

CONTAINING TIME

Jane Perryman's New Approach
to the Vessel

by Esther Carliner Viros



1

I am walking my dog Riley along a field ditch edged with hedgerows and trees. The sky is cloudy gray, the path muddy soft from heavy rains. The prints of horses, deer, and muntjac are etched into the ground. For a hundred meters ahead the line of hedging has been cut by the farmer, sliced by a chainsaw to reveal smooth yellow wood made indecent by sudden amputation. A hazel tree lies across the path. Stunted catkins hang from the branches, their future pollination a thwarted dream.

*A hazel tree felled across the path
Smooth yellow wood
Sliced by a chainsaw
Stunted catkins hanging limply*
—Jane Perryman

The multimedia installation entitled *Containing Time*, a segment of which is being shown in the context of a larger solo exhibition of ceramics and paintings at Vessels Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts, represents an important new direction for British artist Jane Perryman. Internationally recognized as a ceramic artist, writer, photographer, and film maker, Perryman has brought these various forms of expression together to create a new body of work. Found objects (such as the catkins cited above) inspire a text, are photographed, used to produce a frottage, incorporated into clay material, transformed into a vessel and fired, thus becoming a record of time and place.

Well known for her books on naked clay and smoke-fired ceramics, Jane Perryman is also an authority on traditional Indian pottery. Her book, *Traditional Pottery of India* and a documentary recently released on DVD, are now essential archives of a disappearing tradition.

In addition to her other occupations, Perryman is an experienced practitioner and instructor of Iyengar yoga. The balance and harmony she seeks in her art reflect the balance and harmony she seeks with her practice of yoga.

These facets of Perryman's life are essential to an appreciation of her work. They are interconnected and organically related. The text quoted above is the entryway into her new approach to the vessel.

Influences and Inspirations

It took Perryman a while to find her true voice in ceramics. Like many young students, she entered art school to study one material and got diverted to



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1 *Conversation*, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, 2014.
Photo: Douglas Atfield. **2** Bowl from *Containing Time* installation, 4 in. (11 cm) in height, 2014.

3 *Touching Balance*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, 2013.
Photo: Douglas Atfield. **4** Vessel, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, 2012. Photo: Douglas Atfield. **1-4** All pieces are handbuilt double-walled vessels, made of a mixed porcelain and stoneware clay body, burnished, saggar fired to 1940°F (1060°C).

another. Originally interested in textile design, she found herself in the department of industrial ceramics. It is such twists and turns in the journey that often define who we are.

For many years she worked exclusively in slip casting and mold making. She was never fully satisfied, feeling glazed work was cold and brittle. When she discovered the mainly handbuilt, burnished, smoke-fired work of Siddiq el Nigoumi, a Sudanese artist who had settled in England in the late 1960s, she knew she had found her direction.

Around that same time, Perryman was studying objects in the archaeology and anthropology departments of museums in London and Cambridge, where she was particularly attracted to British and French Celtic pots.



5

She rid her small studio of all casting, mold-making, and glazing paraphernalia and embarked on a new path of handbuilding low-fired pottery. She spent many years experimenting with different smoke-firing techniques. Her initial attraction to textile design came into play as she worked with various resists, allowing the smoke to leave its mark on her pieces.

Evolution of the Work

There are four different periods in the evolution of Perryman's smoke-fired vessels. At first she built her vessels through a combination of coiling, press-molding, and slab-building, often adding a foot to the assembled piece. Her initial handbuilt, burnished, and smoke-fired pieces were vessels that reached out and up, aesthetically influenced by Celtic pots. Perched on narrow pedestals with wide shoulders, they seemed to leap from the fire that had marked them. The lines and patterns created with different types of resists were like garments on dancing bodies. Perryman found the challenge of taming the smoke and flames exhilarating, and this came through in her work.

In the early 1990s Perryman made her first trip to India to participate in yoga training at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune. It was there that she discovered traditional Indian pottery-making techniques. She was captivated as she watched a group of women working steadily, building large tandoori ovens, coil after coil. She internalized these observations, and began to work with coils.

The second period could be said to begin with the coiling and with the move toward simpler, rounder pieces. The vessel no longer sat upon a pedestal but sat upon its round bottom, rocking back and forth to find its own point of equilibrium.



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5 Bowl from the *Containing Time* installation, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, 2014. **6** Bowl from the *Containing Time* installation, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, 2014. **7** Conversation, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, 2012. Photo: Graham Murrell. **5–7** All pieces are handbuilt double-walled vessels, made of a mixed porcelain and stoneware clay body, burnished, saggard fired to 1940°F (1060°C).

In India, Perryman observed the use of saggars in pottery villages. She brought this practice home to her small garden in the middle of Cambridge and began experimenting with different types of combustibles and sand to create vessels with graduated effects of light and dark, meanwhile trying to limit smoke pollution in an urban environment.

The third phase began with new forms. As the nuances of gray, white, and black played out on the inner and outer surfaces of her vessels, she started to create double-walled pieces to expand her canvas. These seemingly heavy vessels were in fact surprisingly light.

This was a period when her work became more sculptural and abstract. She began to pursue the idea of ambiguity and contrast by creating double-walled slabs, curved vertically or horizontally, placing them in conversation with the vessel forms.

There was also an architectural component. The linear pieces were sometimes placed at angles without any addition of a bowl form. They were at times light, at times dark, at times graduated. They created their own mysterious space.

The rounded vessels together with the slabs operated on another level, evoking ritual vessels on a pedestal. They challenged conventional ideas of balance. They were disconcerting because it seemed they would self-destruct with a simple roll. In fact they always found their point of balance—much as in an acquired practice of yoga.

The fourth and present phase, evoked by the poem on page 33, signals a full coming together of Perryman's creative skills. Her vessels

have become whiter and crisper. This was a sought-after effect. Admiring the luminosity of high-fired, unglazed porcelain, she changed the nature of her clay body by combining porcelain and white stoneware. Not wanting to abandon smoke firing, she began experimenting with inclusions in her raw pieces. She inserted organic material such as rice, lentils, and coffee grounds into the walls of the bowls, which burned out during the firing. She burnished each piece then fired them three times: a low-temperature bisque followed by sanding with wet/dry sandpaper, then a second higher-temperature firing, and the final smoke firing.

This past year, Perryman came to a crossroads in this long journey. She felt blocked, so she took time off and followed her instincts. She observed, took long walks with her dog, collected objects, photographed them up close, and used them to create two-dimensional works. She kept a journal, which she distilled into poems. The 52 resulting vessels, weekly journal entries, poems, photographs, and rubbings taken from actual objects constitute a year's ode to the vessel and to life. These vessels gave forth sound. And the ping sound became the inspiration for music.

With this new body of work, *Containing Time*, the three-dimensional object becomes a vehicle for words, images, and music. This is Perryman's new approach to the vessel.

the author Esther Carliner Viros formerly owned a ceramic and studio craft gallery in Paris, France. She now lives in Paris and New York.