



Quarter Plate II.

Whole Fragments

Recent Ceramics by Jim Hamlyn

Article by Ken Neil

NOTWITHSTANDING THE FACT THAT IT IS INCREASINGLY common for contemporary artists to avoid committing to just one working practice, Scotland-based Jim Hamlyn has employed a remarkably diverse range of materials and formats in his artwork to date. He has, to name only a few strategies: written Haiku poetry in short-hand; fixed plastic guttering to gallery walls; installed granite and glass public sculpture; submerged light-bulbs in water; made a table rain; and, most recently, doctored ceramic plates.¹ While it is the critic's cardinal sin to generalise in the face of this kind of diversity, it might be ventured, nonetheless, that Hamlyn is fundamentally interested in questions of origin. This running theme is mooted by the diversity of his practice, for such varied work implicitly quizzes the artist's status as stable originator and, thus, the status of the artwork as origin of stable meaning – issues which his new ceramics bring into sharp focus.

Shown for the first time at Edinburgh gallery '15 Scotland Street' as part of the exhibition *All Is Leaf*,² the ceramic pieces were cleverly heralded by a digital video touchstone which Hamlyn placed in the foyer. Here, four versions of Japanese Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon* were running, one in each quarter of a split screen. Playing synchronously, all four were narratively identical, but each gradually became distinct to the eye because of tonal differences in the original film stock and, also, more significantly, because of the subtitling of each. All subtitles were in English, but what with one film, for example, being a translation into English from a Chinese titling of the original Japanese screenplay, and another being an American translation from the Japanese, the different wording of the subtitles was intriguingly at odds with the temporal harmony of the visual sequences. *Rashomon* was carefully chosen to enhance this resonant dissonance. Murder and rape have been committed and the film comprises the tangled narratives which are the four protagonists' testimonies.

At its simplest, then, *Rashomon* makes manifest the conceptual couplet which is that any truth can only exist through its telling and that that telling varies with each perspective taken on the truth. So, Hamlyn gave a film of four strands at least another four, and what Kurosawa was driving at filmically Hamlyn activated as a means by which one could approach his new ceramic pieces. That approach was informed, then, by the discourse which surrounds the fluidity of meaning, the fragility of origins and any artist's forever tenuous testimony of authority over the precise meaning of his production.

This discourse is engaged in the ceramics by way of reference to more storytelling: it is the famous Willow narrative and its varied visual characterisations which underpin the new works. The Willow story serves Hamlyn's abiding interests well, for this is a tale of

indeterminable historical origin which now has several textual and pictorial versions in circulation.

To explore the relevance of the Willow story to his fundamental concern with origin, Hamlyn skillfully combines two seemingly contrasting techniques. One is additive, the other reductive, with both, in turn, drawing equal attention to the complexity of cumulated stories and to the futility of attempting an archaeology of absolute truth in the light of that complexity. Lest these ceramics be read as a tardy statement about postmodern fracture, one which repackages an already multi-versioned story, it is important to note that Hamlyn takes care to reconstitute the work of art as itself a temporary origin of a kind, a creative act which resists the fatalism of the postmodern idea of rootless signification. The materiality of ceramic assists this positive agenda.

Quarter Plate II, 2005, is one plate made up of quarter sections from four original plates, each one of which displayed a different Willow pattern. The outcome is a combination piece whose fragmented structure is made clearly visible by the disjointed circumference: the symbolic continuity of the circle has been interrupted by the splicing of the patterns. And yet, on closer inspection, the Willow story is still readable from the composite pieces and, surprisingly, there is a near perfect linking of the fence and the border pattern in the lower two quarters. Having reduced different 'original' versions to segments, a new version is collaged, but far from being unintelligibly fractured, it retells the narrative in its own way and establishes by doing so a new origin for the Willow legend.

With *Untitled*, 2005, five different ceramic renditions of the Willow story have been strategically masked with white oil paint leaving on each one the salient features of the willow tree and the two birds – the resurrected spirits of the murdered lovers. Here Hamlyn has isolated elements of the story by additive means, searching, it seems, for those common aspects which might hold fast across different tellings. But the observed subtle variation in the common elements actually draws attention to the fact that in Willow lore the birds can be pigeons in one version, doves in another, unspecified in yet more, and even absent in some. The artist tells us that it is the ever-present aspects of stories, the central components and characters, which provide narrative stability but which also afford opportunities for ongoing variation. So, by adding the white paint, Hamlyn reduces the pictorial elements of the story, but precise meaning does not result from the simplification because his process highlights the range of 'editions' in circulation and prevents any one from being privileged over the others.

Sandblasted, 2005, is clearly constructed by a reductive method. As the title suggests, one half of a Willow Pattern plate has been sandblasted to reveal, figuratively speaking, what lies beneath the story. But the

scraping away of surface, in the process of what might be called an archaeology of meaning, draws a blank. The truth of a story, we discover again, does not lie precious and immutable beneath the representation of that narrative. As the *Rashomon* video tutored, truth should not be seen as an indissoluble nugget couched in its protective story, for it is discovered instead woven into the surface of its telling.

Just as the *Rashomon* work acted as touchstone, these ceramics are a distillation of the spirit which connects the disparate methods Hamlyn employs. The new ceramic works, like the majority of the artist's projects, are guided by an enduring interest in philosophical conundrums; an interest, it is important to note, which goes beyond what may be *de rigueur* in postmodern art theory and one which gives Hamlyn's body of work to date its positivist and engaging character.

A philosophical influence over the years has undoubtedly been Ludwig Wittgenstein, and a number of Wittgenstein's language games. None so clearly as the final ceramic work in this collection, *To Witt*, 2005. Here Hamlyn indulges in a light-hearted act of punning at the same time as offering an incisive visualisation of Wittgenstein's philosophical questioning of the nature and location of truth. Four plates of varying diameters are combined to produce a centripetal final plate, which, like *Quarter Plate II*, flirts with fracture in the compilation of a readable version of the Willow Story. With this work, supported by *Sandblasted* in particular, Hamlyn invokes a Wittgensteinian premise that the origins of truths are not to be found by some mysterious inner process. Rather, a reductive or concise sense of origin might only be found through an additive process, one which takes place, importantly, in a public realm. The material ceramic truth, as it were, of *To Witt* is a product of layering, not of paring away, and thus it models that strand of Wittgenstein's thinking which recognised the centrality of being in the world, the finding of sense and significance in relation to others, not by, to use the archaeology analogy once more, some sort of excavation of the self.

Hamlyn's ceramics, being a material whole of cumulated parts, readily recommend then, following Wittgenstein, that we might better think less about where in a narrative the stable truth is embedded, and more about how truths are collectively agreed in an additive and interpersonal way. As Hamlyn eloquently implies across the gamut of his diverse practice, there is nothing quite as important as art in the cumulative social processes which add up to collective agreements. Art is in this way an arena for constructive storytelling rather than a showcase for predetermined truths. This conviction is one stable point which is consistently metaphoricised in these



Sandblasted. 2005.



To Witt. 2005.

stimulating ceramics, and one which has provided an origin of a kind for Jim Hamlyn's incredibly varied and poetic outputs.

REFERENCES:

1. See <http://www.jimhamlyn.co.uk>
2. *All Is Leaf* was at gallery '15 Scotland Street', Edinburgh, from 30th July to 27th August 2005. Artists: Jim Hamlyn, Annette Heyer, Graeme Murray, Louise Cattrell and Lise Bratton.

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