



Raku Bowl

Martin Smith

Not on display

Title/Description: Raku Bowl

Artist/Maker: Martin Smith

Born: 1976 c. - 1978 c.

Object Type: Bowl, Pot, Vessel

Materials: Ceramic

Measurements: h. 175 x d. 240mm

Accession Number: 50565

Historic Period: 20th century

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Martin Smith was introduced to Raku during his studies at Bristol Polytechnic and came to refine his process at the Royal College of Art. This thrown vessel follows directly on from Smith's RCA graduation exhibition, closing his 2-year research degree. The refined form, crisp geometry and precise execution are typical of Smith's entire oeuvre but, in the context of Raku, mark him out as a visionary that reinvigorated Raku amongst contemporary makers and buyers. [1]

Raku ware is bound up in centuries of Japanese history and tradition, closely linked to Japanese tea ceremony and the customs of Zen Buddhism. The 20th century western Raku process is praised for its spontaneous nature and unpredictable results, often strikingly coloured with random and expressive markings. Contemporary Western Raku ware was often described as a pastiche of past Japanese masterpieces [2] but Smith's innovations revived the medium. [3] His ability to execute planned geometric surface decoration with high levels of detail and precision was previously unseen.

Smith enjoyed the speed with which Raku could produce results. [4] Pots are not shut away in a kiln for days but require quick working, even at the molten stages, when the body and glazes are still hot. [5] Despite the spontaneous tendencies in Raku, Smith sought to exert limitations and parameters over the process with the aim to produce specific, precise results. Designs were meticulously planned before firing, masked off with tape and the glaze sprayed on for an even result. Smith would even manipulate the extent to which crazing would occur on the interior glazed surfaces with the application of damp clothes for rapid cooling. He designed a kiln of his own that would fire quicker and did not require pots to be moved for the final reduction process. To achieve the desired levels of precision Smith approached Raku solely as a ceramic technique, removing it entirely from its historic traditions. [6]

The red and black body and simple geometric pattern wrapped around the circumference reference Smith's interest in Ancient Greek pottery of the same colours, as well as its tendency for story-telling decoration. [7] The pattern morphs in its progression around the vessel and the changing shapes suggest a journey or evolution. [8] In this, the vessel urges movement from the viewer to observe the narrative, activating the space around it. The vessel becomes more than a container of space, rather a larger volume to be contemplated in space.

These late 1970s Raku bowls also make early reference to key preoccupations with the Vessel, examining the sense and capacity of containment. The Raku bowls have an obvious and recognisable vessel form that the viewer may associate with functional wares.

Here the vertical sides and trimmed rim infer a strict utilitarianism; only the geometric design circumvents the delineation between the inside and outside of this vessel. Where some of Smith's other Raku bowls feature an uneven edge, as if the clay has been stretched to its very limits, here the harshly squared rim suggests this vessel is no more or less than intended by the maker, a strict measure of volume and containment.

Contrastingly, at the base of the bowl, these suggestions of certainty and stability are challenged. [9] The slightness of the slope blurs the demarcation of the walls and base, and contact with the supporting surface is hazy in the shadow of the bowl. The uncertain relationship between the vessel and the surface creates an uneasiness, subverting its 'vessel-ness' and forcing the viewer to look again.

Natalie Baerselman le Gros, October 2020

[1] Paul Rice, *British Studio Ceramics* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2002), p. 146.

[2] Anthony Wells-Cole, 'Martin Smith: A historical perspective by Anthony Well-Cole', in *Forms around a Vessel: Ceramics by Martin Smith* exhibition catalogue (Leeds: Leeds Art Gallery and Leeds Art Collections Fund, 1981), pp. 3-4 (p. 3).

[3] Rice, p. 146.

[4] Martin Smith, 'Forms around a vessel', in *Forms around a Vessel: Ceramics by Martin Smith* exhibition catalogue (Leeds: Leeds Art Gallery and Leeds Art Collections Fund, 1981), pp. 5-14 (p.7).

[5] Interview with Martin Smith, phone call 10/09/2020.

[6] Smith, pp. 5-14 (p.7).

[7] Smith, pp. 5-14 (p. 10).

[8] Interview with Martin Smith, phone call 10/09/2020.

[9] Alison Britton, 'Within Walls', in *Martin Smith, Balance and Space, Ceramics 1976-1996* exhibition catalogue (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1996), pp. 9-30 (p. 24).

Further Reading

Leeds Art Gallery, *Forms around a Vessel: Ceramics by Martin Smith* exhibition catalogue (Leeds: Leeds Art Gallery and Leeds Art Collections Fund, 1981).

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, *Martin Smith, Balance and Space, Ceramics 1976-1996* exhibition catalogue (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1996).

Paul Rice and Christopher Gowing, *British Studio Ceramics in the 20th Century* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1989).

Paul Rice, *British Studio Ceramics* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press Ltd, 2002).

Oliver Watson, *British Studio Pottery: The Victoria & Albert Museum Collection* (London: Phaidon, 1990).

<http://martinsmith.uk.net>
