



Bent Elliptical Piece

Martin Smith

Not on display

Title/Description: Bent Elliptical Piece

Artist/Maker: Martin Smith

Born: 1982 c.

Object Type: Sculpture

Materials: Ceramic, Redware, Slate

Measurements: h. 100 x w. 85 d. 90mm

Accession Number: 50568

Historic Period: 20th century

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This low-level, leaning bowl is press-moulded from the mitred segments of a single ellipse. First sculpted in plaster, the form is then distorted before the clay is introduced to receive its impression. A simple organic ellipse is twisted and made awkward in this off-balance bowl. This piece draws on the viewer's experiences with functional vessels and our expectations of such a vessel. [1] In doing so it more explicitly interrogates the theory of the vessel where some of Smith's other pieces have only enquired.

Many people's relationship with a vessel of any kind is often associated with function, usually domestic or culinary, be it a plate or bowl for dining or cooking, a vase to hold flowers, a beaker or mug to drink from. A key requirement for the successful use of these objects is stability. A functional vessel is required to have a stable base and uncompromised connectivity to whatever surface the user is going to place it on. Even a decorative vessel generally should be somewhat stable. Smith disrupts this in the overtly rounded base of this vessel. [2] The bowl's connection to the surface is so slight it is lost in the shadow it creates. The lack of discernible base means the behaviour and image of this vessel changes each time it is placed, it may rest further in one direction than it did previously, and there is no proscribed viewpoint, front or back. This dis-interaction between the horizontal and the vertical refers back to Smith's earlier Raku bowls, many of which create a similar uneasiness in their lack of stability.

Vessel users may also expect a certain correlation between the exterior and interior form. The volume of the interior space, generally, tends to mirror the shape and size of the exterior, give or take the material body of the vessel. Smith again subverts this. [3] The interior of Bent Elliptical Piece is not only considerably less in volume but is also a completely different shape from the outside, not reflecting any of the angles and impressions of the exterior. This suggests the walls are thicker in places, this bowl may be heavier than expected. Its vessel-ness, the sense of contained space, is compromised.

The mismatching interior and exterior volumes of this bowl is reminiscent of historical archaic vessels such as the amphora or lekythos of ancient Greece. [4] These were storage vessels that ranged from simple utilitarian pottery to ornate show pieces. Those owned by the elite were often status symbols, large vessels storing the most expensive oils or wines, the vastness of the vessel demonstrating sheer wealth in the quantity it could carry. However a number of archaeological examples, particularly of lekythos, suggest the interior space of some were much smaller than the exterior suggested, therefore not needing to hold much liquid to appear full. A ruse of elite misrepresentation. The interior of Smith's vessel is also coloured with a yellow slip, perhaps suggesting a delicious libation is held within.

The associations with classical pottery traditions is continued in the pairing of red and black. The interaction of the red clay body and the black slate top visually references the dramatic contrasting

red and black decorations of Attic Greek wares. Particularly in the orientation, often the rim and flared opening would be painted black to offset and border the decoration on the red body, Smith's materials echo the ancient vessels.

The placing of the slate draws attention to the rim of the vessel and the outside perimeter is changed. The transitional surface that marks the termination of the exterior surface and its transformation into the interior is exaggerated and, a typically small surface area, is expanded into an entire plane. The introduction of a new material disturbs its ceramic-ness and the vessel looks almost chopped in half. [5] The viewer can imagine this is a cross section of a larger vase, referencing some of Smith's other architecturally inspired works.

The materiality of the slate bears similarities and differences to clay. The two materials share a metamorphic relationship, both natural materials extracted from the ground. [6] Clay begins in a plastic and impressionable state, made hard through firing from human intervention, and it becomes solid and shrunk. Slate however is made hard naturally through extended compression. Laminated and inflexible, it must be cut with a blade, or ground to submission, yet when fired the material acts like puff pastry, each layer separating. This very contrast draws attention to those special qualities of clay that Smith so enjoys.

This bowl, in its compromised vessel-ness and contestable ceramic-ness, forces the spectator to look again. This bowl operates in a way that is unexpected and the intentions of the maker must be considered. The viewer becomes an active part in the contemplation of the vessel as it occupies and objectifies place and space as a container and an examination of containers.

Natalie Baerselman le Gros, January 2021

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

[2] Interview with Martin Smith

[3] Interview with Martin Smith

[4] Lekythos, CR 75, 1982, review of forms around vessel

[5] Interview with Martin Smith

[6] Interview with Martin Smith

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).

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

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

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

<http://martinsmith.uk.net>
