



Sicilian Fusion Piece

Martin Smith

Not on display

Title/Description: Sicilian Fusion Piece

Artist/Maker: Martin Smith

Born: 1981 c.

Object Type: Sculpture

Materials: Ceramic

Measurements: h. 100 x w. 120 d. 80mm

Accession Number: 50566

Historic Period: 20th century

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Credit Line: Donated by a private donor

The end of the 1970s saw a shift in Martin Smith's work away from Raku and the thrown form. Enjoying Raku for its dense black colour in contrast with the softness of the fired material, Smith found similar qualities in red earthenware and appreciated its humble domestic connotations and the associations of the flowerpot. [1]

This vessel is slab built, each wall is cut from a larger block of clay and adhered with a clay slip. The rough, striated interior texture is from the process of cutting slabs from the block. Smith has then painted this surface with a darker clay slip. In maintaining and even highlighting this texture, Smith draws attention to the medium's once plastic materiality and allows the texture to be aesthetically appreciated, rather than just a mechanical result.

In vast contrast to this, the ceramic vessel is clad in aluminium of the same thickness as the slab walls. The brushed, hard metal surface creates an opposition that heightens the tactility of the clay. However, the only visible part of the original ceramic form is the thin rim between the aluminium and the slip, removing the vessel from its ceramic-ness. [2] Paired with the worked stone pedestal, these interventions demonstrate Smith's heightened attention to the clay after firing, working the piece beyond the kiln, a practice that would command much of his future work and often see him described as 'more of a mason, then a potter' [sic]. [3]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Smith made many extended research trips to the Mediterranean and found new preoccupations in its architecture. Smith became interested in the nature of the pedestal or plinth and its relationship to the object it displays, often citing the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius at the Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome, displayed on a plinth by Michelangelo, made itself some 1400 years later. [4] This bowl is part of a series that includes a supporting element, much like a pedestal or plinth, and Smith interrogates the interaction between the two bodies and the role of elevation that one has to the other. The union of separate parts (statue and plinth, vessel and pedestal) fuse to make a third composition that affords them prominence in the surrounding space and draws attention. [5]

For this series, as the title suggests, Smith also found inspiration in the ancient sites of Sicily. In particular, at Selinunte, a valley of Ancient Greek temples now collapsed following an historic earthquake. Smith recalls how monolithic columns lie as rubble in their separate elements, undoing the image of stability and immovability that these temples would have once had. [6] In this piece, the relationship between the object and plinth is similarly destabilised by the dramatic slope at which the fusion of the two bodies occur. No longer is the plinth a supporting, elevating object but the composition appears precarious. The similar blocky, angled shapes of the two bodies recall imagery of once perfectly matched now tumbled column shafts, perhaps even a hint of entasis is suggested in one shape being larger than the other.

Despite the influence of ancient sites and architectural elements, Smith maintains his interest in the vessel form. The colour contrast between the clay/slip and the aluminium draws the viewers' attention to the rim and internal space of the vessel. [7] Viewed from different angles, the vessel's interior is cave-like and close, its capacity is unclear, but the deep opening on one wall negates this, letting in shafts of light.

Natalie Baerselman le Gros, November 2020

[1] 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.11).

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

[3] 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).

[4] Smith, pp. 5-14 (p. 12).

[5] Smith, pp. 5-14 (p. 12).

[6] Interview with Martin Smith, email 30/10/2020.

[7] Interview with Martin Smith, email 30/10/2020.

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>
