Construction

Tony Hepburn

Not on display

Title/Description: Construction

Artist/Maker: Tony Hepburn (Artist)

Born: 1975

Object Type: Sculpture

Materials: Basalt, Ceramic, Porcelain, Stoneware, String

Technique: Handbuilding

Measurements: 340mm

Accession Number: 50748

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England

Credit Line: Accepted under the Cultural Gifts Scheme by HM Government from Leslie Birks Hay and allocated to SCVA, 2016

Tony Hepburn is ‘a sculptor in clay whose work lies outside all ceramic traditions’. [1] This abstract collage looks assembled from found materials. However, each piece is made by Hepburn from clay, pushing the material to its limits. Clay is cracked, scraped and pierced, and slips blister and encrust on the surface. The composition appears both fragile and hard at once. It is made of paper-thin clay with surfaces reminiscent of stone. Hepburn sculpts the clay with the tools of a carver, using files and planes on bone-dry clay, and precariously balances the forms, holding them together with resin-coated string.

In the early 1960s, Hepburn studied at Camberwell College of Art where he was taught by Lucie Rie and Hans Coper. He had initially studied painting but pursued clay because it freed him from representation, he says, ‘making a pot was the first abstract decision I had made in my life’. [2] Hepburn’s work has always challenged the expectations of ceramics practice. It has constantly shifted visually and stylistically, encompassing sculpture, installation, performance and the fields of conceptual art and architecture.

There is a rapport between his early works at the Sainsbury Centre Collection (see also 50748 and

50747) and those of American sculptural ceramicists working in the 1960s, including Ron Nagle and Ken Price. This affinity was recognised when he was invited to teach in the USA in the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s Hepburn had moved to the USA permanently. Here he continued to make radical ceramic work and became an important and influential ceramics teacher at Alfred University, New York and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan.

Sim Panaser, June 2020

[1] Tony Birks, *Art of the Modern Potter*, (London: Country Life Books, 1976), p. 9.

[2] Cranbrook Schools, *Renowned Ceramics Artist Visits Upper School*, 2008, https://schools.cranbrook.edu/news-detail?pk=435392 [accessed 12/05/20].

Further Reading

Birks, Tony, 'Anthony Hepburn: Young British Potter', Craft Horizons, 29 (July 1969), 34-36

Birks, Tony, Art of the Modern Potter (London: Country Life Books, 1976)

Cranbrook Schools, Renowned Ceramics Artist Visits Upper School (2008) https://schools.cranbrook.edu/news-detail?pk=435392 [accessed 12 May 2020]

Selection of essays on the work of Tony Hepburn, Detroit Research, Volume 2 (2015), https://www.detroitresearch.org/volume2/ [accessed 20 June 2020]