

“Here and there a noble form has been in some measure degraded by an excess of ornament. The fingers seem to have cast off all control and to have run away in a riot of plastic extravagance...Deplorable lapses occur; one need only name a pot from Nottingham which displays on each side two leering masks, and a monstrous puzzle-jug from Oxford [which] has in full relief on one side a defective human figure, its ungainly double-bulbous body covered with scalework. Such vagaries are due to a tendency to unbridled facetiousness which is a very English trait, and can be no less irritating in its vulgarity when met within the present context of literature, as for instance the admirers of the great creative genius of Dickens.”

From *Medieval English Pottery*, Bernard Rackham, 1948

The use of a literary analogy here is a good one: Ceramic remnants provide us with us a linear mode of historical events so useful to story-telling - site-by-site, pottery sherds date *everything else* in archaeology. Telling time as it does in the scattered rubbish of kitchen and tomb, pottery has tried to *be* everything else too. Copper, jade, peel, skin; this eternal effort to make the ceramic simulacrum is among the traditions which have led to this being such a doctrinaire medium, and is one which the work of Gillian Lowndes so easily cheats.

Lowndes saw the ability of fired material to crush time, move sideways. Her work is heavily freighted with familiar motifs of ceramic technique, yet appears split, as though seen through a compound eye. She used the pottery kiln not as a reliable tool, but as a black-box system – withholding useful mysteries akin to those of the human brain. Wavering somewhere between rotten past and chalky, apocalyptic future; her combinations are left not to burn, but to think in the cave; to bathe in history and change their being. A dual “denial and celebration of the sophistication of ceramic material”¹ epitomises a transcendental knowledge both encoded in the plant, and also in the fragile afterlife and false modesty of the puritanical ceramic object.

More than any other ceramist, she often seems to have focused not on the object itself, but on the volatile atmosphere of its production. There has been a tendency in craft circles to couch her work in the realm of playfulness - experiments to see what will and will not survive 1300 degrees Celsius. However, materials here are discreetly conscripted - tortured not to writhe and spoil, but to divulge actual facts. Surfaces are peeled back in the heat, left to show sharp springs, fuses, a skull of exposed foundations.

Those parts that can at least hobble out of the smoke now emerge warped, denuded. Glass pours from a stone, bricks melt: it is a plan of hell. In Lowndes case, only after this purifying flame comes the facetiousness of decoration, the faceted-ness described by Rackham. She fired high to “point to the intensity of emotion expressed”² but many pieces are peacefully finished in the cool; in paint, string, tippex. Later works are wreathed in simple, flowerless plants.

Contrary to so many of her canonical contemporaries, there are no counterfeit ceramic effects here, no tricks, no sweating for a glaze the perfect shade of *tomato*. The materials are presented *de re* and bolted to the works like roof scales, lean-tos. The gables and gargoyles of conglomerate architecture. It is conscientious poetic truth: Sponge is sponge, cloth is cloth, yellow paint is yellow paint.

Aaron Angell, 2016

1 Victor Margrie, *Ceramic Review*, 1994

2 Gillian Lowndes in *Gillian Lowndes*, Amanda Fielding, published by Ruthin Craft Centre, 2013