

Gareth Mason

Ecstasy and Beyond

GARETH MASON'S VISUALLY STUNNING AND unorthodox forms, glazes and constructions are astonishments. Their deep philosophical and mytho-poetic underpinnings make them irresistible for collectors. Mason throws his pieces by hand and slowly constructs each work so that its angles, glazes, surface textures and materials interact intensively with each other, with light, viewers and other visual contexts. Some works take years to realise.

Multiple firings also variously transform each sculpture. When I saw one incredible work at an elite group exhibition, I was hooked.

More is More is a book with an unusual format – a three-in-one exhibition, conversation and exchange

of letters about ceramic art featuring Mason and produced by Jason Jacques Gallery in New York. This 188 page book opens with the art itself – two to four close-up images of each of the 51 works. Each sculpture variously inter-mixes materials including porcelain, celadon, lustre, glazes, oxides, vitreous slips, decomposed iron, minerals and stoneware. The second and third parts of the book are intensive conversations and a lengthy letter exchange between

Mason, who was born in Pembroke, Wales in 1965 and

presently lives in Alton, England, and American Richard Jacobs, whose international ceramics collection numbers in the thousands.

Part of what puzzles and attracts me to Mason's

A Review by Jan Garden Castro





ceramics is they are quite abstract, yet each has a strong, individualist personality, and many allude to traditional ceramic vessel forms. They seem to have past, present and future lives – to be alive. There are four images of *The Universe Bleeds, Too*. I see a squat pot about 21 x 19.25 x 18 inches, with its swollen white mouth, dark images at the base and gray, white and red sides. Something compelling is going on inside and outside. The bullet-like hole with a drip of red glaze running out of it may be melodramatic and so is the gold-seamed larger opening on the other side. Mason's words, written on the page with the vase (not on the vase): "Our desire to touch and caress lies closely to our fear to be burned."

Mason uses fire to make shapes with hues, cavities and cracks. Fire is an important creative element and metaphor in his art. Each work also embodies and acknowledges the ceramic medium and process and the earth from which the materials came.

Bronze is Not All, seems like a female goddess form. The flattened gray wings at the hips, the soft folds and dusky hues in the 'skirt' and cracks in the grey-white 'bodice' all make me want to peer inside the red opening of this slender form. The text on this page is: "a powerful drive to articulate something of 'self' through the agency of the creative act".

Dream Seed is one of my favourites, in part, because it is more accessible. I like the works that stretch me in new directions and also the ones I seem to understand. This almost-traditional Asian ovoid shape or melon shape has a small foot and mouth. The circles, horizontal and vertical streaks and the shifting hues, along with dark layers of glaze peering through lighter hues appeal to me. The surface textures could be an aerial view of the planet. The title *Dream Seed* evokes beginnings that may grow.

Facing page: *The Universe Bleeds Too*. 2010. Porcelain, stoneware, sang de boeuf and firebrick inclusion. 21 x 19.3 x 18 in.

Above left and right: *The Universe Bleeds Too (Details)*.

Below: *Bronze is Not All*. 2011. Porcelain, satin glaze, feldspathic glaze, iron, porcelain slip, platinum and Mother of Pearl lustre. 15.5 x 9 in.



I am sure that each individual who views Mason's work can arrive at his and her own cosmology of seeing these works and that, too, is their purpose. Following the *tour-de-force* image parade, the second half of the book is mostly texts. Jason Jacques sets the tone in a brief introduction to the book's genesis: "Clay makes us look more deeply and rarely divulges its beauty right away. Mason's work is rarely beautiful at first glance. His work is a kind of madness that demands contemplation

and contemplation takes time. . . One must be willing to revisit the object over and over again."

Next come Mason's speech at SOFA, Chicago in 2011 and selections from his 120-page correspondence with collector Richard Jacobs, who questions everything about the craft, the deep-rooted origins of the artist's acts of making, complicated processes, sexuality and more. Mason's outpourings, both as a maker and as a wordsmith, are seasoned by his deep knowledge and love of ceramic and visual arts, philosophy and literature.





Space permits only a portion of one musing by Mason after Jacobs asks him “Have you left room, Gareth, for beauty in the beast?” Mason replies, in part: “Have I left room for beauty in the beast? – Yes. Many times. And the same is true of the beast in beauty. What do I mean exactly? Beauty in the beast refers to works that are ostensibly dark, hard-edged, confrontational but that contain unaccountably moving or stirring qualities; they reach out and arrest you in spite of their uncompromising complexion. The beast in beauty concerns works that are ostensibly consonant and harmonious, apparently glad on the eye but that embrace darkness. . .

“Let me cite some examples of each and then we will move on to the nature of the sublime as I see it. I mentioned Francis Bacon a while back. His is a Beauty-in-The-Beast that would induce me to not only leave the room but to travel to another continent. Further examples: Alberto Giacometti, Pablo Picasso, Lucien Freud, Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Cecily Brown, Egon Schiele. . . and as to The-Beast-in Beauty, look at Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gough, J M W Turner, El Greco, August Rodin, Kathe Kollwitz, Bill Viola, Rembrandt (actually Schiele crosses both definitions, as does Edvard Munch). . . The list is a crude device to evince a point and I am loath to use it but I hope it provides context here. Suffice it to say I recognise both beast and beauty when I meet them and they arise in every sphere of human expressive endeavour. They are most interesting when they intersect. As I type I am listening to the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. The beauty of his work is deceptive; he is intimately acquainted with depths of poignancy that coat it with a richer dust. The contemporary Japanese composer Takashi Yoshimatsu understands the

Facing page: *Dream Seed*. 2011. Porcelain, layered glazes, oxides, feldspars and lustre. 20 x 19 x 29 in.
Above: *Dream Seed* (Detail).

intelligent deployment of dissonance, as does the German composer Nils Frahm. I contend that the spectrum of emotion attainable in art is dependent on the orchestration of ‘beast’ and ‘beauty’: each is enriched by its cognisance of the other. . .”

Mason’s education includes studies at London’s Wimbledon School of Art from 1983 to 1984. He earned a Bachelor’s degree with honours in 3D Design (Ceramics) from West Surrey College of Art and Design in 1987. He established his first ceramics studio in Farnham, Surrey and moved to Alton, in Hampshire, England, in 1998. He has affiliations with several teaching institutions and art publications.

Mason’s work is included in art collections worldwide, including, the Izmir Foundation for Culture Arts and Education, Turkey; Haegang Ceramics Museum, Icheon, Korea; Nairobi National Museum, Kenya; and Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland. He is a Fellow of the Craft Potters Association and a Brother of the Art Workers’ Guild, both in London, and he exhibits regularly in solo and group exhibitions in the UK and abroad.

REFERENCES

More is More. Gareth Mason. New York: Jason Jacques Gallery, 2014. Hardbound, 188 pages, 78 pages of text. ISBN: 978-0-9788371-6-7.

See also: www.garethmason.net, www.jasonjacques.com/gallery/, and <https://cfleonline.org/exhibition-gareth-mason-jason-jacques/>.

Jan Castro’s books include *The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe* and *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne*. Contact Jan at www.jancastro.com to receive her monthly “In the Studio” blog.