

TRANSFORMATION

Vivienne Foley talks to Rashna Mody-Clark

At first glance Vivienne Foley's ceramics seem to have become more conceptual. Her new horizontal pieces shown for the first time at the V&A in 2004, can only be described as sculpture though they defy the norms. There are long forms which roll and oscillate and are as light as shells found on a beach. There are cellular forms which interconnect with fine tubes and others where concave sections are joined oyster fashion to make long concertinas. They are ridged or smooth, black or white.

These constructions defy the medium. In terms of scale and complexity they should not be possible in thrown porcelain. Our expectations have been challenged. This could be laboratory or playroom.

The classical throwing for which Foley is known is still the core skill without which her new work could not exist. During her career each phase of her work has produced its own distinctive forms which have developed from an aesthetic concerned primarily with balance and proportion. The tall glazed forms with lustrous black or crackled white surfaces have been replaced with something strikingly different, but in fact there has been a smooth progression from the conventional to the abstract.

In the mid 90's her elegant vases developed in a more organic way when she made the necks off-centre and the mouths flared and shaped to sweep up at an angle. These works were alive in a different way from the refined and sensual classics yet they still retained a turned foot ring, nipped in waist, a neck and a mouth.

Three years ago tall forms with sinuous outlines and long arching necks dominated her exhibition at James Graham & Sons, New York. The openings had become so constricted they were merely long passageways for air into the rounded bodies which somehow gave the forms extra buoyancy.

"As soon as you go off-centre forms have zoomorphic overtones. With a vertical axis my work became bird like, when I turned the same forms on their side I was reminded of simpler life forms. Suddenly I was back at the microscopic level and thinking of amoeba and spiragira. Simple cells linked together. They can hook together or roll apart. They are mostly made without openings which give the forms a special dynamic. Wet forms feel bouncy on the wheel when they are enclosed and I want to keep this quality throughout the firing process.

I am interested in duality and transformation. If I open my studio window the dominant sound is of scaffolder's yelling to each other. If I close the window all I can hear is the sound of a blackbird singing on the chimney pot. It is the same space, the same air.

My technique is the same as ever, the forms are full or constricted, yet now they are different. Turn over a classic vase and it becomes a squid. When throwing on the wheel I revisit old ideas and they become new again, transformed by imperceptible movements of time and experience. As Hamada said "the classic is always new".

Foley's photography plays an important role. As an interpretive tool the lens lifts her work onto a different plane and she finds poetic and abstract dimensions which can influence future concepts. Another consequence is a portfolio of images which are beautiful in their own right.

"We are beguiled by surfaces. Our perceptions are hugely influenced by colour and texture. My white on white images make works look ephemeral but with a matt black slip the same piece could be made of cast iron. The visual weight is a lie but changes the way we feel."

Technically this new series is the most demanding ever. Unlike an artist working in two dimensions, where a brush stroke or pencil mark is definitive, a potter's last imprint on the clay is only the first in a dramatic process of transformation. Foley's challenge is to produce flowing forms from sections joined with engineering precision. With the new work there can be up to ten thrown sections which are luted together on the wheel. Some are only 2cm in diameter and can be up to 30cm high, with walls being only 5mm thick. These joins have to be wet enough to adhere but stiff enough not to distort. They have to be strong to withstand temperatures of over 12,000°C without cracking.

"Choosing the right clay body has led to difficult decisions about which qualities are most important - perfectly smooth outline or purity of colour. A porcelain with the finest particle size and whiteness also has the highest shrinkage which shows up the throwing rings and joins when fired. This could be cured by firing to a lower temperature (pieces are perfect at the bisque stage) but I need a fully vitrified body for polishing and the right 'porcelain feel'. Another standard body I use has a lower shrinkage and is kinder to use but has a greyer fired appearance which is more suitable for glazed pieces".

A glaze layer though never disguising the form will reflect light back and cover minor blemishes. Unglazed surfaces are much more demanding. To Foley the feel of a piece is as important as the first visual impact. The silky smooth finish achieved by laboriously polishing with several grades of diamond abrasives is much more tactile than a glazed surface.

“As I polish I am in touch again with my original throwing, and I like the feeling that, combined with lightness, the piece is so slick it might leap out of my hands like a fish”

Foley has always been dedicated and persistent with her explorations, ever ready to push the materials to the limit, but why stay with a technique that is so difficult, what is it about throwing that is so alluring?

“The nearest analogy I can find to throwing is that of a dancer where every breath and movement defines character. The nature of a clay shape can be changed by one generous movement, or by shaving off a millimetre. The full expression of a dancer can only be captured on film. The extreme heat of a kiln preserves a potter’s physicality”.

The connection the viewer has to the work is less subjective. Our response is instant and instinctual. Either a piece works (that tiny jump of the heart) or it doesn’t. Foley will move on regardless of what is expected. The process is as important as the product.

If the success of the series Connected Forms and Rolling Forms is anything to go by, Vivienne Foley should continue to take risks, both with the method and the medium.

Sydney born Rashna Mody-Clark is an international freelance designer and art director based in London. She won the Press & Publishing Awards ‘Designer of the Year’ award for her work as Art Director on House & Garden magazine.

*Photography by Vivienne Foley.
www.viviennefoley.com*