

Martin McWilliam



Form Against Time

ENTERING THE DOOR AT OUDHEDEN NATIONAL MUSEUM of Antiquities in Leiden, just a short drive outside of capital city of Amsterdam, is a rarely surprising experience. In this smaller province city you would not expect a collection of cultural history treasures that, in quality of the collections, matches up close to both the British Museum and Berlin's Nationalgalerie. In the entrance hall an entire Roman Egyptian temple is reconstructed as an appetizer of the rich inventory that this museum holds, dating back to prehistoric ages. Contemplating the beauty of this timeless form, the eye meets a highly contemporary object: A bronze sculpture by British ceramist Martin McWilliam who has, since the 1980s, been living and

Article by Dr Louise Mazanti

working in Germany. By heart, McWilliam is a child of the Leach era, receiving the most important parts of his training in Dartington Pottery-Workshop (directed by David Leach) and in European and Japanese workshops. The almost seamless match of stone temple and bronze sculpture on a span of 2000 years owes to this strong artistic impulse. Leach pottery, as we know, was built on the amorphous aliveness of the 'friendly flaws' in timeless perfection of functional ware. What McWilliam most importantly took to his own expression was this deep dedication to the vessel form, to timelessness and to beauty. Whatever the similarities in aesthetic sensibility, McWilliam offers neither a regression to ancient cultures nor

a stroll down memory lane to the Leach Mingei. Postmodernism has clearly made its cut through the waves of ages. This is already present in the bronze statue that introduces McWilliam's solo exhibition in the side gallery. The main issues of McWilliam are already given: The vessel, the image and the form. The vessel is the ever enduring point of departure and return for McWilliam's artistic investigations

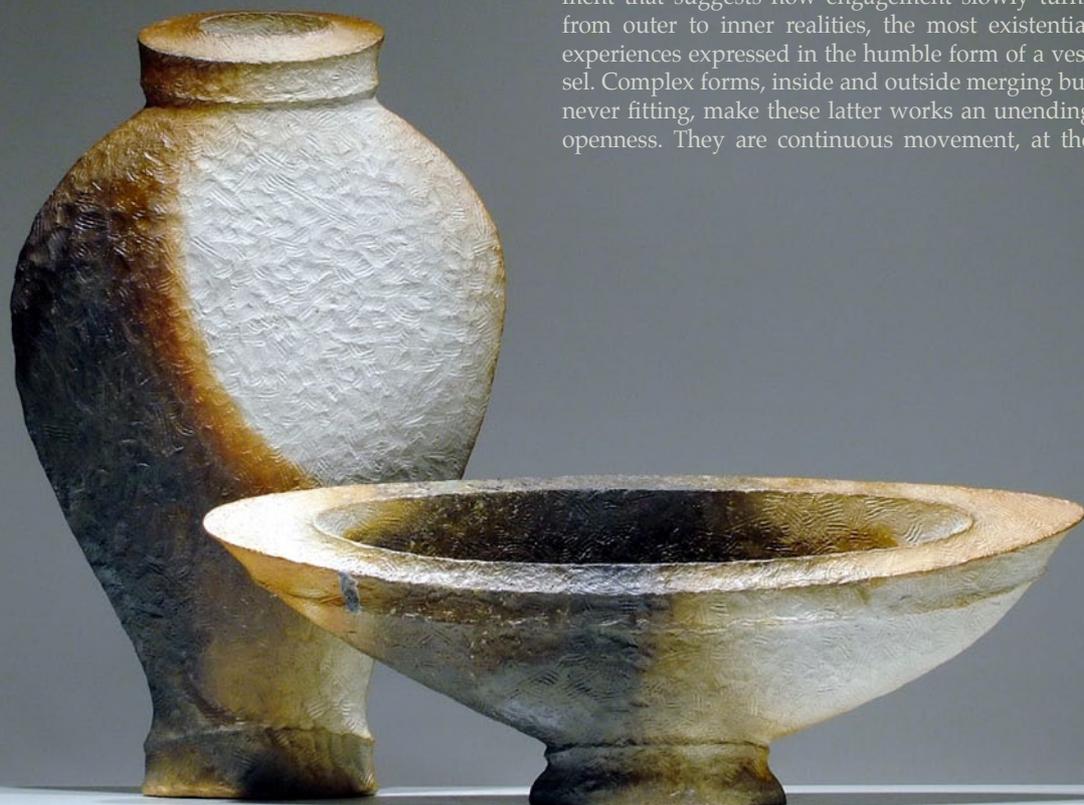
throughout his almost 30 years as an independent artist: The vessel, conceived in form, transformed to an image. A red thread from his young, tentative beginning at the throwing wheel in the 1970s and until he stands in full artistic maturation in the current exhibition is the vessel, which has continuously led investigation after investigation. The bronze piece in the temple clearly marks that reflective questioning has added to the timeless beauty. The abstract form by no way promises functionality or even clear perception. Form has turned into an image and image has turned into a question. A hallmark of McWilliam is the flattening of the form and the play with visual and cognitive perception, which he has played out during two decades with accuracy and a real sense of formal subtleties. The exhibition clearly builds on this artistic scope. In the earliest works on display dating back to 2000 the artist investigates the



Facing page: *vic mj&mb*. 87 x 54 x 10 and 59 x 76 x 10 cm.
Above: *para pro*. 60 x 38 x 15 cm.



vessel as seen from the outside; a formal object referring to the graphic appropriation of visual culture, while later on the inner space takes over as a field of continuous exploration. It is an interesting development that suggests how engagement slowly turns from outer to inner realities, the most existential experiences expressed in the humble form of a vessel. Complex forms, inside and outside merging but never fitting, make these latter works an unending openness. They are continuous movement, at the





Facing page, above: *mkor j&b*. 41 x 38 x 13 and 29 x 46 x 21 cm.
 Facing page, below: *vic class j&b*. 82 x 50 x 14 and 33 x 87 x 12 cm.
 This page, above: *nom enter*. 64 x 36 x 16 cm.
 Below: *Martin McWilliam*.

same time resting in absolute, silent balance. This inherent paradox makes them touch upon the deepest essence of life: The space of questioning reality. This is not an intellectual exercise. McWilliam's ode to the Leach era's bodily sensitivity keeps his work alive and his formal investigations take them to another space of the mind. It is the space of absolute presence – the absolute timelessness – the transcendence of time and space, opening the moment the spectator truly engages with the work.

At this point, Oudheden National Museum of Antiquities unfortunately seems to have left out the possibility to communicate the full depth of McWilliam's work. The exhibition design mirrors McWilliam's conceptual approach in the flattening of the form. The display is largely arranged as an image that can only be experienced visually, so the bodily, emotional response is largely kept out of reach. Furthermore a huge screen with a DVD of McWilliam's, indeed, interesting working process disturbs the deep experience of relating to the works. Their visual part is enhanced on behalf of its deeper artistic meaning. No doubt that the display creates an appealing image in itself but this part is not owing tribute to the depth of McWilliam's work. This might originate in the fact that the museum is devoted to cultural history, for which understanding is more

important than experiencing. When this is said, however, the museum must be credited for arranging this first solo exhibition of ceramic art and for having seen the strong meeting of timelessness in form.



Dr Louise Mazanti is a writer and lecturer in Denmark. The exhibition *Martin McWilliam: Form Against Time. Ceramics 2000-2010*, was held 24 March – 18 September 2011, Oudheden Museum of Antiquities / Rijksmuseum van Oudheden Holland.