



Justine Allison

The Language of Clay



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Shifting Lines



Contents

- 04 Shifting Lines
by Ceri Jones
- 10 Of precision and irregularity
by Alex McErlain
- 18 In conversation with Justine Allison
by Ceri Jones
- 24 Biography
- 28 Acknowledgements

Shifting Lines

Justine Allison's intricately made vessels are eloquent and uplifting. Effectively so because of their unassuming presence. Light is attracted to them, held, and radiates from them. There is a quietude to Justine's work that reflects both the meditative process of its making and the grace of the finished forms. They are not perfect, they are precise. They have strong lines and soft colours. They are fixed forms that convey movement. They are vessels that make us hold our breath.

Lines from land and urban strata are in the fabric and decoration of Justine's vessels. The lines drawn into the clay as well as the ceramic edges evoke movement in each piece. The vessels shift as they are built, settle as they dry and alter again as they are fired. They have a poise born out of the fragility of their material and the robustness of its qualities. Porcelain is a very fine clay body to manipulate and Justine does so with skilful tenacity. Once it is fired to a high temperature, vitrified, it is stable and strong and luminescent.

Families of vessels have familiar traits and pleasing differences. They sit comfortably in groups, chime as pairs or sing out as individual pieces. The seemingly most simple of small, cupped bowls can be utterly alluring. Justine applies gold leaf to the inside surface of select small bowls. This gives an ethereal quality that can dazzle.





Form, for Justine, is paramount. Function is a driving motivation, but it is the aesthetics of a piece that are key to her making. Taking a functional vessel, such as a jug or a spoon, as a starting point, Justine will work her thinly rolled sheets of porcelain at just the right pace to capture the form. She describes it as drawing with the clay. Like a drawing, the marks of making remain. Lines, stripes, rubbed colour, lettering, hemp twine, gold leaf or palladium, any of these contribute to the considered aesthetic of finished jugs, pots, bowls and spoons.

Justine has her own language of clay. Balanced between functional and sculptural, her ceramic practice is rich and original. With a profound understanding of her materials and a honed visual aesthetic, Justine's vessels are resolved. It is such a pleasure to have this solo show by Justine as the opening exhibition in the second series of *The Language of Clay*. It expands the dialogue presented through the first series and celebrates singular expertise.

Ceri Jones



Of precision and irregularity

The title of this exhibition series *The Language of Clay* is especially apt for the work of Justine Allison who constructs pots by hand in porcelain. Working with sheets of clay to make a pot is seemingly straightforward, a long established process called slab building. Very simple techniques usually prove to be anything but simple to the inexperienced. In Justine's hands soft slithers of clay are manipulated with a dexterity that belies the difficulty of the process. Justine chooses to work with porcelain, the clay known to some as white gold and to others as the devil's invention. Porcelain is unquestionably the most difficult of clays to work with and to choose to hand build with it in thin sheets is the greatest challenge. So it begs the question why does she do this? The answer lies in the sublime work that emerges from her endeavours. The pots have an ethereal quality, so light and delicate when picked up and yet their form is strongly stated. Translucency is an integral part of their design not just a convenient by product of the process. She understands the language of this porcelain clay intimately and works with its properties to coax out the best of its attributes.

Her works often begin with creating three dimensional forms with paper and scissors, manipulating and modifying until she has the essence of an idea formed. From there the work must take place in clay using the thinnest of sheets and manipulating quickly before it dries too much to bend. There is a tension at this stage when working porcelain; one moment it is so soft and floppy that control seems impossible, then suddenly it's losing moisture rapidly so cracking results if you try to bend or join it. A seemingly impossible task to control such a wayward material into a delicate, precise form. Once the form is made it must be nurtured through the drying process and eventually given over to the heat of the kiln when it will take on a life of its own once more, twisting and moving as it becomes almost molten – the key to its ultimate translucency.





Justine composes not just with shape but with surface, frequently applying linear marks that cause visual interference in the way we perceive a form. In some cases the application of precise vertical lines onto a fairly regular shape is changed through the course of the firing as the porcelain bends and twists with the heat. It is precisely this working with the potential of the material that gives her work its unique creative quality and sets her apart from others who are simply technically adept.

Her repertoire includes cups and jugs; items intended for use; which come alive when filled with drink inviting tactile as well as visual exploration. Sgraffito lines drawn through a dark underglaze stain are deliberately imprecise, animating the surface and encouraging enjoyable scrutiny. Her square formed bottles often have lines created with masking tape, painstakingly applied by hand. She likes the fact that the tape is not always regular and of course the firing distortions only serve to emphasise this interplay of precision and irregularity.

I asked her about historical pottery that she admires and she instantly responded 'slipware'; pots made with brown clay in a vigorous improvisational manner and I saw the connection, the need for familiarity with the potential of a material and an openness to working with, rather than dominating, material traits. She also cited factory visits to Stoke-on-Trent and seeing serried ranks of pots creating interest through their stacked arrangement. She likes to set her own work out in groups, it brings out the individuality of each object, raises awareness of human intervention as opposed to mechanical repetition and suits her way of making pots in series. To make a group of similar forms is a common potter's trait, partially chosen for efficiency of production but more importantly for creating individuality through change in emphasis. Her workbench is opposite a window where the varying light at different moments in the day show the ways translucency can effect and enhance a form. Her studio has a satisfying messiness which contrasts beautifully with the immaculate porcelain forms arranged in groups at differing stages of production.

Justine has been developing her ideas since the millennium. She was one of the last group of students to benefit from a rich and diverse ceramic education which has now almost disappeared. Her work shows the passion of a potter restlessly driven to push herself and her ideas. This exhibition; her first solo show; captures her at a moment when she is fully in tune with her current materials and process; enjoying the collaboration with the clay and the kiln, testing herself and her ideas and recognising the unexpected beauty that can come from the interplay of artist, idea and process.

Alex McErlain







In conversation with Justine Allison

Talking with Justine, curator Ceri Jones learns a little more about Justine's impetus for making.

CJ: You live and work in a beautiful environment, very rural, surrounded by woodland. Do your surroundings have a bearing on how and what you make?

JA: Yes and no. I think I'm quite an urban-minded person, quite building-centric. I am an outdoor person but I wouldn't rather be out in the field than in my studio. I like my indoor environment, I think the two can mix. I think that what I've been most informed by was the urban environment where I grew up. There are so many lines in an urban environment, so much you see that's not natural. It does have a bearing. I think, though, my work got more linear when I moved to the countryside.

I find that where I work in my studio I have to look out, I have to have that space. I like seeing the change outside, there is movement everywhere.

CJ: You work with porcelain, you hand-build, there are real technical challenges inherent in that. What is it about porcelain that attracts you?

JA: I think it's the light, particularly with the porcelain I use. I was hand-building with bone china in college, which I liked, but there was something about it that was just too white. Whereas there was something about porcelain that felt right; how I work with it, the colour when it's fired, the colour of the clay. Hand-building with the clay, it's like having a piece of paper to me, I can have an idea and I can just do it. I can roll out clay with my eyes closed and I can feel it. For me it's simple, there are technical challenges, especially with the new work, but I know the material quite well so I know when it's gone too far, when it's too dry, what I can do with it. It's nearly been twenty years of rolling out clay, that's a long time. There's something so immediate about hand-building, I can roll it out and if I have an idea I can actually do it.

CJ: So you go straight into working with the clay. Do you ever plan on paper first or draw?

JA: Yes I have done with some of the new vases, purely because of angles. I've had to plan, I don't think I could go straight in there and get it right, especially with the four sides, I couldn't cut it and get it right straight off. It's only these pieces that I've done that

with. But again it's quite an immediate process, I roll my clay out and then draw into it, I draw into the clay. I treat it like drawing so there's no rubbing out, you just leave it and it becomes part of the piece.

CJ: Do you note ideas for your work in any other way?

JA: I spend a lot of time observing and I photograph a lot, much more than I used to. I've never been a sketcher. It's not how I record things. I write things down on bits of paper, lots of bits of newspaper. And I realise that's what my mum does as well, I'm doing the same, I've come across lots of old newspapers of my mum's and there are snippets of things that she's thought of and now I'm doing the same. It's almost as if I write it and then it's discarded.

CJ: You make a lot of vessels, you explore the balance between form and function. How do both of those interplay for you?

JA: Probably form over function as a priority, but everything on the whole can be used. I find that different people have different takes on my work. Some people look at my work and think they're going

to break it and some people are very physical with it. It can be used, and that's important but that's not the priority. There was probably an element of function to begin with, when I started making the lanterns, but there is something else about the glaze that brings the whole form together. I think the glaze softens the pieces somewhat, even though it's just on the inside. They're tactile pieces so the finish is important.

CJ: The decoration you use is textured, has that come about through experimentation over time?

JA: I suppose it's experimentation. You're always going to be able to feel the decoration because I'm using an underglaze. There's more going on in the pieces since I've started doing the stripes, they've got busier. Whereas before I didn't use any colour, the decoration was all patterns on the surface.

CJ: You say that your work's become busier yet, to my eye, it is calm. It's very fine and must demand a lot of patience. Do you feel calm when you're making?

JA: I'm quite a quiet maker. I can be quite methodical about certain things. I like the quiet, though I listen to



the radio, I talk to myself when I'm working, I think I have a daily ritual, certain things happen at certain times. It's probably the most controlled space and time that I have, in the studio. Everything else around me seems quite chaotic. It's messy but calm in the studio. I like my mess. It's not very big here but I love this space. It feels very much mine. So it is calm. Unless something goes wrong, but then it's generally my fault. I'm not frenetic when I work, I'm methodical, I have to be or I'd go insane, such as when I'm putting the stripes on with the masking tape, which is the same colour as the clay. I have lots of pairs of glasses everywhere because I can't see anything any more!

CJ: Tell us about the gold in your work.

JA: The gold has come from calligraphy. I've done calligraphy since I was eleven, though I haven't done it for a long time, I've let it slip. I used to do a calligraphy course with a wonderful lady and I did illuminating with her. We used to do proper, old fashioned illuminating with gesso and would use gold leaf. Also I used to use more text and writing in my ceramic work than I do now and so I was wanting to add a bit of gold to that. You can't use

gold in ceramics in the same way as gesso though, you can't burnish it like you do on parchment. It took me a while to accept the different process, which I'm now loving, the gold has definitely come from my gilding days.

I didn't used to sit down much when I was younger, I was like Tigger, so my mum used to find it amazing that I'd just sit still and write letters down, I'd write books full of just letters. I think that has fed into how I work now.

CJ: The gold leaf adds a real luminescence. Light is important to you. When you're creating a piece will you use the light, work with light?

JA: Not so much anymore. I've got some pieces at the moment that are just biscuit fired and I'm really enjoying them, I like the more robust nature of them. The process informs the work. I do have an idea as I'm making of how the light is going to affect the work, how thin it is and how it feels. They've become lighter in places, the vessels, because of the physical thinness, though I have to be careful because it can go too far.

CJ: Tell us about spoons. When was your first spoon?

JA: I made a little gold spoon first, I think it was when my daughter Cherry was quite young. It was tiny. I could probably read many things into my doing spoons, they're vessels, I like vessels. I generally like the handles to be really flat and sticking up. So again, quite impractical, but you get great movement in them, especially through the making process.

CJ: You use some decoration and some colour in them and you've also introduced different materials with your spoons. You've used twine to bind the handles, tell us about that, it's a real contrast.

JA: It is and I've been thinking about it for quite a while. The handles are so thin and binding makes them feel very different. It takes that impracticality a step further too. Using hemp twine, it's not even something you can delicately wash, you really can't use that. I really like the contrast. A lot of it is aesthetic, starting with something quite simple and doing something different with it each time, I can't keep doing the same thing.

CJ: Have you got trustworthy tools that you couldn't do without?

JA: I have got an old knife that hasn't got a very good blade in it, I use it for doing particular cuts in the clay. I've got my rolling pin, don't touch my rolling pin, and different paintbrushes and several bits of cardboard that are very important, they have certain things written on them. They're always laid out to the right of me.

CJ: Quite ritualistic?

JA: Yes. On the odd occasion that I do move things, if I have to clean or something, then I tend to clean around my tools and try not to touch them. I guess because I don't have a lot of tools, I don't need many, they're very important to me. Timing is important too. The studio is cold, there's no insulation, so I have to work within certain timings, because of the state of the clay, and of me.



Biography

Justine grew up and studied in London, graduating from Camberwell College of Art in 1998. As a craft based degree course, making multiples was integral to her training. This persists in the families of vessels that Justine now makes, though it's the differences in each piece that motivate her creative interest.

The urban environment too has had a lasting impression on her. A move to rural west Wales fourteen years ago catalysed a shift in Justine's practice. With time and space to dedicate to making full-time, the lines and shapes of an urban landscape translate into her forms and decoration.

Justine has been hand building with porcelain since college, a technical feat which has become second nature to her. She works thin sheets of rolled porcelain as if they're paper, slicing and joining, propping and mark making.

Justine's starting point is functional pieces. She'll take the form of a particular vessel and make it to her aesthetic, focusing on form above function. Most of her pieces remain functional but it is the perfection of form and use of line that is the overriding priority. Her eye responds to a sharp aesthetic that insightfully acknowledges the constant movement of the clay throughout the making process.

Justine uses light as a medium. The thinness of the clay is key to this. She can corral a glow within a vessel or simply lay bare a smooth surface in order to catch every whisper of light as it falls.

The seeming simplicity of the decoration belies the profound attention to detail that Justine applies to the texture of her vessels. Fine stripes meticulously sculpted using minute strips of masking tape and underglazes in muted colours bring an unassuming tactility to her work. Gold leaf applied to the interior of small bowls conveys striking luminosity.

Having presented work at selected exhibitions in the U.S., France, Ireland and Japan, Justine has recently exhibited in UK galleries including the Biscuit Factory, Bevere Gallery, the Geoffrey Museum and Nantgarw China Works Museum. Current stockists include Flow Gallery, Snug Gallery, Cambridge Contemporary Crafts and Ruthin Craft Centre.

Justine's work has been purchased by the Aberystwyth Ceramic Collection.

www.justineallison.com





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www.languageofclay.wales

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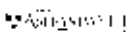
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




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The sun shines through the dusty windows of Justine Allison's rural workshop in mid Wales. But there is nothing rustic about the refined porcelain vessels that are caught in the light. Hand-built from thin slabs of clay she creates precise forms – beakers, pourers and sharp-edged vases decorated minimally with line. Justine Allison's ceramics are skilfully made, precious to touch and a delight to the eye.

Professor Moira Vincentelli,
Consultant Curator of Ceramics, Aberystwyth University