

Focus and form

Her work is known for its sophistication and perfection of surface. Now, as she prepares for a solo show, Ruth King shares the thinking behind her pieces and the processes she follows to create them

Words Alex McErlain | Images Cristian Barnett



The objects that artists choose to keep around their studio are often revealing. Alongside the paraphernalia of practical manufacture and works in progress are things that don't initially seem to have any reason to be there. In Ruth King's Yorkshire studio I found myself looking at these curiosities almost as much as I looked at her pots. The skeletal remains of a pheasant's breastbone, with its stark curvilinear form and naturally bleached surface, made the most direct connection to her work, but other intriguing objects also captured my attention. There was a lead worker's wooden former, a piece of fragmented flint, a dried fish and black and white postcard images of gargoyles from Chartres cathedral. Another item, an exquisite glass retort – precise, strong, yet fragile – was described by Ruth as having 'frozen energy'. It was obvious that these personal items are important to her and she commented that, 'they reflect my interests and offer alternative manifestations of my underlying concerns'. She continued: 'the same qualities have always attracted me. I respond to things that are taut but not tight, that have an inevitability about them'.

I realised Ruth was talking about her work too, the things that demand her attention and lead her to devote intense periods of concentration to try and achieve these qualities in a finished piece. She was in the process of completing a new work when I made my visit and had been deeply involved with this new pot for a week. It had been worth the time invested, she said, to eventually arrive at what she described as 'a conclusion to the form that had both sensuality and structural logic'. She unwrapped the polythene covering and we each held the leatherhard piece, rubbing our palms across the surface to better understand what was before us. 'Of course it's partly about touch, in its widest sense,' Ruth commented, 'but it's also about looking and apprehending what you see and feel. Not only do the forms have to feel right in my hands as I work, they must also look right standing on their own, apart from me – then they may touch someone else.'

COAXING THE FORM

Ruth King's repertoire of individual forms has been fine-tuned over the past decade with a restlessness that is characteristic of her determination to bring something fresh to each piece she works on. The pieces are composed in an improvisational manner, working somewhat like a jazz musician, beginning with a basic structure, then being open to discovery and response. There are never two pieces quite the same, despite beginning with hand-drawn card templates, many of which are versions of an ovoid that delineate the upper and lower sections. Her technique is straightforward: a soft sheet of clay is wrapped around templates to define space and construct the basis of the form. From this deceptively simple beginning, Ruth starts the process of gentle coaxing and manipulation that will eventually bring a piece to life. She spoke of the importance of rim and foot, which she describes as 'the starting point and the conclusion that



between them hold the implied energy'. The forms are characterised by a sense of swelling from within, as though they were straining to hold back an imaginary interior pressure. There is often a place of emphasis, a point or angle for the viewer to focus on. These are sophisticated works, spare, sometimes austere, inviting both visual and tactile engagement. Ruth spoke of being 'so controlled about making the form, that letting go to the vagaries of fire in the salt kiln' might be seen as a reckless act. But it is this counterbalance between control and gesture that ultimately brings the work to life.

Her work is unusual in the salt-glaze genre, with its spare employment of the process. She brings subtlety and sensuality to a technique that can get rather overblown and reliant on texture. Her exploration of colour is vibrant in this medium known largely for either brown or blue. The pots are sprayed with thin layers of colouring oxide that will react to the salt and to their position in the kiln, in relation to the flame. The resultant gentle modulations in colour and tone enhance the swelling forms and create new visual interplays that could only have been anticipated rather than predicted. There is always a cautious time of waiting to see if the collaboration with the kiln has produced pieces that satisfy her exacting demands. It is important that the subtlety of the work is still apparent and that it reads well once the final surfaces have appeared. Ruth spoke of the tension between making things to please herself – that provide an intellectual challenge – and making pieces that will appeal to others. The work is at its best when seen individually in a sympathetic environment: in fact, they are then mesmerising, enticing the viewer closer and closer until physical contact becomes inevitable.

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A CAREER IN CLAY

- Ruth was brought up in Hertfordshire, but has lived in Yorkshire for the past 35 years
- She studied ceramics at Camberwell School of Arts and Craft, which at the time was staffed with a stellar group of part-time tutors who were practising potters
- While a pre- and post-graduate student she worked in what was then the Craftsmen Potters Shop, London
- A visit to Japan not long after graduating had a big impact on her approach to ceramics
- On moving to York she initially shared a studio with David Lloyd Jones and began salt glazing
- She fires her salt-glaze kiln five or six times a year
- She has worked collaboratively on creative projects, most notably with artist-plasterer Peter Baker
- Ruth is a council member of the Craft Potters Association and has been a vice-chairman
- She is chairman of Ceramic Art York
- She has exhibited regularly since 1982 and her work is in many public collections, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, London




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MOVING FORWARDS

Ruth King is one of this country's premier makers with a well-earned reputation for exemplary work. We spoke of the journey she had taken over many years to arrive at this position. She remembered how, at the beginning of her career, she had 'no responsibility other than the work', but was 'careless and profligate with this freedom', and noted how 'gradually life becomes more complex with competing priorities that erode freedom'. After our meeting, developing this theme further, she wrote to me: 'When young, sheer energy and a cascade of ideas and possibilities propels you forward, often before fully investigating or resolving the previous idea. When you are older you spend more time delving down into a subject, making more focussed and subtle decisions, working harder each time on trying to find the most satisfying solution.' On the physical effects of ageing she added, wryly, 'the effort of looking closely, and the need for wearing glasses that magnify everything, makes one concentrate more on the detail. Every inconsistency, hesitation or weakness jumps out at you. Removing the glasses, things shrink to "normal" size, but are at the same time intensified. Then they shrink again in the kiln...'

While Ruth may be established, she remains restless, keen to move the work on, to keep exploring the territory that is central to her practice. She has welcomed the challenge of making a considerable body of work for her solo exhibition at the Contemporary Ceramics Centre in London. She also spoke of the communicative challenge, how sometimes new works are slow to engage others, and of the dogged persistence necessary to stay with them until they were accepted. As a collector of ceramics myself I have always enjoyed the challenge set by a good maker of keeping up with their development. As a curator I always look out for those seminal moments when the potter is presenting a major statement about what they do, which allows us to reflect on their achievement. This is a significant year for examining Ruth King's work, but it is not the end of the story by a long way; this artist is far too committed to simply rest on her laurels. 

Find out more at ruthkingceramics.com. Her solo exhibition will be at the Contemporary Ceramics Centre, London, 12 May–5 June; cpaceramics.com

