated beyond South Asia. In the 1990s she returned to India on three occasions for extended periods to document this work in different regions. From this came *Traditional Pottery of India* (2000), a book written in diary-like mode to create a readable, sharply-observed testament. Some time later, in 2012, she was able to edit rough video footage collected in the research process, and to create short films now available on DVD.

FANNED BY FLAMES

As a writer Perryman had first come to the fore with her book *Smoke-Fired Pottery* (1995), which proved a success at a moment when many potters, especially women, were breaking from the wheel-thrown and Japanese influences. In 2004 she followed this, bringing the topic up to date with *Naked Clay* and then with *Smoke Firing: Contemporary Artists and Approaches* (2008). Perryman goes so far as to describe herself as a pyromaniac: she works in partnership with the firing process, taking a certain amount of control but, ultimately, fire is the master. Her early burnished pots often took the form of footed bowls with flaring rims, decorated with resist techniques, applying natural materials or masking tape to the surface. The feel is of an eggshell, smooth but not shiny, and the bowls have an uplifted generous profile with the contrast of seed heads or arbitrary

spots of brown against the delicate turquoise of a bird egg. They are hand-crafted objects, but with messages from the natural world and imprints of natural forms and markings from the process of fire. Perryman smoke-fires her pieces in saggars, which originally she made herself in clay, but then found that they deteriorated quickly. In India she saw how metal oil drums were used for the purpose, and since then she has used that technique. In the last fifteen years she has simplified the forms and now makes double-walled vessels with round bottoms. These rocking forms find their own equilibrium – gravity takes over – they go with the flow.

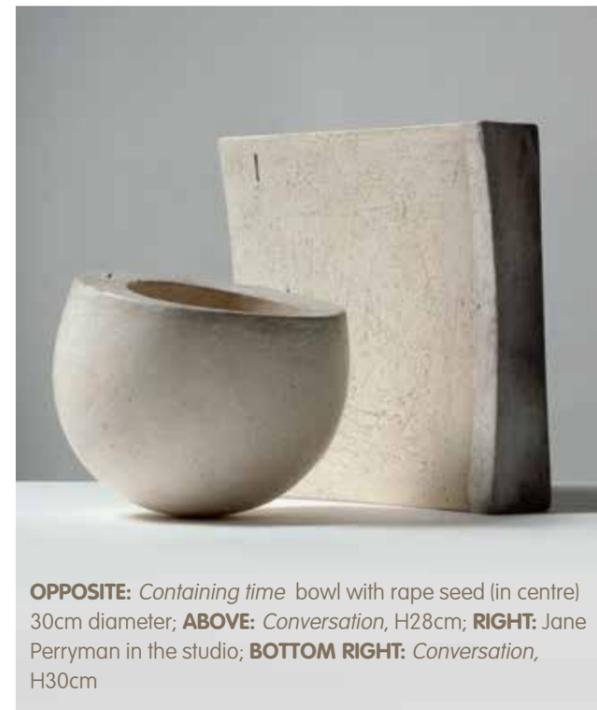
'Perryman goes so far as to describe herself as a pyromaniac: she works in partnership with the firing process, taking a certain amount of control but, ultimately, fire is the master'

ALL ABOUT TIME

In recent years Perryman began to conceive of her pieces as 'conversations'. The bowl form is always the crowning glory, but it is set off by a rectangular plinth or a curved double-walled slab. Using a mixture of stoneware and porcelain clays, the construction technique includes handbuilding, slabbing and press-moulding, distressing the surface with inlaid organic material that disappears in the firing, so that the natural markings can be picked out in a final rubbing in of colour. In 2013 to 2014, after decades of working, writing books, running workshops and by now living in rural Suffolk, Perryman felt that she had come to a hiatus in her ceramic practice. So she set out on a different kind of project, one that picks up ideas that are current in the wider art world, linking to the concept of the 'expanded field' in ceramics. *Containing Time* is a distillation of personal experience and ceramic process to take the form of a multimedia installation. Each week, over



the period of a year, she honed in on one significant moment recorded in words and evidenced by collecting a piece of natural or man-made material. She photographed this, made a frottage, or rubbing, of it and then incorporated it into white porcelain clay, from which she made 52 simple double-walled bowls, one for each week of the project's year.



OPPOSITE: *Containing time* bowl with rape seed (in centre) 30cm diameter; ABOVE: *Conversation*, H28cm; RIGHT: Jane Perryman in the studio; BOTTOM RIGHT: *Conversation*, H30cm

Ever a wordsmith, Jane used diary recordings of her sensations and experiences, distilling them into a short poem to encapsulate her memories. For example, in week 31, on 11 June, she records evocatively: *Today the field of rapeseed / A vast sheet of seed pods / Spikes against the dull sky / A million silver raindrops...* In 2015, eight weeks of the cycle were shown in Boston, but she is planning a much larger show with all 52 bowls, along with the photographs, poems and frottages, and a soundtrack composed by her musician husband, Kevin Flanagan, based on the pinging sounds made by the variously sized bowls. She used white clay, but is currently working on smoke-firing each piece to give the surface more depth and subtlety. In *Containing Time* each group is a still life – a synthesis of nature and culture, process and product, where the burnished bowls encapsulate a timeless essence distilled from an ephemeral moment. The project wonderfully gathers together four decades of work and experience. 

Jane Perryman's *Containing Time* is at Korsbarsgarden Gotland, Sweden, korsbarsgarden.se from 21 June to 1 August. Moira Vincentelli is Emeritus Professor of Art History and Curator of Ceramics at Aberystwyth University



JANE PERRYMAN'S CAREER STEPS

- 1965-1969: BA in Ceramics at Hornsey College of Art, London
- 1970-1971: Post Graduate Certificate of Education, Cardiff
- 1980: British Council Scholarship to Keramisch Werkcentrum, Holland
- Throughout her career Jane Perryman has won many awards, including those at the *World Ceramics Biennale*, Korea (2005) and the *Fletcher Challenge*, New Zealand (1991). She was a finalist in the Open to Art, Milan (2014)
- She has had multiple exhibitions, among them recent solo exhibitions at Vessels Gallery, Boston, MA (2015); *An Indian Odyssey*, Aberystwyth Art Centre (2012); and Blas & Knada, Stockholm (2009)
- Among her published works are *Smoke Firing: Contemporary Artists and Approaches*, 2008; *Naked Clay Ceramics without Glaze*, 2004; *Traditional Pottery of India*, 2000; and *Smoke Fired Pottery*, 1995. Her film *Pottery Traditions of India* was produced in 2013
- Perryman is a Fellow of the Craft Potters Association (craftpottersassoc.co.uk) and a Member of the International Academy of Ceramics
- Her work features in collections across the world, from the Goteborg City Art Collection, Sweden, to the Icheon World Ceramic Centre, Korea

