

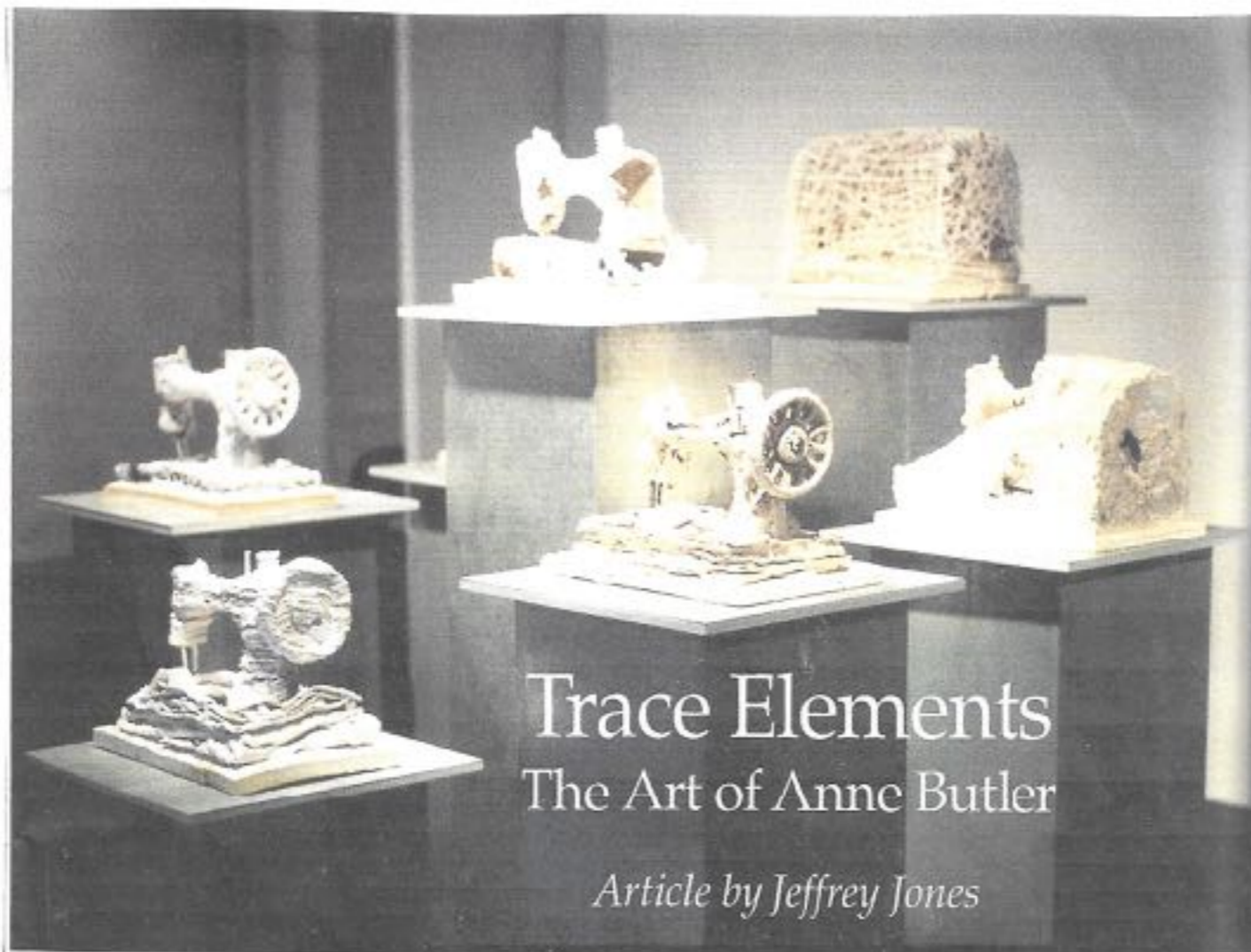
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Trace Elements

The Art of Anne Butler

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ANYONE WHO HAS MADE ANYTHING FROM CLAY knows that time is an important dimension in the realisation of the finished work. An object made of ceramic material is not complete until time has had its say. To be able to watch patiently and let things come to pass is not the least of the range of abilities demanded of those who chose to fashion and fire clay. All art records a process but the transmutations wrought upon clay by the addition or evaporation of water, the exposure to air and to heat, and by the often gradual and accumulative effects of other materials are constant reminders that the art of ceramics is one that is uniquely inflected by the impress of time. Clay remembers well what has been done to it and it rewards those who wait.

A different kind of reward is offered to those for whom history has waited on their behalf. Hundreds, perhaps thousand of years after a ceramic artefact has emerged from the kiln it can be studied, described

and endorsed by a range of interested scholars and connoisseurs. Such people can draw conclusions not only about the manufacture and purpose of the object and the artistry of the maker but also about the wider context of which they both formed a part. The original physical and also cultural fabric of the ceramic object may have literally or metaphorically disintegrated but many different kinds of interpretations can still be assembled from what is left. Something is lost of the object and yet something is made of what remains.

That which is left – the memory, the trace, the record – is the substance of the ceramic art of Anne Butler. The objects she makes are witnesses to their own history and stand as eloquent reminders that all physical objects are subject to an inevitable refashioning over a period of time. Change is this artist's subject matter but it is not so much the biological processes of growth and decay with which she is concerned as with the accumulation and dissolution of material, the stuff of

which everything is made, which occur as a result of both human agency and the passage of time.

It is a seemingly straightforward process that is revealed and documented in Butler's work: as things are manufactured they achieve a form and an identity through an increase both in mass and complexity, but things also degrade, they shed weight and diminish in size. Yet such a description, with its implication that more is better, is challenged by the work itself. The work clearly signals that meanings can be arrived at as much through the stripping away of layers as through a process of addition. There is no virtue to be found either in 'less' or in 'more' but there are insights to be gained in the understanding that objects are never fixed in any dimension, including that of time, but are always in a state of flux. To this must be added the further consideration that the meanings of objects are similarly unstable and they change as we change over weeks, months and years. We think we remember what things were like and what things used to mean, but the past is another country which we must, of necessity, visit from elsewhere. Yet it could also be said that the past is never entirely over and done with, any present reality is inevitably coloured by memories of the past.

Butler's most recent body of work consists of a series of sculptures which make use of a familiar object – a sewing machine – to explore ideas of individual and cultural memory. 'Ceramic sculpture' is too awkward and insufficient a description with which to categorise such work. Nevertheless the ceramic nature of the pieces is of prime importance and it is also work that is genuinely sculptural in intent and execution. All sculpture fills space either through accumulation (such as modelling, assemblage, or casting) or through some technique in which a form is revealed (such as carving). Butler's work makes use of both these approaches and, what is more, it does so in a manner which articulates the symbolic meanings of the opposite but complementary processes of accretion and of passing away.

There is much that is reminiscent of archaeology in the working methods and intentions of this artist. Taking a simple sewing machine as her starting point she subjects it to analysis in more ways than one. She takes the object, reconstructs it through a casting and layering process, then carefully strips it back, stopping only when an optimum amount of information has been revealed. Often the sand that is used for casting the object is only partially removed and is fired alongside the clay itself and additional materials such as fabric, string, metal, and fragments of bone. The object retains its identity as a sewing machine but it is an identity that is embedded in and validated by its surroundings, like a fossil set in rock strata or shards lying among the detritus of centuries. The artist, like the archaeologist, knows that that which is left behind can



reveal its secrets only through a consideration of its place in a wider scheme of things, and she wants the spectator to know that too. She tests the object out, investigates what kind of a thing it is, asks questions not only of its shape, its form, its physical make-up, but also of its history and of the story which it continues to tell.

There is something specific about the resonances which an object such as a sewing machine imparts and there is something more general, more universal and perhaps more arbitrary as well. The original sewing machine which was used as the source of this work has a personal significance for the artist in that it belonged to her grandmother and was due to be discarded after her grandmother died. The sewing machine's owner had become frail and forgetful and perhaps had had no use for it for many years. Her granddaughter has found a new kind of use for it, extending the story of both the person and the object, ensuring that in some sense they remain intact, still



here, affecting us. It is a memory of things that we see in the artwork; there is no 'real' sewing machine there, just traces of one. (The object itself was not destroyed in the making process, nor does it form a part of any of the pieces and it survives elsewhere.)

Sewing machines also have a wider significance in that they are the kinds of machines that many people will have used or seen used in the home or in the workplace. Like any machine they can be understood as things which make our lives easier or harder. It is important to Butler that her pieces are seen together as a group, all facing the same way. They are lined up as if in a factory, all of them made for the same task but all of them accruing different histories, all eventually subject to the changes wrought by time. Sewing machines are also the kind of simple technology for which few people now have much use. They are old fashioned and may evoke curiosity, nostalgia or even disdain. They are representative of a class of objects – typewriters, record players and telephones with dials are others – which now look as if they belong in the 21st century. With every passing year such objects will continue to retreat further back into the warehouse of history until eventually they will be of interest only to the specialist.

These particular sewing machines, however, are not just tokens of a particular moment in time with a retroactive appeal to people of a certain age. As reworked by this artist they achieve an affecting presence that is a reminder of the fragility shared by all things. They are reminiscent of objects in the natural world such as petrified forests, they have chilling echoes of those unsettling casts of the doomed people of Pompeii caught in Mount Etna's lava flow and they also evoke more mundane associations of things left incalculable to accumulate dust and cobwebs in the manner of Miss Havesham's wedding cake. The power of all these things lies in their ability to evoke a sympathetic response in the spectator. They are remnants of another time and another place which remind us of our common experience of temporarily being in the world. As human beings we share that world with many other kinds of animate and inanimate things. We may think that is only given to human beings to be able to remember but the ceramic sculptures of Anne Butler cause us to consider that clay has an memory too and it is one that may well outlast our own.

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