Line and Body

‘...my work is about the home, about human feelings and feeling human’

Jane Cox explores the complexities hidden in the sculptural work of Ruth King.

Ruth King’s sophisticated and beautifully made sculptural vessels bridge the gap between sculpture and domesticity. The sensuous, seemingly simple abstract forms are underpinned by a deep level of intellectual inquiry into all aspects of the work – surface texture, detail, form, and scale – and while expressing the tensions between paradoxes of nature, they seem to also contain these paradoxes, giving them a primal or archetypal stature.

DOMESTIC SCALE

It is unusual to refer to such obviously sculptural work as domestic, but King says, ‘Everything I do is domestic... my work is about the home, about human feelings and feeling human, about being held and needing to hold.’ This is borne out by the scale of the work; most of it is between one to two feet high, with the largest ones being a maximum of three feet. This domestic scale is established, she says, because ‘I need to be able to physically hold each piece in my lap. The appropriateness of scale in relation to the body is critical.’ King is not interested in large-scale grandiose public projects, preferring her work to register on a personal level, so it can readily communicate something that people can identify with.

King does not describe herself as a sculptor; neither does she feel limited to working in this particular scale. Rather, she consciously chooses to work to these dimensions. The physical nature of making her work on her lap likens her to other artists, where what is expressed is dependent upon its relationship to the human scale.
Morandi, for example, whose intimate still life paintings depict spatial relationships on a massive architectural scale, actually painted on moderately-sized canvases. In the same way, King’s spatial relationships on a massive architectural scale, actually

HENRY MOORE Because of the shape of the forms, parallels have

IN CONTEXT King’s work therefore hovers between the human/figurative world and a pre- and post-industrial one; belonging to both, but limited and constrained by neither. One is reminded of sculptors such as Epstein whose Torso in metal from the Rock Drill (1913–1914) was shocking for its time. Intended to celebrate man’s relationship to mechanisation and industry, it later became associated with the ravages of war and industrialisation and the stifling of humanity. King’s work is gentle and more feminine than this, but it references the large-scale works that precede it.

The sense of dynamism and movement in her work presents a neo-modern interpretation of the work of Italian Futurists, such as Boccioni (Unique forms of Continuity – transposed and translated – and never literal. ‘I want to convey the feeling, essence, or sense of something, without copying or alluding to it directly.’

To me as a fellow potter, they have a further significance. The surface lines or seams also hark back to mechanised production, and more particularly, the tools of mechanisation. In King’s work we see parts of anvils, hammerheads, cams, and blocks of steel; their shiny polished surfaces are evocative of the polished steel surfaces of cars or motorbike engines. This is intentional, making ceramic combined with the polished metallic finish of sal-glaze, the most dynamic of King’s pieces are figures in a whirling dervish dance, rock steady on their bases but whirling up to a future unknown.