



Symbolic Visions

EXHIBITION – SIMON OLDING is entranced by Sandy Brown's latest sculptural work.

PHOTOGRAPHY – JOHN ANDOW

We have come to expect spectacle from Sandy Brown's art and craft. Large paintings sing with movement and colour. The pots rather courteously attend to her long-standing interests in Japanese ceramic traditions, while adding mercurial, dynamic interests of her own. For some time now these ceramic works have been gathering size and exuberance. Heavy and freely painted vases; tea and coffee pots that could sustain the largest family gathering with ease; plates of resounding abstract energy. Even Sandy Brown's house, as well as her majestic new studio and gallery in Appledore, North Devon, stand out amidst the elegant riverside terraces by virtue of their vibrant colour.

There is a powerful and compelling drama contained within Brown's major new body of work, belied by the poetic title, *Ritual: the Still Point and the Dance*, and the calligrapher's handwritten sign on The Glove Factory, the outstanding venue for this show. The exhibition starts quietly enough. In a modest room, a characteristic jug and bowl stand in front of the newly constructed wooden-framed and cotton-covered tearoom. A large circular floor-standing sculpture is placed in between: an allusion to Cornish myth (where stones are crawled through for the purpose of renewal) and to the Japanese tradition of lowering the height of the entrance to the tea ceremony, so that all who participate do so equally.

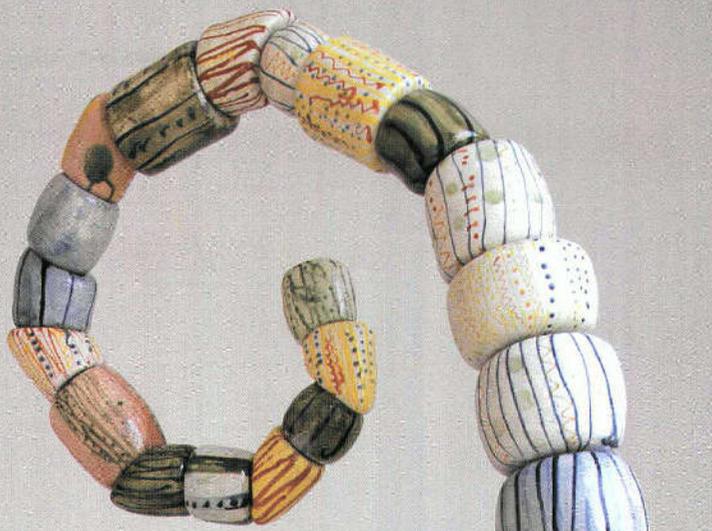
This merging of East and West continues in the tearoom itself. Brown has added furniture, textile and silver design

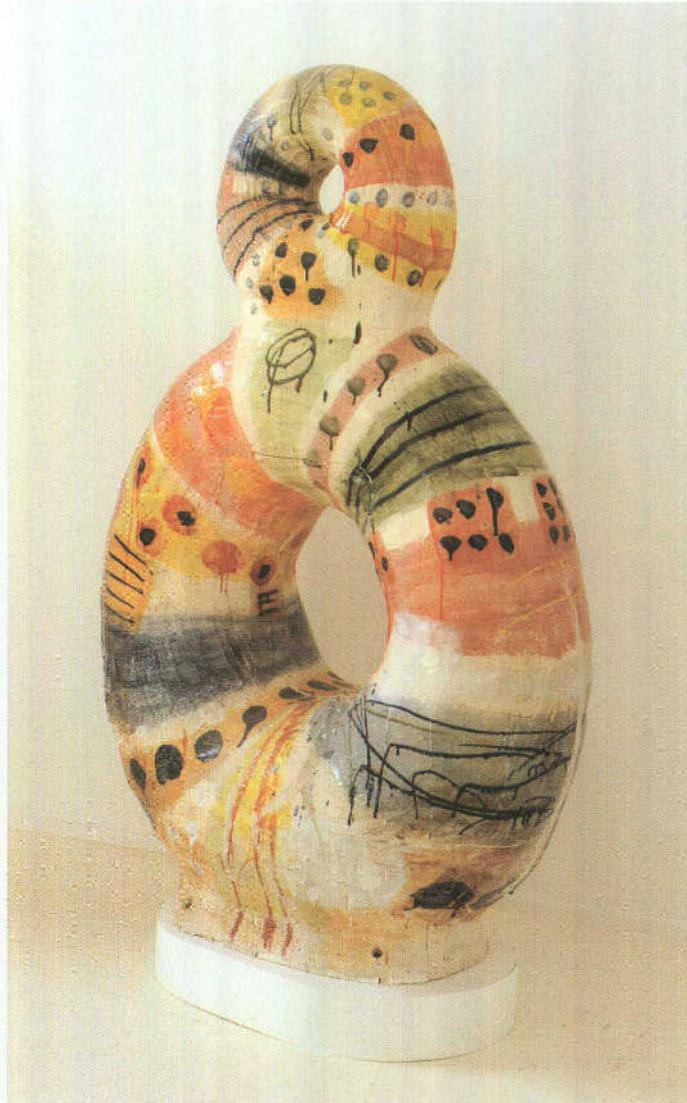
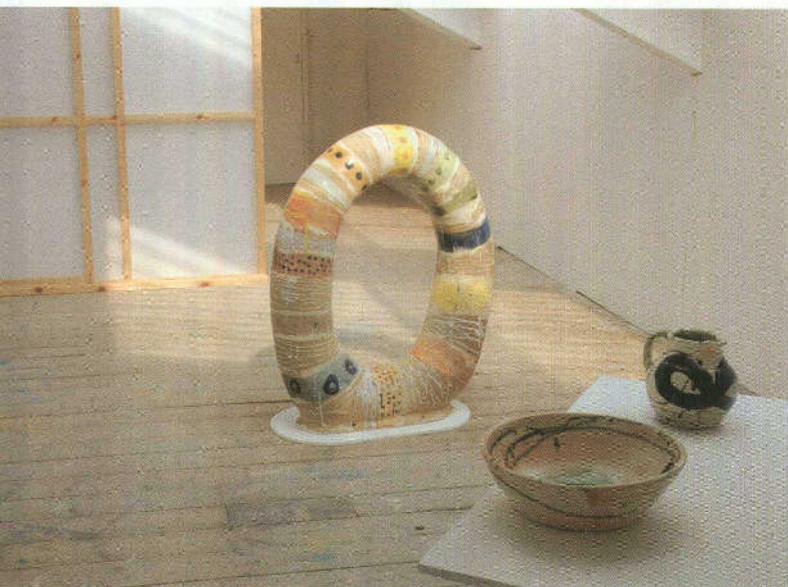
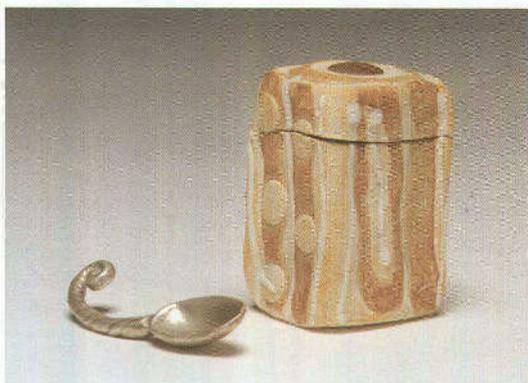
to her portfolio of craft skills. These are elegantly expressed in the ash table, inlaid with mahogany and cherry details and scrupulously made by a firm of local joiners. Brown's control over these craft processes is intended, in her phrase, to 'honour the activity as well as the objects in the ceremony'. In doing so, she also lays out a manifesto for the significance of craft skills.

There is nothing in this contemplative display (the 'still point' of the title), however, to suggest the spectacular array of work in the next room. This large, tall gallery, gracefully lit by natural daylight, once lay at the heart of the building's previous function as a factory making sails, then gloves. Handcraft is steeped in the place. Brown has responded with vigour to the challenge of this commanding room and made it work for her purpose. A large number of ceramic sculptures, all massive in scale, are arranged across the room. Each one has a big physical presence, but the cumulative effect is of a frozen dance, where rhythm and music are present, if not seen or heard, apart from in the mind's eye.

The sculptures share certain elements. They all have simple and monumental forms and Brown has clearly relished the task of 'inventing an old and new shape at the

THIS PAGE: Sandy Brown in the gallery, standing with *Fecundity*, stoneware, H200cm | OPPOSITE PAGE: Sandy Brown with *Prelude*, stoneware on steel pole, H366cm.





same time'. Many are reminiscent of the human, and especially the female, body. Freely painted glazes adorn the sculptures, often within a formal arrangement, with bands and blobs of colour setting the pattern. Some works use totemic pillars to hold and balance ceramic globes. Others use a stocky base from which a circular, swelling shape emerges and reaches confidently upwards. Brown enjoys the mass of her shapes, as well as feeling comfortable in their irregular swellings and curves. These columns are about as far removed from, say, the Doric ideal as one could get. Asking Brown to make a perfectly symmetrical column would be like asking Miro to paint a star literally.

At the back of this dancefloor of sculptures (all about to embark on rather rumbustious movement) is *Prelude*, perhaps the most commanding work in the show. It is named first and seen last in the exhibition. It combines two tall curved arrangements, one slight, one coiled at the tip, comprised of large ceramic 'beads', assembled not as a bracelet, but to suggest a dancing couple, gracefully acknowledging their forthcoming movement with a semblance of a nod and bow.

Brown has wrought symbolic force out of seemingly simplistic elements, demonstrating how the manipulation of massive clay forms can convey shapely and subtle movement as well as carry anthropomorphic messages. The works are not large for the sake of it. David Whiting's perceptive essay in the well-illustrated catalogue points out that they have 'the expressive richness of... votive painted terracottas' seen by the artist on a trip to India in 2001.

Brown also remarks that she has been thinking about these shapes 'bubbling under' for some fifteen years.

The work is a spectacle of movement about to happen. The dance is one alluded to by the energy of the sculptures and their relationship to each other. The paintings mirror this sense of pent-up energy and add their own bravura commentary on the work. The totality of the exhibition concerns movement, humanity, the power of fertility and the strength of the female.

Sandy Brown spent two years actively researching and developing her ideas for the exhibition, admirably supported by a significant grant from Arts Council England, South West. Her reflections, the maturing of her symbolic visions and the creation of this landmark exhibition (which deserves a national and international tour) are a triumphant conclusion to these investments. **CR**

Sandy Brown's *Ritual: the Still Point and the Dance* will be in situ at the Glove Factory, Appledore, Devon, until April 2007, before touring to Germany and other galleries around the UK during 2007-8. Ring or email for an appointment.

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THIS PAGE TOP LEFT: Tea caddy and spoon, H max. 25cm | BOTTOM LEFT: Tea house entrance, showing jug and bowl for cleansing ritual and *Circle* sculpture for renewal ritual, H max. 120cm | RIGHT: *Essence of Woman*, stoneware, H175cm | OPPOSITE PAGE: Tea house interior, with cast iron kettle and reduction-fired brazier, tea caddy and spoon and blue ring tea bowl, H max. 100cm.



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TITLE: Symbolic Visions
SOURCE: Ceramic Review no221 S/O 2006
PAGE(S): 30-3
WN: 0624403945004

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