



Quirk

Alison Britton

On display**Title/Description:** Quirk**Artist/Maker:** Alison Britton (Artist)**Born:** 2019 - 2019**Object Type:** Vase**Materials:** Ceramic, Earthenware**Technique:** Slab-built**Measurements:** h. 429 x w. 290 x d. 250 mm**Accession Number:** 50860**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Arts Council England/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Art Fund

Alison Britton OBE (b.1948) is one of the UK's leading ceramic artists and writers on ceramics. She was part of a group of radical artists graduating from the Royal College of Art in the late 1970s who wanted to re-establish the 'vessel' as an abstract form, taking inspiration from Gordon Baldwin (b.1932) and Hans Coper (1920-1981). They moved away from the Leach school of Anglo-East Asian ceramics towards a more modernist aesthetic. [1]

Quirk is a wonderful example of Britton's approach to ceramics. Slab-built in earthenware with painted slip decoration, this work possesses a fresh spontaneity that challenges the viewer's expectations of the medium. Britton's originality is found in her methods of constructing semi-functional vessels. Breaking with convention, Britton first applies her slip decoration to slabs of rolled out clay before assembling the cut sections into three-dimensional forms. By allowing the surface decoration to influence her placement of the clay sections, Britton intuitively develops her abstract vessels.

Quirk was included in a solo exhibition of Alison Britton's ceramics titled *Heat-work*, held at Tommaso Corvi-Mora, London (17 September -31 October, 2020). *Heat-work* showcased works that had predominantly been made by Britton during a period of lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Quirk possesses a jaunty personality that speaks directly to the viewer. Tubular additions, or lugs, situated on either side of the vessel, jut out like ears. Backward leaning with a rounded 'pot-bellied' body and a short tubular spout, the work engages the viewer through its anthropomorphic and slightly comical characteristics. Britton extends her gestural brushwork across the three-dimensional surface of this slab-built construction, using the painted line to explore the tension

generated by the vessel's diagonal axis and its curvilinear qualities. This work has a signature and date on the base.

Britton explores the vessel as a form and its relationship to function. Her works have a loose connection to function in that they are containers, but often the size, lack of handles, or double spouts renders use in the traditional sense impossible. The surface is treated as a three-dimensional canvas with decoration applied in an abstract and painterly manner, with a limited palette of pigments.

This work is representative of Britton's oeuvre, in which she deconstructs or disassembles the vessel and reinvents its form, animating the dynamic lines of her abstracted vessels with the addition of painterly mark making. Her lively brushwork has led to comparisons with the painters Stephen Buckley (b.1944), Howard Hodgkin (1932–2017) and Sean Scully (b.1945). [2]

Britton was awarded an OBE in 1990 in recognition of her services to the applied arts, and she is a senior tutor at the Royal College of Art.

Vanessa Tothill, June 2022

[1] Paul Greenhalgh, *Ceramic, Art and Civilisation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p.452.

[2] Greenhalgh, (2020), p.452.

Further Reading

Britton, Alison, *The Work of Alison Britton. Catalogue of Exhibition* (London: Crafts Council, 1979)

Britton, Alison *Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design. Occasional Papers* (London: 2014)

Dormer, Peter and David Cripps, *Alison Britton in Studio* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1985)

Dormer, Peter, *The New Ceramics: Trends and Traditions* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986)

Greenhalgh, Paul, *Ceramic, Art and Civilisation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020)

Britton, Alison and Tanya Harrod, *Alison Britton, Ceramics in Studio* (London: Bellew Publishing, 1990)

Sandino, Linda, *Complexity and ambiguity: the ceramics of Alison Britton* (London: 2000)
