Simon Carroll’s ‘Head Throwing’ Video

Article by Helen Hopcroft

It was the singular phrase ‘head throwing video’ that piqued my curiosity. I’d received a potter’s association newsletter advertising a talk by British ceramicist Simon Carroll at the Newcastle Regional Art Gallery. It mentioned an entertaining head throwing video on the artist’s web site: www.simoncarroll.net. Three such disparate words that one doesn’t expect to see in the one sentence: ‘head’ ‘throwing’ and ‘video’. How was it possible for me to remain indifferent? I contacted the gallery and went along to his talk.

Carroll was visiting Australia en route to New Zealand’s Cantalay conference where he had been invited to talk about his work and demonstrate. After this he planned to use his Craft Council grant to travel to North America and then back home to Cornwall. Despite being a multimedia artist (he paints in oil, uses printmaking techniques and executes large-scale beach drawings) it is his ceramic work which has attracted critical attention with recent exhibitions at London’s Victoria & Albert Museum and the Tate Gallery in St Ives.

Three things are immediately striking about Carroll’s work: his strength of expression, unconventional tech-
niques and enormous range of influences. A photograph of Carroll’s studio is instructive. Around the walls hang a number of vigorously executed oil paintings, while in the centre of the room large ceramic vessels are covered with the same fluid and expressive brush strokes. There is no disjunction in approach between the two and three dimensional work, the same vigorous confident line persists.

At first sight many of Carroll’s ceramic works appear ugly and awkward, somehow misshapen and thrown together, but this is actually the root of their peculiar beauty. The work is strongly influenced by the diverse genre of ‘Outsider’ art; often created by marginalised members of society, people who may be mentally or physically ill, extremely young or vulnerable in some other way. The line between influence and categorization becomes blurred and though it is not an important line of enquiry, it is hard to know whether to file Carroll’s work under the ‘influenced by Outsider art’ or in the ‘Outsider’ category itself.

Other influences include the paintings of Basquiat, Baselitz, Goya, Tapies and Picasso; Abstract Expressionism; Gaudi’s Barcelonian architecture; Thomas Toft (17th century Staffordshire slipware potter); heraldic patterns, Japanese Oribe ceramics and the 20th century European avant-garde CoBrA movement.

Technically the pieces are complex, skilfully constructed and multifaceted but this again is not immediately apparent as sometimes their freedom of construction looks closer to accident or chance. Carroll uses a combination of throwing, press moulding, and handbuilding techniques to create pieces that tend to be large in scale and cylindrical in form. A range of tools is used to carve lines into the wet forms and then different coloured slips are applied with broad paint strokes; sometimes the slip is simply poured on or the pieces are dipped into buckets of slip. Glazes are un-self-consciously yet thoughtfully applied with Carroll often re-firing until the right shade is achieved.

His larger pieces are usually assembled in segments; he will start by throwing a base, then cut this off the wheel and throw the cylindrical mid-section of the form. A mould will be used to encase the tall mid-section and the pot will continue to be thrown inside this. A wet top section will be added while the mould is still in place and the pot will be re-thrown. Lastly the mould is removed, the lip of the base scored and joined to the combined mid section and top.

There is extreme fluidity to the way he makes things, techniques are used as required; there is nothing neat, fussy, overly correct or laboured about his work. Seams tend to be accentuated, often like welds in iron plates, with evidence of the physical process of joining left on the finished work.

In the December 2005 edition of Ceramic Review, Jo Dahn wrote that Carroll’s work “is a ceramics practice that, for all its free use of ceramics-specific techniques, relates more closely to fine art styles. Like Peter Voulkos, Carroll’s bold handling references vigorous,
painterly abstraction, from Picasso to the abstract expressionists. At the same time, there is and has always been something of the baroque about his work: muscular and expressive forms; lyrical passages in tension with an exquisite contained or controlled clumsiness; surfaces that are — by some miracle — simultaneously lavish and delicate."

Underlying Carroll’s development as an artist is a life that often seems to have verged on the point of chaos. The process by which an artist learns his or her own visual language is rarely straightforward, but in Carroll’s case it seems messier than most; he speaks about years of manual labour, periods in psychiatric care and drinking with honesty and humour. What is interesting about his descriptions of these past events is the way even the most mundane activities have contributed to the development of his unique style.

At one point he had a job teaching ceramics at a school for the blind; in exchange he received free use of their studio facilities. One of the young students, if left unsupervised, would reach about him and grab anything he could feel and then happily incorporate it into his own sculpture. The boy’s sculptures would often have his classmate’s cups and bowls stuck haphazardly to their sides like octopus suckers.

Often clay pieces at the school would get broken either during the firing process or after they came out of the kiln. Carroll would take the fragments and glue each child’s art work back together. Reassembling the shards changed the way he saw form, he began to allow himself the freedom to experiment and to accept chance: “slowly but surely I was getting things shaken off” learning to escape the “correct ways of doing things”.

At another time, Carroll was asked to make a large number of amphorae for a London based artist. It was just after he had finished his ceramics degree at Bristol University and he confessed to accepting the job without knowing what an amphora was: “history of art was in the morning” and he had chosen Bristol because he “liked the pubs there.” During the tedium of throwing literally hundreds of amphorae Carroll developed his unfussy approach to joining. He realised that the amphorae were the “carrier bags of their time” and reached the point where he told himself “don’t worry, just throw them”. It represented further disengagement from the traditional aspects of his training, a questioning of the techniques and methodology of his craft.

A number of manual jobs followed and each time he took away something that was eventually to be of value to his art. During a period as a construction worker in Barcelona he was struck by the beauty and neon colours of the builders’ chalk lines, he would gaze at them in awe, fascinated by the unself-conscious application of colour. Yet he wasn’t the only person whose imagination transformed the dust and heat of the construction site; the Welsh carpenter he was working with was an avid Country and Western fan and had named all of his tools: the power saw was ‘Cherry Baby’, the jigsaw ‘Bronwyn’.
In the early 1990s, when ecstasy use and rave culture were mainstream in the UK, Carroll got a job building 63-foot catamarans in the town of Portishead, near Bristol. He had never built a boat before and neither had the rest of the young cash-paid-daily labourers. The site was full of dust, the heavy smell of resin, thumping techno music and a constant stream of casual employees. Someone showed him how to fair a boat’s hull: you run your hand over its sides until you feel a small hollow, then this indentation is filled and sanded.

At first Carroll couldn’t tell where the hollows were but gradually his hands developed sensitivity to the subtle variations in the boat’s form. He said that after drawing on the sand is a nearly-perfect metaphor for the way Carroll’s art has emerged from the diverse experiences of his life; close up, the drawings appear to be a random series of squiggled lines but climb a nearby slope and look down and an intricate design becomes apparent. There’s a rather sweet video of Rolf Harris on Carroll’s web site discussing the beach drawings and then helping make one with an old rake. Rolf gets puffing very quickly and ends up singing an old fashioned song about love letters.

And in case you’re wondering, the head throwing video mentioned in the opening paragraph refers to an art event where Carroll asked fellow ceramicist Martin Lungley to throw a pot on his recently shaved head. Carroll sat on a swivelling office chair, using his feet to push his body around while keeping his head as still as possible. The ceramicist did a surprisingly good job of using Carroll’s skull as a wheel; the end product was a natty terracotta jug with a comically fluted rim.

Helen Hopcroft completed a Masters degree in painting at London’s Royal College of Art in 1994. Prior to this she studied Fine Art at the University of Tasmania and used a Nescafe Big Break to travel to the UK in order to commence her postgraduate study. She lectures in Fine Arts at Newcastle University and works as a freelance writer for a number of new media and print publications; her publication list includes The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, Ceramics: Art and Perception, Music Forum Magazine, unsweetened (UNSW literary review) and ArtsHub.com. She has exhibited her paintings internationally and is currently working on her first novel and on paintings for a solo exhibition at Despard Gallery.