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"James Tower and the landscape in which he dwelled were coeval; out of it came his leaves, fish, trees and fields of stones, clouds or spots. The magic of his work is that the relationship between figure and ground is always open. It is not clear whether we are invited to look at the negative or positive, the black or white. Whether the left forms are holes or objects, or whether they are simply the intervals between flow. There is a sense of water running between rocks, patterns on a butterfly's wing, spots on a fish's skin, clouds on a wintery day, stripes on a zebra's back, ribs of a human chest and the multiple leaves of a compressed succulent in the myriad forms of James's work. His genius was to synthesise and make of these inspirations in which he delighted things in themselves."

**Antony Gormley**

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JAMES TOWER

Timothy Wilcox (ed.)

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# JAMES TOWER

CERAMICS, SCULPTURES  
AND DRAWINGS

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# SCULPTURE, MODELLING AND POTTERY

**Conor Wilson**

All students during their time at the Academy do some work in one or more of these subjects. Instruction is given in modelling from life, work in terracotta, plaster-casting, carving in wood and stone, letter-cutting and pottery.<sup>1</sup>

In its teaching the aim of the Academy is to select elements that are learnable and teachable whatever the stylistic inclinations of teacher or student. The work of each course is enlarged by weekly seminars, lectures, reading and visits and by some of the extra-curricular activities that are possible in a residential college.<sup>2</sup>

Henry (Boys) got our music group – only about four of us – to perform the room we were sitting in. Using the intervals made vertically and horizontally by door frames, windows, brickwork and so on, we clapped the rhythms of the spaces.<sup>3</sup>

There was a constant flow of visiting artists and critics, and the atmosphere was alive with discussion and polemic. I found Clifford Ellis's ideas sympathetic and enlightened. An absence of compartmentalism and an underlying feeling that all arts were one. A constant urge for innovation and experiment. Many of my fellow artists worked in the pottery from time to time widening the range and feeling of the creative atmosphere. I now had a congenial and beautiful environment, excellent equipment for ceramics, and I was able to teach and to do my own work consistently.<sup>4</sup>

Today, whatever faculty you are working in, the buck stops at the level of vice-chancellor. There are a few glorious and inspiring exceptions, but let's be honest, how many vice-chancellors have their own (perhaps excellent) art school at the top of their list of night-time thoughts? They go to sleep worrying about winning major science grants, or their place in the rankings of international universities, or the naïve measuring of research and teaching outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Change is the essence of tradition. Our declining civilisation has largely lost the conception of tradition as continuous change by small variations – as evolution, in other words – and can produce only fashions which, one after another, appear, live for a little while and die without issue. At each death another deliberately different fashion is launched and promoted, as sterile as the one before.<sup>6</sup>

I had become familiar with the slipware and tin glaze painting of the English tradition and was struck by the freedom and verve of the decoration. The wayward, humanist

elegance, the marvellous sense of the material, the liquidity of the slip and the rich transparency of the tin glaze painting. I became aware that we had inherited a splendid tradition in ceramics in this country, characterised by an intuitive élan and spontaneity. A vitality that lifted many of these pieces from mere function to major works of art.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of a painting in a constant state of change recalls Henri Bergson’s theory of ‘duration’, which proposed an understanding of time as a constant flux rather than a series of static moments, a constant state of becoming rather than being. Bergson’s philosophy had been an important source for the Cubists and went through a revival after the Second World War; specifically, through the advocacy of the potter James Tower, he was the subject of particular interest amongst the staff at Corsham in the early 1950s.<sup>8</sup>

Bergson’s idea of the *élan vital* and Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious were assimilated into the aesthetics of pottery during the 1920s and 1930s, enabling it to become one of the few crafts to be accepted as a fine art by the Modern movement. The repercussions of this have continued to the present day. The Arts and Crafts and Studio Pottery movements, while different, both tried to promote ‘vitality’ as a key virtue; this term, supplemented by ‘virile’, ‘vigorous’, ‘organic’ and ‘alive’, coloured their descriptive language.<sup>9</sup>

In 1951 I approached Charles and Peter Gimpel with this work and they immediately agreed to show it. They were, perhaps, the first fine art gallery to show ceramics, and they are still one of the few who continue to do so. Their enthusiasm and support has been unswerving ever since, and I have continued to show there to the present day.<sup>10</sup>

This isolation from the ‘craft’ world meant that his work is far better known amongst ‘art’ collectors than it is amongst collectors of ceramics and, also, that his influence on other potters has been smaller than would be expected.<sup>11</sup>

What was important to (Roger) Fry was that their ‘felt approximation’ enliven the pottery, inviting the viewer to enter into the artist’s unconscious creative process, to feel ‘the nervous tremor’ of the creative force.<sup>12</sup>

How can we think, (Bill) Readings asks, in ‘an institution whose development tends to make thought more and more difficult, less and less necessary?’ What the transnationals and the international bureaucrats and even the foundations need and want to know is not necessarily all that the public needs or wants to know.<sup>13</sup>

Over the fired white tin glaze I pour another darker coloured glaze. When this has dried, it can be removed by any sort of tool, knife or finger, revealing the white glaze underneath. The dry powdery glaze is immensely responsive to touch, and it reflects the nervous quality of the hand far more sensitively than any brush for me.<sup>14</sup>

There should be no hierarchy of excellence within universities. A glazed ceramic pot made in Tokyo or Cornwall or Tasmania can exist at as high a level (of beauty, intellect and emotion) as a mathematical equation, a sonnet, a cure for malaria or the engineering of a dam. Each adds to our humanity and should be celebrated for doing so.<sup>15</sup>

Ceramic form is the enclosure of space, and the enclosure needs to be taunt and energetic. Clay is a slow material. Space is a fast material. A lot of the things we think of as the ultimate products of individuality are in fact products of relationships, of dyadic or triadic relations of one kind or another.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the most radical, most revolutionary movements today base themselves in indigenous communities, which are communities that see themselves as traditionalists but think of tradition itself as a potentially radical thing. So the deeper the roots you have, the more challenging things you can do with them.<sup>17</sup>

*The tree is saying things in words before words.*

*It says:* Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering.

*It says:* A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch.<sup>18</sup>

**CONTRIBUTORS**

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