

Expressionist ceramics

Gillian Lowndes: At the Edge

Centre for Ceramic Art (CoCA),
York Art Gallery

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Reviewed by Jane Audas

Gillian Lowndes (1936–2010) did not make easy work. It can hardly be described as pretty. It is not functional. It presents as fine art, yet her practice was firmly within the craft world. All of this perhaps contributed to the ceramic sculptor being somewhat overlooked towards the end of her life.

A reappraisal has slowly been bubbling over the past decade since the last major retrospective of her work back in 2013, at the Ruthin Craft Centre in Wales. A smaller show followed at London's The Sunday Painter in 2016, a space more aligned with the fine art world. A recent purchase of Lowndes' sculpture *Untitled* (1976) for the Arts Council Collection, however, suggests an appreciation for her work is gaining momentum. Now, this exhibition at the Centre for Ceramic Art (CoCA) will surely nudge her nearer to her rightful place in the canon of leading craftspeople of the 20th century.

This solid and visually surprising show offers up over 40 of Lowndes' pieces, mostly unseen by the public – forming, as they do, part of the private collection of lender Anthony Shaw, who has a strong connection with CoCA. Early works include her box forms from

the 1970s, some made from fibreglass dipped in porcelain, then folded and draped using dressmaking techniques and fixed together with pins before firing. Lowndes' brick works of the 1980s come next: re-constructed pieces of brick and shards of ancient pottery, which demonstrate, quite literally, her nascent love of working with found objects. You can see her visual language evolve in the 1990s, with her bricolaged sculptures, largely made from building detritus – pieces that show how Lowndes let her materials suggest (if not lead) her to the form of the final work.

By the noughties her sculptures were far removed from traditional domestic craft ceramics. *Tongue II* (2006), for example, looks as odd as its title suggests: a folded tongue (made from PVA glue impregnated with alumina) is held between two bulldog clips, and sprouts bristling hairs in odd places. As a work of craft, it has no function and is a disconcerting presence; it is a piece by a potter working at the edge.

The space at CoCA (which opened in 2015) is generous and architecturally strong; ceramics shown here have room to breathe. Even though most of Lowndes' pieces in the exhibition are quite small, they inhabit the cases at CoCA like little explosions of ceramic expressionism.

The curator, Helen Walsh, has arranged the work as it was originally made, in sequenced groups. Labels are minimal, containing object information but no descriptions, largely because there is little information written about Lowndes' individual pieces or processes. Accompanying cased works is a bookcase containing ceramics from CoCA's





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From far left: *Shredded Clay with Claw*, 1994; *Mesh Collage with Loofah and Hooks*, 1991; *Collage with Bathroom Tile*, 1985; all works by Gillian Lowndes



collection, picked for their similarity to the ethnographic pieces the artist and her husband, the potter and antiques dealer Ian Auld, lived with. They brought these back from Nigeria, where they lived from 1971-2.

Meanwhile, in several large wall cases, Walsh has mixed Lowndes' work with empathetic pieces by other makers, using themes suggested by her oeuvre: Character, Organic, Materials, Ancient and Form. In the Materials case, for example, her *Tin, Nail, Scroll* (2007), built around a rusty tin, hangs alongside Kerry Jameson's *Tools*, based on her research into historical implements in the Wellcome Collection and Science Museum, and Nao Matsunaga's *Forlorn Trees* – reclaimed chair legs and carved wood brought back together. These juxtapositions work well, adding both visual and craft-historical context.

In another case is an early work from the 1960s, bought by W.A. Ismay (whose collection is at the heart of CoCA); this single piece tethers *At the Edge* to the centre's collections. It is a solid, almost plain and respectable vessel, with zig-zag patterning – and, actually, very un-Lowndes-like.

One of the most revealing exhibits is a case containing a group of miscellaneous objects, or 'unfinished works', chosen by Anthony Shaw from Lowndes' studio after she died. A rusting ballcock, wrapped and nailed building site flotsam, twisted forks and dried loofahs lie like

limbs (as they must have in her studio) waiting to be used and, perhaps, abused by Lowndes. Nothing could speak more clearly to her making processes toward the end of her life than this small selection, made when clay was close to being the material of least concern. By the end she was making work in pieces, firing it and then doing cold work like stitching, wiring, gluing and even painting afterwards. Looking at the 'unfinished works', it is hard to tell which is the original found object and which are the pieces Lowndes had begun to work on – a confusion that would doubtless have delighted her.

Finally, there is a set of drawers on display that opens to reveal delicious Christmas cards that Lowndes made for Shaw, which he saved and dated. They show a delicacy of approach and artistic sensibility that is somewhat at odds with her ceramic output. This private relationship between collector and maker is the implicit story of *At the Edge*, with the works that Shaw bought laid out next to the cards and the 'unfinished works' he rescued – and it's a fascinating one. But the wider story of this exhibition is what it reveals about Lowndes: her place within ceramics, within craft, her material rebellions, her experimental processes and – most memorably – the unalloyed verve of her work.

Jane Audas is a freelance digital producer, writer and curator