



Duration

01:04:54

Reference

OH5

Subjects

Ceramics / Craft Revival / Gender / Digital Era

Recording date

5 June 2015

Recording location

London

Interviewee

Britton, Alison (AB – speaker, female)

Interviewer

Lin, Gloria (GL – speaker, female)

Synopsis

In this 2015 First Decade interview, the ceramist Alison Britton (b. 1948), best known as one of the radical group of artists that laid the foundations for the 'New Ceramics' in the 1970s, discusses her time on Crafts Council committees, early influences, gender issues in making, the impact of digitalisation on craft and tactility, and changing attitudes towards and adaptation of the term 'craft'. Britton openly discusses the politics of purchasing, referring to generational differences in craftsmanship values and the strategies for acquiring objects in the early years of the Crafts Council.

Recording

00:28 AB begins by talking about her early interaction with the Crafts Council (CC) following her graduation from college in 1973.

01:16 The CC took some of AB's work on a touring show and now these pieces are in the collection.

01:42 When she first left college, she was mostly making tiles for bathroom commissions (as referenced in a *Crafts* magazine interview).

02:17 AB began working with the CC Index Committee, where she said 'yes' or 'no' to makers' slides. Later she was on the Purchasing Committee (a group of makers).





02:45 AB: 'The Crafts Council kind of invented the word makers, didn't they, I think, in order not to have to gender it all the time, I think, the craftswoman/craftsman thing'.

03:01 AB states that she was on the Purchasing Committee for two to four years.

03:02 GL asks what the process for shortlisting makers was like. AB says the CC staff shortlisted, then the committee met. Sometimes there were 'hot disputes' about whether something was good enough or not. AB says that David Pye was 'very much for craftsmanship values, which some of my younger colleagues were not so intense about [...] so there were things he just couldn't accept where we thought what they were doing they were doing on purpose, as you were'.

05:17 AB says the 70s were about experimentation and bringing something new to the table, referring to her course in Leeds as 'very fine arty' and her ceramics course at the RCA following this.

06:12 GL asks what initially drew AB to ceramics. AB says she was nine when it first started, when she got to play with materials her father's friend sent home ('lumps of stuff in my father's briefcase'). She felt it was more exciting than just 'throwing cups and saucers'.

07:54 GL asks about her role in the CC. AB says it felt like a real job that helped things to progress and get the ball rolling in the maker space. Refers to the CC as: '**small, but very passionately staffed [...] people were all very engaged**'.

09:35 AB talks about the slides and describes them as a bank system, because they could not keep slides digitally. People would come to choose slides for their shop or exhibitions.

10:01 GL talks about finding the correspondence from 1972/73 to 1992 in the CC archives.

10:30 AB asks about archiving digital material. GL responds about photography and the idea of seeing 2D pictures of objects.

13:36 GL asks about changes in AB's practice during the 70s. AB suggests it was just 'coming'. She sees the relationship with the CC as reciprocal: that her generation was changing what the CC focused on, and the CC's focus was changing the makers.



15:08 AB discusses her workshops. Her first, 401½, was shared with First Decade makers Carol McNicoll and Jacqueline Poncelet. After JP left to work in Brixton, AB shared with others.

15:59 GL asks when AB went into teaching and education. AB states that she always knew she could not make a real living as a maker, so she taught from the beginning at Loughton College of Further Education, then in Portsmouth. She began at the RCA in 1984.

16:29 GL asks if AB felt any pressure to make multiples or commercialise her work. AB feels that for her, this was not an issue. She came into the craft, along with Carol McNicoll and Jacqueline Poncelet, making things individually.

17:28 GL asks if making and the world of craft were gendered. AB believes they were. She refers to Elizabeth Fritsch getting high prices for her pieces as something that seemed 'to incense a lot of bearded men'.

19:42 AB discusses the differences in publicity and profile between the 70s and now.

20:13 GL asks about the current craft revival and understanding of the word. AB discusses the use of the term 'craft' in the past and how the CC deliberated over how they would present themselves and the term. She feels there has been resentment of the word and that it still exists; 'craft-y' is pejorative.

21:26 AB discusses her feeling towards crafts and art and design, and how there must be a permeable boundary between them.

22:42 GL asks about AB's involvement in planning for the future of the CC. AB discusses CC strategies to endorse ceramics made by female makers and approaches to perceptions of the makers involved.

24:33 AB discusses her changing techniques and shifting interest in abstract painting later in her career.

25:57 GL and AB talk about travelling, her artistic influences (which she describes as 'visual-verbal') and her sketchbooks.

28:27 AB discusses the glazing process and experimental techniques of spraying and pouring.

29:44 AB talks about the thought process behind her making and her more recent work.



31:23 GL asks if AB had much to do with the Handling Collection. AB talks about her early memories of it as an educational collection and discusses the teaching of crafts and kilns in schools.

35:03 AB talks about the impact of digital on tactility, the challenges of forgetting and the lack of resources for young people now. She expresses concern about the current generation and digital access changing how people interact and perceive things.

36:59 AB talks about the importance of the CC as a place for experiencing touch in a digital world.

37:26 GL and AB discuss the contemporary use of the term 'craft' and what it really means in society today.

38:08 AB states her views on the work produced in the current craft revival and talks about her experience of being part of the RCA.

39:40 GL and AB discuss AB's teaching career and how teaching and making have changed over time due to demand and the economy.

41:54 AB discusses the free market of the last few decades, valuing one's own work without a framework and how potters have commanded prices at auction houses.

43:09 GL refers back to the craft revival. GL and AB discuss authenticity, nostalgia and the revival of knitting as a hobby rather than to make ends meet.

45:26 AB mentions Martina Margetts's editorship of *Crafts* and talks about generational differences in engaging with the magazine. Again she discusses the digital influence on craft.

48:25 AB talks about poetry and her past practice of writing it.

49:06 GL asks if there were any pieces in the first decade that AB loved making. AB talks about her first show, in 1979, and the new public exposure that it gave her. She refers to a piece shown in *The Maker's Eye* exhibition: **'I'm fond of this piece, which... But it was, it was the end of something, it was the end of drawing on things really, that was the moment of changing over.'** AB talks candidly about how she was feeling her way through the first decade, rather than making things she loved or favoured.



53:02 GL asks about the importance of the documentation of AB's current work. AB talks about objects she feels attached to from the 1990s and the photographic documentation of her work.

55:45 GL expresses interest in thoughts and debates surrounding CC purchasing. AB talks about the politics of the Purchasing Committee.

59:53 GL and AB discuss the role of the guilds in the craft world and the interplay of the V&A, the CC and other institutions in positioning crafts in Britain.

1:02:22 The interview finishes with comments on nostalgia and collecting reflections of an important time.