

## **Handheld Gardens, by Adam Geczy.**

WHEN THE TATE GALLERY BOUGHT CARL ANDRÉ'S EQUIVALENT VIII OF 1966, NO-ONE, AMIDST THE SCANDAL IT CREATED, COMMENTED THAT IT WAS A CERAMIC, A RADICALLY REDUCED, INDUSTRIAL CRAFT OBJECT.

What kind of object was it? Two layers, each of sixty bricks - André's work marks one of the first major statements in the Conceptualist quest to raise the artwork above the level of the palpable by making works which took the emphasis off themselves in order to draw attention to idea and motivation, site and context. It was also an indispensable component to the 'But is it Art?' debate that accompanied the experiments with dematerialisation that began in the late 'sixties. The art of disappearance, with its focus on the idea, was one of the major horizons which took art as far from the art-craft debate as one could get, simply because the object was surrendered to intangible components such as the spirit of place, outer-worldly intention, evocation and so on; notions germane to art for a long time but this time challenged and crystallised and made to operate at their outermost limits. The artists in this field were devout on collapsing the genres of art making, so that language, painting, sculpture and where they were placed, were all thrown into one inseparable dialogue.

Typical to this practice was the use of objects - or object surrogates such as mirrors, as in the case of Robert Smithson - to draw attention to a natural site, to distil an awareness of the natural which, mythically, had been usurped by the dark complications of urbanisation and technology. They were objects whose sole purpose was to disappear in order to generate a rare experience of Nature which our habitual, acculturated perceptions would normally prevent us from having.

Minimalism's extension into what has been called the 'expanded field', in which the gallery walls are perfunctory but not physical limits, the stress on raw materials, the reverential experience of the land and a renewed articulation of ecological issues, saw many artists searching for ways to restore the role of art as facilitating a deeper awareness of the fundamentals of place and living.

What is most ironic is that, amidst this legacy, theories of the craft object are all but unobserved. The art-craft debate, alive in the respect that craft-artists still felt subjugated, was thought a redundant debate. The craft object was the earlier bedfellow to the 'Is it Art?' debate, and craft was and still is to differing extents the word for the lesser alternative to art's super-natural potential. Craft was of the earth, art focused on the escape. It is ironic that the materials of the Minimalists and Land Artists were all among those which are in other ways used by craft practitioners: metal, wood, stone and raw fibres. The manipulation of the environment could not be more literally present in ceramics, which is a fashioning of the earth. In ancient cultures, the type of clay, the origin of the ceramic was an important part of its value and meaning. Moreover, the promises that lie in narratives of ritual and site-specificity are central to craft.

André's Equivalent VIII, as with most works of this kind, was part of a continuum of work dealing with horizontal planes: paths, floors and passages; it was like a material synecdoche (hence the title) of the pathways he traced through parks and forests using basic geometric forms. And it is a ceramic. And they were ceramic bricks, utilitarian objects, ergo craft. True, its bold recontextualisation meant that it fitted into an 'art' dialogue, yet it is still an annoying paradox that a ceramic must compete within a welter of debates to become more than a mere crafted object, however beautiful. The other difference between André's work and craft that one could concede, is that the epoch of artistic transcendence, of which André and his peers represent a

significant cusp, eschewed touch whereas the craft-artist must value it, and problematise it at best.

When speaking about a ceramic one will immediately encounter it on the level of a tradition which encompasses a whole philosophy, if not a religion, as with the Japanese or Ancient Greeks, permeative in its perennial manifestation, rigorously observed. Toni Warburton works within two traditions: ceramic objects which are largely more built than thrown, and object assemblages and ready-mades which draw broadly from the languages of Surrealism, Russian Constructivism and the Earthworks of the '70s. Her relationship to ceramics is strange and complex, for ceramics are both central to her practice even when it is not present, yet when present, the ceramic object alights upon many issues, not necessarily to which the issue of ceramics is at best peripheral. Like the Land Art Minimalist (who made smaller objects to inform the larger), Warburton has always been interested in the question of the integrity of site and origin, as well as forging geometrical constructions out of found and fabricated objects. Her works extend from outdoor sculpture to small hand-held curios, from the monolithic to the incidental. In her case, the tension between the natural and the made are seldom absent, nor is the difference between the perceptions and expectations we have of each.

The smaller ceramic objects since 1997 reach back to an early Baroque aesthetic in which a form is a compound of smaller forms. Instead of beginning and ending as a whole, the resolution of the object is as a marriage between once uncertain, formless parts. The works from her 1997 exhibition at Mori Gallery were inspired to a small extent after the sixteenth-century French potter Bernard Palissy whose work is characterised as a dense, sometimes informative, sometimes decorative, amalgam of rich visual information, relying on the deep colour of the

glazes (which have retained their brilliance) and subtle undulations of form. Even more than Palissy, the provenance for these objects lies in the work of Léon Arnou, a nineteenth century ceramicist-sculptor who became part of John Minton's workshop as a result of the repatriation of a number of French people following the 1848 revolution. The works produced by Arnou and Minton were remarkable for the intense coloration of their glazes which held a before unseen detail because of their resistance to bleeding.

This small but highly significant development meant that the ceramics were incorporated where they previously had not: the domestic bibelot quickly enlarged into figures and shapes which had a burliness well remote from the brittle, light subtlety of Meissin figurines, and served sympathetically as brilliant open-air statues, ideal garden ornaments. Their clear articulation of form was not lost on contemporary classicists, who rightly compared the vividness of these relatively large free-standing forms to the painted bronze sculptures of Ancient Greece. These fine works of Minton and Arnou are relatively unnoticed today, conceivably because of their indifference to the modernist aesthetic of reductionism. The complex decorativeness of these objects and their sympathetic marriage to outdoor, cultivated garden settings were apt reminders of the etymology of Rococo - which had begun to enjoy a revival in the mid-to-late nineteenth century - of Rocaille, meaning pebble-work.

Warburton's Blue Quatrefoil Dish, Brittle Star Bowl and the Angophera Vase all presciently resume the conversation of the approaches to decorative ceramics from Palissy to Minton. And, common to the aristocratic play of the garden aesthetic, these objects confound the boundary between the forest clearings and moist man-made lakes, land and marine life. Like the long line of garden stone and ceramic sculptures of which Warburton's works are part, the role of

reference to natural forms is less as mimicry and more as exaggeration, since, indeed, the garden was more than a casement of nature but a highly complex and contested set of signs. It was meant as a microcosm both of nature and the state; a place where the contradictions unresolvable in political or pure philosophy, philosophies of the conflicts between humans and nature, could be resolved aesthetically. It is important that these works of Warburton's be seen, then, as more than direct responses to an environment: potter goes to the sea, walks in the garden, gets inspired, makes an object. Instead, they are as much responses to the ways in which certain natural forms are favoured over others in decorative art; how they are translated, the retranslation of these visual languages and the meanings these stylisations and reformations of nature are made to uphold. Warburton's works are responses to responses to nature in a medium whose relation to the earth ought never be forgotten. The series of these particular works is called Wake, with connotations of the residue, distant impulsion, and restitution and change after something has parted.

The Angophera Vase is the most ambitious of this body of work. A grotto reduced to the dimensions of table-ware, the vase reads as a composite of at least six horizontal layers, referring to land strata, the deposits left behind on a beach. It represents the way collectors and the seventeenth century architects of mock-natural environments attempted to give natural phenomena a sense of order - an order which has its own unaccountable anomalies. Living with these objects for a little while leads to the realisation that they are neither kitsch nor aesthetically heavy, despite the large quantity of visual information which these objects have. This is also borne out by the ease with which these objects combine with others of a different ilk.

Another aspect of these works is the equilibrium between asymmetrical and symmetrical features, roughness of design and delicacy, smoothness and roughness of touch. It is a balance which Warburton developed further after considering similar relationships in Japanese ko-kutani ware, which have parallels with the European trends from which Warburton has drawn, in the respect of the intermediate relationship between domestic and natural order; the boundary between of calculated and incalculable disorder.

This mid-wayness is strongly present in all the objects. With its decorative encrustations of shells and seaweed tendrils, the quatrefoil dish assumes at once the nature of a small rockpool and a dish with a careful arrangement of food. Other works such as the Brittle Star Bowl and the Diamond Dish betray their possible use as bowls with holes throughout. The object undermining its use recurs again in the elegant suite of mixed-media works, *Initial* (1998); one work, *Tumbler*, was a cup perforated with holes, hence a vessel in which interior and exterior is drawn inexorably together. These works are investigations into the way marine forms, whether shells or rocks, are in a constant process of accretion and erosion. In the midst of this process natural forms take on relatively stable and predictable shapes; then these shapes gather and constellate in a random manner. Each of Warburton's objects are like metaphors for a place and an experience; they are not simply decorative evocations, but are a portion of a far greater personal experience which an object cannot fulfil. They objectify the way in which a memory of a place is its own composition taken somewhat arbitrarily, and has its roots more in the sensibility that experiences that place than the place itself. The works communicate, in a delicious and sumptuous way, the incommunicably private pleasure we derive in an object taken from its environment, like a conch or piece of flotsam.

This argument, carried out in visual terms, between an object made to look curious or beautiful, and objects which exist as such without our intervention was already in place in the Sleight series two years before. On angular plinths jutting from the wall, Warburton placed a variety of small knots, some found, others of white rope like that used by illusionist magicians, and another series of bronze. The title, taken from the phrase, 'sleight of hand', explored an ongoing concern of Warburton's which is the relative traces and potentialities of touch in an object.

Warburton's exploration of the knot brought the private experience with clay into close proximity to weaving, Warburton's knots being like magnified fragments of a weave (and at this point it might be observed that Warburton's vessels, riddled with holes, have a singular relationship to loosely woven fabric). The only twist in these small works to the condition of tactility and dexterity, which the crafted object - stated in the name - is helpless to avoid, was a one-off attempt to avoid tactility. To this end, the found knots were chopped-off from lengths due to the frustration at the impossibility of untying them, fragments in which the hand is at a loss to play a part. They were tragi-comic ready-mades which are the remnants of failure and anxiety. As the title, Sleight permits, if the hand passes near these things, it is with lightness (*legerdemain*), in order to give the impression that touch did not occur. But in contrast to the magician's aplomb, the air about these works is avowedly neurotic, artistic solutions wrought from the remains infuriatingly insoluble minor problems. Obdurately evading touch (the artist is the first to accept this), is already a way of acknowledging the premium of touch. And the bronze knots - which visually have an absurdly scatological character to them - are wonderful items to hold.

In the same year as Sleight, Warburton produced a couple of small 'earth art' sculptures which returned to the obsession with the traces and residues of touch, though in this case the touch of

natural forces. In *Patterns of Rain*, she arranged bricks and pavers on grass for simple, decorative shapes. It was a work in two incarnations (or three counting the photograph): after the grass had weathered, the bricks were removed and the shape the bricks left on the grass duplicated with a white outline. With these works Warburton artfully quoted the work of André and other artists like Smithson who designed work for the gallery destined to inform the larger projects outdoors. Only with *Patterns of Rain* it was the reverse, the land and environment works (for there are others, such as the collaborative works with Susan Ostling executed for the 1998 Canberra Sculpture Forum) inform what is made on a much smaller scale - the ceramics and the incidental works which subtend them. Like any good Voltairean, she tends her own garden well, but only a compact, compressed scale. In her works the grotto, the private inlet, the garden clearing is continually present, as is the hand, the viewer's no less than the artist's. To scan an object with the hand is mentally to take a walk in the garden.

#### Endnotes

· An exhibition of Toni Warburton's new work was shown at Mori Gallery, Sydney, 26 May - 12 June, 1999. Toni Warburton is represented by Mori Gallery, 168 Day St, Sydney

· *Catchment*, an installation by Toni Warburton of mould blown glass beakers was at Newspace, Sydney, 29 March - 8 April 2000, tel/fax: +61 (0)2 9555 6137; email: [sasca@mail.usyd.edu.au](mailto:sasca@mail.usyd.edu.au)

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**Images: Some of the artworks mentioned can be seen in the group exhibition *Wake***

<http://www.toniwarburton.com.au/toni-warburton-wake-ceramics-mori-gallery-1997/>