

KEN EASTMAN: THE CUT OF THE LIGHT

15 March to 28 April 2018

...At some point the process begins - usually I just start, start in a gradual but steady way, trying to feel the clay, the dryness, the strength, start building. The second slab responds to the first and then I am working. Hopefully if I just keep putting things together, a life of sorts might be found, or hinted at. Keep joining clay to clay, offering up, lining up and laying down, trying different pieces to see if anything happens. Time passes - the structures grow - 7 or 8 slabs are joined and some sense of scale and dimensions are beginning to be found. I now feel the clay working - the exact amount of bend or strength that I have to work with. I build upwards and onwards, slab leaning or standing on slab - meeting its neighbour and finding how to co-exist.

...Much of my working is about trying to find a way to think about the world, to sort it out for a brief period of time - to make sense of things - to give them an order and a shape. I go to the workshop to explore, to try to make things which I don't understand and can't explain, to ask questions rather than find answers, to try to think with my hands...

Ken Eastman, 2018

Ken Eastman is now one of Europe's pre-eminent hand-builders, and on the simple evidence of this show, one of its most quietly ambitious. I say 'quietly' because this deeply thoughtful and least showy of potters works intensely and painstakingly on small groups of pieces, carrying through ideas and explorations in series, but each object is quite independent and autonomous, quite distinct in mood. He makes forms over many months, gradually building up, modifying and altering, studying and reconsidering from all angles, scrutinising the pleats, flaps and flutes of clay, the curves and projections and their relationships. This is probably his most complex sequence so far. As the surfaces and colouration have become more austere, the palette monochrome (but with subtle variations, if you look closely), the shapes have a new convolution, a pulling together of seemingly disparate parts.

They remind us of forms in nature as well as the urban environment. Eastman creates an interesting interplay between organic and human-made traces, polished and smoothed by touch and the elements. This is perhaps his most anthropomorphic work too. Pieces like 'About Time' and 'Distance Coming Closer' have their own contrapposto, their own slightly twisting, centrally-generated dynamic. One is reminded of other sculptures, for example Boccioni's 'Development of a Bottle in Space', the sense of an object opening out and interlocking with its surrounding space, emanating energy and flux, the innate tensions in apparently still objects. There is certainly a Cubist aspect, an analysis of parts in operation. There is a fluid plasticity too, the planes, blocks and sections shifting and interacting with the air and light in different ways, the nature of these shapes changing with the atmosphere. These are not easy works. That sense of continuous re-drawing and re-shaping is an implicit part of the 'finished' sculpture, an investigation of endings and beginnings, of junctures and re-directions. No surface stands still. The sturdy black 'Here and Now' is strikingly unsettled, geometric and angular in parts, and sensuously body-like

in others. There is a sense in places of the spine under the skin, both taut and soft, qualities most clearly seen in the very corporeal 'Walk with Me'. The surfaces here are crumpled and indented by gentle pressures, accentuated by precision of shadow and 'the cut of the light', to borrow Jeremy Hooker's memorable phrase.

...Work changes quite slowly - there are moments of spontaneity and gesture and at other times change is very slow and cumulative. When working with clay, time and timing are most important.

Ken Eastman, 2018

Internal space may be totally enclosed (as in 'You're not Listening') or a piece is hollow from the top. Sometimes an open vessel comprises the upper section of an otherwise sealed space. The hollow cylinders invite investigation, and we find inside more freely handled surfaces, not so closely worked. A couple of these pieces have piercings, semi-hidden openings, the apertures downward-facing, at first invisible from the outside. The concealments and enclosure of these structures adds to their mystery, and their labyrinth-like architectural aspects have echoes, for example, of the silent and deserted towers and piazzas of de Chirico. Their composite engineering, their leans and movements, put one in mind not only of Boccioni, but a sculptural language that ranges from Tatlin's Tower to Richard Serra and late Caro. The geometric elements appear to hang and hover, like the dissembling that goes on in Cubism, objects deconstructed and re-made. Some components resemble fragments of architectural moulding, here given a new identity. Some shapes look indigenous, rooted in an oblique vernacular style (like photographs from Bernard Rudofsky).

Eastman's colouration ranges from the earthy to the metallic and the softly luminous. Painting is another matter of revision and adjustment, with many revisits to the kiln. All a process of refinement, getting the right balance between colour, surface and form. Certainly Eastman has a sharp eye for other structural vocabularies, harnessing what he can make use of in this highly inventive and often playful art. Ideas evolve out of one another, suggesting new directions as each piece evolves, but there is also a clarity and deliberation that emerges, a formal resolution and integration that comes out of the apparently disparate. Each sculpture has its own stories to tell and secrets to keep, beguiling and enigmatic landscapes that surely comprise Eastman's finest work to date.

David Whiting
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