

Katy West

**Encountering the Collection
An Exploration of Paisley Museum's New Permanent Ceramics Display**

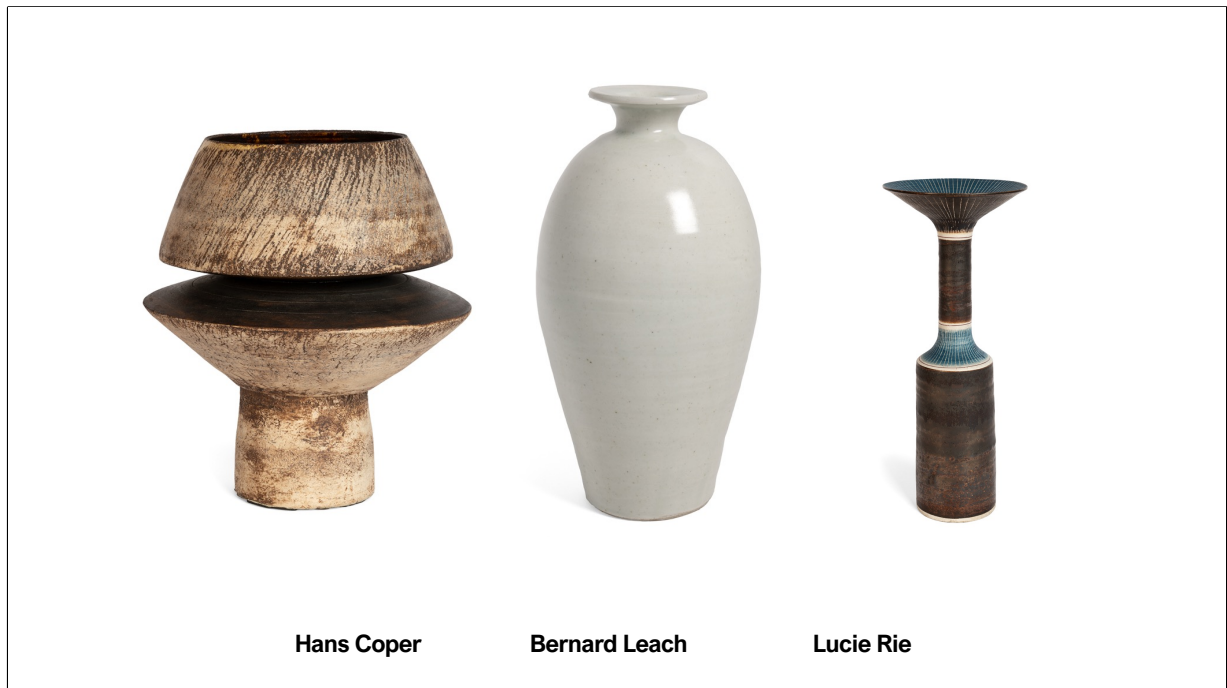
Displaying Design: History, Criticism and Curatorial Discourses
Design History Society Annual Conference 2023
Escola Superior de Artes e Design, Matosinhos
7–9 September 2023



**Paisley
Museum
Long ago**

As a ceramic practitioner and contemporary craft & design curator I was invited by Paisley Museum as a guest curator to make a selection of ceramic works from their large and eclectic collection that will go into a new permanent *high-density wall display* when the museum reopens in 2024 following extensive renovation.

Paisley Museum and Art Galleries were gifted to the town by the Coates thread tycoon at a time when Turkey red, Paisley shawls and Singer sewing machines were thriving global businesses. Alongside a comprehensive, collection of social and natural history and works by regional artists sits an outstanding collection of studio ceramics. Collected mostly between 1958-84, this collection is of national significance within the United Kingdom.



The ceramics collection was instigated by Cyril Rock, Director of Paisley Museum between 1949 – '66. Rock wished to explore the field of 20th century British ceramic-wares, aware that few museums were displaying such works. He notes "it was a promising field for exploitation, especially as prices were still quite moderate". He compiled a list of names as a nucleus for the collection, including already established studio potters such as Leach, Coper and Rie.

The growth of the collection is due in part to Henry Rothschild, who as the young director of Primavera, a gallery dealership of contemporary ceramics in London then Cambridge, agreed to provide the museum with outstanding works from his gallery's regular exhibitions. Rothschild, mindful of the importance of keeping works in the public realm, was also no doubt aware of how this would ensure continued prominence for his artist-potters.



**Paisley
Museum**

Just now

I was asked to select only 20 makers for a new permanent display, forming a small part of the newly redeveloped museum displays. When you think that a 1984 catalogue of the collection included works by nearly 150 makers, many of whom have several pots in the collection, you can see what an impossible task this process was.

The display as it stands constitutes a number of parts:

- A 100 word introduction
- 36 objects on display by 20 makers
- 6 of which come with a 30 word caption
- A portrait linking each caption with its maker and mode of production.
- a factual label with maker and object material and date.

Although most decisions have been made now, this process is still live until the museum reopens and visitors engage with the display.



One striking thing about the collection is that, although it's tied together by a material, what is immediately apparent is the variety and idiosyncrasy of the approaches taken to the material by the makers. The ceramic objects in the collection's original purposes were not to be museum exhibits encased in glass. The majority of the works in the collection were made as parts of discreet bodies of work, shown first in an exhibition context. This original context allowed audiences to encounter progressive ideas, diverse intentions, and a myriad of formal devices, formulated in clay.

So how could I do justice in a highly limited display format to the diverse intentions of the makers represented in a large collection demonstrating such a broad range of concerns?

A short answer to this question is that I don't believe it is possible to do adequate justice to each of these highly individual work in such a limited format. There simply is not the space to allow sufficient context to be given for an individual work whilst also giving viewers access to the size and breadth of the collection.



Josiah Wedgwood (1790)

Bernard Leach (c. 1945)

I have therefore used the process of developing this display to investigate a different display strategy. I have approached the ceramics in the collection as “discreet units of energy” and I have approached the display format as a non-linear, non-hierarchical, rhizomatic mode of exchange.



Janet Leach (c. 1945)



Hans Coper (1963)

My display strategy was to present overlapping encounters so that each object has the potential to provide a multitude of readings. The disparate selection of works do not conform to their hegemonized display construction, in fact, with each objects unique and autonomous integrity, they could be said to rally against it.



To enlarge on this idea further, Michael Glasmeier coined the phrase “self-contained discreet units of energy” for his 2005 exhibition, *Discreet Energies* – looking back on 50 years of Documenta. In this large survey show there was no interpretative material or commentary in the space, the works were not arranged chronologically by exhibition or date, nor in relation to the spaces in which they were originally displayed. By treating the art works as *self-contained units of energy*, Glasmeier meant to draw attention to the possibility of myriad other histories, impossible to define, within and alongside the specifics of the Documenta context.



Elizabeth Fritsch (1976)



Tony Franks (1981)

Like Glasmeier, I hope that the positioning of works within my display allows for different connections to be made and these connections be open to multiple interpretations. The display's ordering does not conform to a strict chronology. There are no groupings by theme in the work, the connecting matter is clay but the manifestations from this material are infinite.

Given the range and breadth of the ceramics collection, and conscious of the limited number of works that I could select, I hope that the selected works retain their qualities of individuality, idiosyncrasy and particularity.



Alison Britton (1982)

Jacqueline Poncelet (1975)

So in what ways might my display of objects encourage a multiplicity of readings that animate the fixed museum display? How might my display offer the visitor an egalitarian and open-ended experience? How might my display encourage and empower the viewer to enjoy, relish, and take inspiration from what they encounter?



In a “Contextual Model for Learning” (developed by John Falk & Lynn Dierking in the 90’s) the authors describe 3 overlapping encounters that inform the viewer in a museum

1. The physical – visceral response to the work on display
2. The sociocultural – themes imbued in the rationale of the maker
3. The personal – evoking memory, reminding the viewer of something they know



Considering this in terms of the Paisley display, I reflected that the objective is not just to introduce viewers to the medium of ceramics through its collection, but to invite the viewer to connect with these varied “units of energy”: The viewer may consider the objects in relation to the museum, but they may also think about how they connect to real feelings or things around them, and perhaps more personally to how they connect to objects that trigger thoughts and emotion relating directly to their lived experiences.



Ewen Henderson (1982)

Sara Radstone (1982)

This made me reflect upon the expansive experience that the museum goer encounters, and its relationship to “Flow”, a concept around happiness, developed by philosopher Mihaly Csikzsentmihalyz where he discusses a satisfying state of consciousness, or ‘flow’, that makes a museum or gallery experience genuinely satisfying to its visitor.



Spongeware Plate, Bells Pottery, Glasgow (c. 1835)

Angus Suttie (c. 1985)

Csikszentmihalyz defines flow as *“a state of mind that is spontaneous, almost automatic, like the flow of a strong current”*.

Donna Loveday goes on to explain this phenomenon as, *“a common experiential state where by learning and satisfaction are optimised. If a museum exhibit induces the ‘flow’ experience, the experience will be intrinsically rewarding and consequently will grow in sensory, intellectual, and emotional complexity.”*

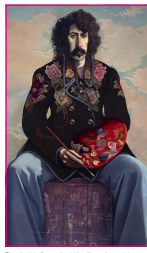
Are we just here to entertain you?

You can see us, but can you hear us, the real us? You sold us this American dream but locked us in a nightmare. You put us on a platform with shiny costumes, but you can't hide the pain behind.

Are we dying, are we alive? Are we free? Or just here to entertain you? We carry our history and the pain of the ones before us.

Take a closer look at the death and violence you showed us. What do we feel? Numb? Angry? Sad?

Coproduced with Jambol Radio African-Caribbean radio station



The artist, John Byrne, painted this self-portrait around the same time as *Freedom Riders*. It shows the artist in a similar setting to the one in the painting.



He is divided by chains of death... like the chains he may have worn when enslaved. The dark hood reminds her of all the friends he has lost.



Beneath his shiny showman costume is a military-coloured T-shirt. Outside, it's the American dream. Inside, he is a free man.



The guitar is a divine dead angel... America's national symbol. With each chord, he's reminded of his American nightmare. Why bring to mind a message, to inspire listening?



His platform is a shiny stage that is a shining star. He's here to entertain you. The drawings are child-like but they're not innocent... they're a warning. A warning to the world.

Life on a cliff edge

The cliffs of Ailsa Craig, off the Ayrshire coast, are ideal for nesting seabirds. The island is a Special Protection Area and nature reserve — but it was once home to working families.

Life was tough. They survived by fishing, hunting seabirds and selling feathers for mattresses. In the mid-1800s, the public grew concerned about cruelty to birds. New rules banned summer hunting.

More was done to protect seabirds during the 1900s and Ailsa Craig's bird populations started recovering. It's a small win for nature — but there are still many threats to seabirds' survival.

Coproduced with Paisley Natural History Society



Millions of birds worldwide were killed for feathers. By 1900, feathers — and the skins of birds — had made puffins practically extinct on Ailsa Craig. By 2000, 2000 puffins had returned.



Summer ground flight was from one of the island's seabirds who nested every year on Ailsa Craig's outcrops, which is still used to make mattresses for the winter sport of surfing.



Ailsa Craig is an important nature reserve owned by the NatureScot. For hundreds of years, seabirds such as puffins, gannets and gulls have nested there in their thousands.



During the 1800s was a dangerous job. Puffins' droppings on open ledges were young gannets' food. Their nests. Puffins were caught by gannets' web-footed babies.



Puffins were in danger of extinction and they are still being hunted for feathers. In 1900, 2000 puffins were still being hunted for feathers. In 2000, 2000 puffins had returned.



When puffins are in danger of extinction, they're often in danger of extinction. In 1900, 2000 puffins were still being hunted for feathers. In 2000, 2000 puffins had returned.

I am one of a series of guest curators invited to “help tell stories” from the museum’s collection. Remember this is a museum with a large range of artefacts, from Paisley’s industrial past, natural and social histories. I recently had a peek at some other “stories”, 1 about the ornithology of Ailsa Craig, co-produced with the Paisley Natural History Society. Another about a painting of First Nation Americans by John Byrne co-produced with the local Afro-Caribbean radio station.



Richard Slee (c. 1988)



Boot's Dispensary (date unknown)

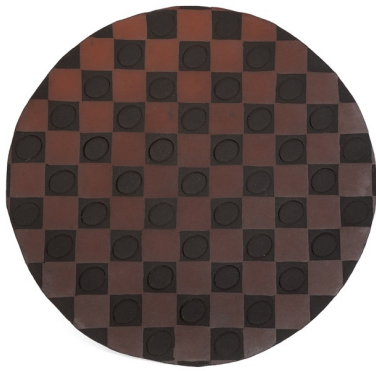
This made me consider the role that my own high-density display has to enhance the museum goers experience. Could this be less about how my display competes for attention alongside the other displays and stories, and more about the opportunity it has to compliment them?



Rozelle Holden (1964)

Martin Smith (1978)

During the development of my display, I was interested to discover that in the 19th Century a law was passed in Britain whereby: “objects of art science and historic interest in museums must be accompanied by “a brief description”, a practical example of the democratisation of the museum and the developing responsibility towards its visitors, as museums became accessible to the general public.



Tony Franks (1981)



Govancroft milk jug (c. 1972)

For the display at Paisley I was given a strict word count for its text-based elements; a 100 word intro and 30 word captions x 6. This decision was apparently based on many years of research from other galleries, but the Paisley curators noted that the last time they reorganised displays there were allowed 300 words per exhibit. The museum's editor commented *that "the word length lends itself better to poetry than prose"*. Bearing in mind that the average word length for a poem is 96 words, these captions are more akin to a haiku.



Lucie Rie (c. 1961)

Frances Upritchard (c. 2003)

In addition to a very low wordcount consideration of language used in the labels, should make them clear and accessible. The museum was using [Hemingway](#), a website that helps you simplify your text and cut the dross, very effectively. In addition, the museum staff were road testing their labels, on local groups and school children.

In consultation with the museum, we decided that the captions would focus on the processes displayed by the makers, which in another context I might find frustratingly simplistic. I fixed on 6 works by 6 makers, and I collated portraits of the makers in action to illustrate these texts.



Josiah Wedgwood (1790)



Frances Upritchard (c. 2003)

Factual information outlining 'maker, title, material date' is also available to the viewer. As we all mostly carry pocket computers this data can lead the curious viewer to explore any works of interest in greater depth at their leisure.

I began to warm to the haiku approach on the labels, to be less concerned about how I would squeeze everything I wanted to say about the works into such a low wordcount, and to embrace the brevity of the format.



Lucie Rie made delicate pots on a fast-turning kick-wheel, guiding clay by hand. She finished the pot upside down to refine it, adding a base and her initials.

Technique: Throwing

In the end, I feel that this basic, accessible approach to the captions helps demystify the objects, perhaps allowing for sufficient connection between the enthusiastic amateur potter or avid great pottery throwdown watcher to the objects on display. Most importantly limited captioning will enhance the object's role as 'discreet units of energy'.

Alison Britton painted free-flowing, gestural marks onto rolled out slabs of clay. She then cut and assembled them with a glue-like 'slip' into jug and vase-like forms.

Technique: Hand-building.



In conclusion, John Dana (founder of Newark museum) suggests, “*That a museum devoted entirely to the display of objects that had no connection to the lives of most of its potential visitors was pointless.*” In his opinion the real work of the museum was in enriching the quality of the lives of its visitors, and to entertain, interest and instruct.

Which begs the question, If the primary job of Paisley Museum is to entertain, interest and instruct its visitors by displaying objects that connect in some way to their lives how might my ceramic display contribute to this aim?



Angus Suttie used a combination of pinched pieces of clay and coiled 'sausages' to build his imaginative forms. He created almost animal-like forms, including this teapot.

Technique: Pinching and coiling.

To return briefly to Falk & Dierking's 'Contextual Model for Learning', and the 3 potential levels of encounter that the museum visitor may have with the display:

Firstly, there is the initial physical response to the work, the visceral materiality of the pots, their colours, textures, and form.

Secondly, there a possible deeper engagement with the social-cultural themes and formal qualities imbued by the maker in the works, The narratives they contain, open of course to multiply readings and interpretations.

Finally, there is the potential to make a personal connection with the display, whereby the viewer makes a direct connection between what they see, with their own lived experiences.



Jacqui Poncelet poured liquid bone china clay into plaster moulds, coating the inside to create a copy of its shape. She made translucent forms using this industrial process.

Technique: Slip-casting.

Reesa Greenberg devised the term '*remembering exhibition*', to describe exhibitions that remember past exhibitions. *She remarks, they "attest to a belief in a dynamic, rhizome-like notion of history where past and present are interwoven"*.

In responding to the project brief laid out by Paisley Museum I have sought to use the constraints given on the size of the display and the capacity for interpretation as a positive force influencing less linear and more open ended capacities for meaning and interpretation.

Although each individual work is not explained in detail, basic (factual) information is offered. From there, the display is open to interpretations on a number of levels, the viewer fictioning the works, through their physical, formal and personal encounters with the display.

Elizabeth Fritsch carved graphic motifs into the surface of leather-hard clay pots. She then inlayed them with coloured slips before firing.

Technique: Sgraffito, from the Italian for 'scratch'.



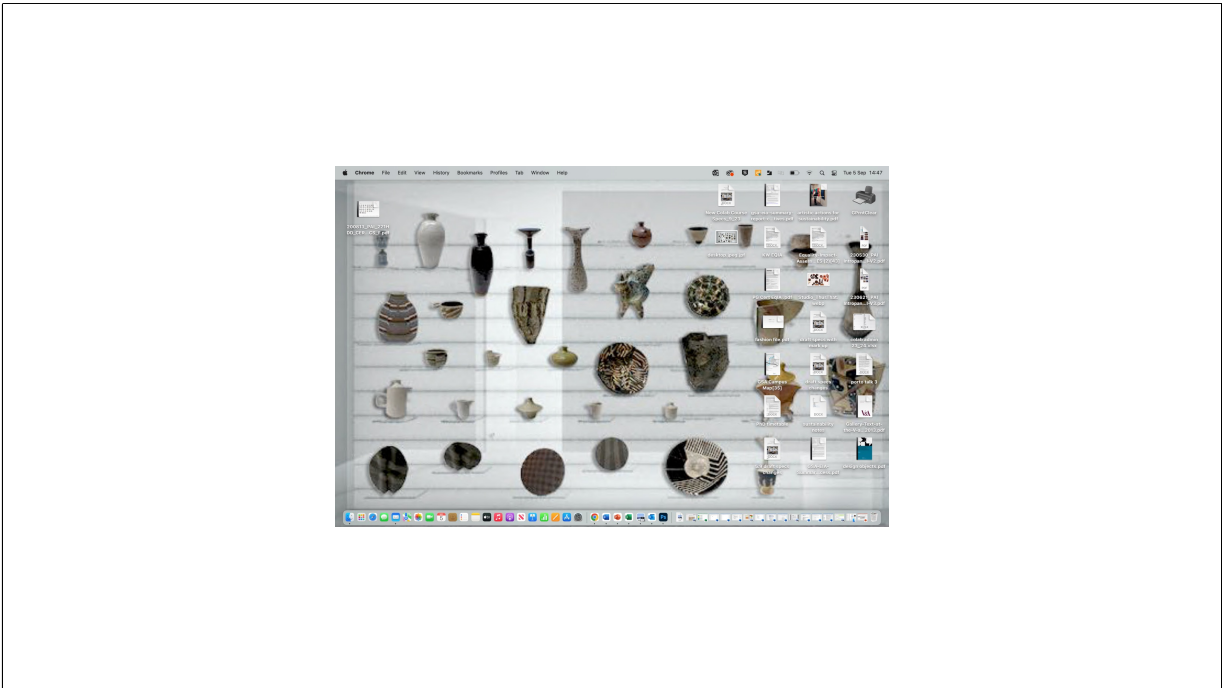
Nearly all the works on show relate to past exhibitions, but removed from that context are exposed to new interpretations. Their original narrative is no longer explicit and is replaced by an opportunity for new readings of and between the objects. The works are open to a “dynamic rhizome-like” encounter, which conflates fact and fiction, presenting work with varying past histories in one homogenised display structure.



Richard Slee painted and sprayed coloured glaze onto low fired 'biscuit ware' pots to create shaded tones. His pieces mimic the mass-produced kitsch ornaments that inspired his work.

Technique: Glazing.

It is my intention that this rhizomatic composition and layering of meanings will contribute to the display's potential to enrich the encounter and positively impact the viewer's experience in the museum. However, in closing, I must admit that I am constantly mindful of the other works in the ceramic collection that are not on display, and the infinite variations that they could bring to the display.



This has led me to consider how I may work with the museum to develop alternative mode of engagement to connect the collection with the museum’s visitors, how perhaps this high-density display may function like desktop icons, on which a double click may open up new lines of enquiry and lead the viewer to further encounters with the collection.