



Fields of Perception

After a ten-year gap Jonathan Middlemiss shares the spiritual approach that brought him back to ceramics.

As I drove to my studio in the Chilterns, I noticed a figure walking towards me in the distance. And then a small bird flew down on the road and stayed there. A second later I realised it was a leaf, and that the figure was actually walking away from me! Nothing unusual? But have you ever thought about why you see something and then realise it isn't what you thought, and how often that happens?

A Vajrayana Buddhist teacher once described something similar when explaining how we perceive reality. He said he had been sitting in a car waiting for someone and had noticed a black dog behaving very strangely. It began at one end of a street and ran across the road, jumping up at a house wall, before crossing again and crouching beside a door. Sometimes it would stay still for a while and sometimes seemed to leap in the air, moving down the street. He was enthralled by this behaviour for some minutes before realising that it was in fact a large plastic bag blown in the wind!

CONSTRUCTED PERCEPTION This is amusing because it illustrates how our minds try to put every unexplained experience into a known context...and we know we are doing it! It is our way of navigating

through everyday life, with such experiences of incomprehension/comprehension happening in milliseconds while we create/reinforce notions of the reality we live in. And we want to create a reality that we can recognise, so we add and subtract from our experiences to do so. Sometimes, we may even choose to ignore what our senses show us, as it may not fit into how we believe the world to be. There is great truth in the statement that 'we see what we want to see', because we are building up a composite picture that creates the reality we have chosen – very often one that is unthreatening, does not allow space for our fears and neuroses to come to the surface, and one that hopefully leads us to our own personal idea of happiness. However, it means we have to create a continuous and dependable converse that completes the dualistic picture – a reality that also represents all that we don't want and would like to avoid. It may have arch-villains and phantoms acting out their roles, bringing up our feelings of rejection, humiliation, resentment, etc., and in this case we need to protect ourselves from their sudden appearance and apparent ability to destroy us. Both sides of this approach require constant attention to keep them going.

1 *Turning 15*, thrown and altered white stoneware and metal lustres, 2012, H22cm
 2 A single light source reveals nuances of form
 3 Using scrapers and sanding tools, the body is revealed under the surface
 4 Strong light sources are used to define
 5 Sanded and cut forms are placed together to explore interactive lines, forms, and textures

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CREATING VISUAL ORDER In the middle of a phone conversation my eyes go on a journey of exploration of the surroundings I am in. It helps focus my thoughts on what I am hearing. I find myself aligning angles of one shape with another, for example, a chair frame and the vertical wall behind it. I can sometimes make the solidity of three dimensions much more questionable by bringing in stronger two-dimensional visual relationships. Maybe I can create order where there isn't any, or maybe I can create incongruence from the ordinary. Sometimes it forms a backdrop to the conversation and can even bring in supportive elements. The chair may well be the basis of the issue we are discussing and the wall texture the route through to a solution, so that I am creating a parallel visual story with abstractions that can shed light on the discussion.

The world of created references and contexts is one we invest endless time and energy in. It is our way of surviving, maintaining our safety and responsibility for ourselves – a pattern we are encouraged to develop from our earliest childhood. Later on we continue making things safe long after we need to. It has become a habit. In a discussion someone open to an experience may comment 'Look at the glorious blue flowers on that tree!!' (as an awesome experience), and the reply may be 'Oh yes, it is an abutilon tree'. This is the process of making something safe by naming it and possibly disengaging with the experience.

I once suggested, 'Perhaps we have a need, and a right, not to have to make sense of anything!' And I meant it as an attitude to actually use to create an open mind, and to go beyond normal conditioning. It can certainly blow the fuses of our normal filtering of reality! To induce any form of dissociation is potentially unwise, but maybe artists have a propensity towards deconstructing things because they feel that is where a greater reality lies anyhow. Is this with drugs? No, I have never touched them – though they can of course blow the fuses too in the same way, uncontrollably and irreparably! For those who are drawn to expanded consciousness, however, the disciplines of meditation under guidance offer a sustainable route.

MEDITATION After several years of not making pottery and working on outdoor projects, I developed a programme of physical meditation I called Wild Intelligence, offering creative sensory exercises in natural environments. Through movement, words, drawing, sound, and spontaneous interventions, the programme I devised leads participants to the interaction between their perception and the fields of perception by stimulating the senses without expectation or judgement. It encourages the conscious choice to engage with 'not knowing' and being able to let go of associations. Whenever we release the need to contextualise, the senses start to expand. Their intensity grows. They bring a new aliveness and from a person-centred viewpoint of nature we start to immerse into unknowingness. This is an indescribable place because it is everyone's own perception of it, their journey, their engagement, and their openness that creates it. The experience often draws people into a state of wonder and awe, and it is nearly always unforgettable.

My recent ceramic work is now starting to develop from the new forms that grow out of 'immersing into unknowingness'. ☞

