

‘an object..... sets out.... to contain within itself the force of its own nature’.  
(1)

Frances Priest is a young artist, based in Edinburgh, who is finding new potential within the discipline of abstract art. Her chosen medium of clay offers her rich possibilities to explore a fascination with drawing in three dimensions. The interplay of line and space, which forms the substance of an abstract painting, is expanded here, into the interplay of line, space and volume; the contrasting edges of the slabbed clay creating linear movement which draws the eye of the viewer around and into the space of the work. Priest carves into and paints onto the leather hard clay, or in some cases transfers of pen line drawings are set directly onto the surface, thus creating not only the visual movement of the linear markings on the surface, but also a sense of spatial depth and recession. The changing thickness of the lines, the way they bite into or bleed over the clay surface, intensifies the viewer’s awareness of a dynamic set of relationships between volume and plane which is echoed in the tapering edges of the forms themselves.

During a recent visit to the artist’s studio, the extraordinary discipline required to produce these eight large abstract ceramic works becomes evident. All around us is evidence of constant experimentation with drawing, printmaking and maquette-making which will ensure that final forms have that essential, poetic rightness. As Peter Khoroché points out in his recent book on Ben Nicholson’s drawing and painted reliefs: ‘A hair’s breadth in design divides a vital creation from a tasteful object’(2) and it is all too easy for significant form to slip back into inanimate stuff.

Priest herself uses the metaphor of dance, a subject that interests her both as a spectator and participant. The fluid rhythm and poise of dancers’ movements is in constant dynamic tension with the physical effort required to produce them. In contemporary dance there is often a fine divide between an electrifying fusion of shadow, light, movement, pattern and sound and unrealised chaos. Such it is with abstract art. The language is universal and yet derives from a very private, hard won dialogue with line, space and volume as well as that rarely understood dialogue with the technical demands of the medium. Priest cites an interest in other abstract artists working with the particular demands of clay such as Nicholas Rena and Ken Eastman (Eastman also of course a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art), although for me her large paired forms, with their bone-like tactility, recall the vibrating surface of an Agnes Martin painting or the intensity of a Pina Bausch production. There is a toughness and ambition to the work, as well as visual delight. This is the first complete body of work to emerge from Priest’s studio: one can only wait with excitement for this artist to go yet ‘deeper into the sense of things’.(3)

(1) from Kenneth Martin 'Chance and Order, The Sixth William Townsend Lecture 1979 reproduced in Kenneth Martin The Late Paintings Serpentine Gallery Catalogue 1984

(2) p. 96, Khoroché, P., 2002, Ben Nicholson drawings and painted reliefs: Lund Humphries

Ben Nicholson quoted by Khoroché, *ibid*