

Tim Rowan

Patience and Surprise

*Article by
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TIM ROWAN'S WORK IS NOT FOR PEOPLE IN A HURRY. TO glance quickly at his objects is to see weighty stoneware forms, charred by the heat of the kiln and evocative of density and force. His frequent use of rubble-filled native clay increases the work's vigour. Unglazed, scarred, rough-hewn and wood-fired, Rowan's pieces initially suggest a spontaneous and perhaps impetuous attitude, as if the artist works quickly and brings a devil-may-care approach to what he does. Although his written words reveal considerable thoughtfulness, the apparent spontaneity of Rowan's output is one of its most striking features, with a rugged beauty that is enhanced by the sense of freedom it calls to mind.

Despite these first impressions, there is a richness to Rowan's work that becomes apparent only over time. Elements of grace, delicacy, uncertainty

and humour soon absorb our attention, providing a counterweight to the boldness experienced at first glance. Tensions within the work – its merging of open and closed forms, its suggestions of movement and weightlessness within the heavy, ground-hugging shapes and the implications of functionality in what are generally non-functional pieces – add an additional resonance that cannot be understood quickly. Forms that suggest weathered turbines, crates, helmets, boats and bridges recall the detritus of early industrial societies, thus implying a narrative of considerable power, while bringing an element of melancholy and loss to our understanding of the work. Occasionally, as in *Arched Boat*, a poised, classical beauty emerges, fresh and startling, as if we have just discovered symmetry for the first time. And, while Rowan's objects demonstrate

Object 120. Arched Boat. 2008. 7.5 x 9 x 19 in.



a pronounced formal simplicity, their surfaces are marked by colours and textures that are variously moody, energetic and delicate, evidence of a complex, painterly sensibility that draws and holds our attention. That Rowan's undecorated surfaces are not 'painterly' in the usual sense but instead acquire their patina solely from the interaction of specific clays, careful kiln placement and lengthy firing, does not detract from their fascination. For these reasons, Rowan's objects encourage detailed study and reward our patience, persistence and care with a range of expression that is remarkable. At the same time, the artist's tendency to work in series, including the *Cog*, *Turbine*, *Box* and *Bridge* series, furthers our examination by providing the opportunity to compare evolving ideas and strategies.

The depth of Rowan's work is nowhere more evident than in his various *Cogs*, several of which were prominent in *Tim Rowan: Ceramic Sculpture*, Lacoste Gallery, Concord, Massachusetts, US September, 2008. Often enormous in size, sometimes requiring two people to lift and carry, the *Cogs* are typically low, cylindrical forms that stretch horizontally with raised flanges extending from end to end. True to their names, they seem mobile despite their weight, as if propelled forward by a corkscrewing motion, suggesting fish or streaming wind as readily as they recall industrial devices. Many of the *Cogs* are open at either end, with hollow cores that are both mysterious and welcoming, leaving us uncertain whether to reach inside or pull back. Their hollowness undercuts their strength, implying vulnerability as a contradiction of the power of their shapes. Indeed, Rowan's *Cogs* are lyrical objects and thus express vulnerability as a matter of course, with their open mouths suggesting song as readily as their swirling forms evoke the whirl of a machine. To find lyricism

in such massive objects is unexpected, just as Mary Oliver's words, "Lines of good poetry are apt to be a little irregular," are unexpected. While Oliver is referring to issues of metre and rhythm, considerations that are irrelevant here, her manner of thought seems germane to Rowan's work nonetheless. For Rowan, perhaps, sculptural form is good to the extent that it offers meaning through implication rather than directly (an irregular approach) and to the extent that it overturns expectations of how to express abstractions such as strength or lyricism. When seen in this way, a powerful object that implies both vulnerability and song is inherently a good form.

In contrast to the openness and flexibility of the *Cogs*, the works from Rowan's *Box* series appear intractable and solid, with a sense of impenetrability that differs markedly from the *Cogs'* apparent fragility. Shaped as accumulations of vertically tilting slabs and resembling tectonic plates forced upward by volcanic pressure, the *Boxes* lack the unassuming, take-me-as-I-am grace of many of the *Cogs* and instead challenge us by seeming to pose questions and offer temptations. For example, *Triangular Box* is designed with a lid, despite its resolutely closed exterior. It is unclear whether the lid can or should be removed, thus drawing us into the conflict between openness and closure that provides much of the energy of the various objects in the *Box* series, while simultaneously teasing us with the expectation that something of interest or value might be hidden inside. Yet when opened, *Triangular Box* reveals nothing but an empty space that is too small to be used. While the emptiness expressed by *Triangular Box* is a literal disappointment, it engenders metaphoric release as well, because with emptiness comes the suggestion of possibility and infinity, while any objects the *Box* might have contained would be likely to offer little

Untitled Cog with Inner Space. 2008. 16 x 20 x 15 in.



Triangular Box #116. 2007. 9 x 10 x 10 in.



beyond themselves, thus implying resolution and completion. In this way the issue of openness versus closure encountered when examining the exterior of *Triangular Box* is echoed in a more powerful way by what we find inside. By drawing our attention to this reflection between metaphor and reality *Triangular Box*, although outwardly among the simplest of Rowan's works, is, in fact, one of his most complex. Similarly, the other pieces in the *Box* series are marked by the demands and opportunities that exist in the tensions between inside and outside.

While considerations of use and function are an essential feature of the *Box* series, although obliquely, the theme of usefulness is made explicit elsewhere in Rowan's work. Vessel forms provided a recurring subtext, ranging from tea bowls to large, vase- or bowl-like objects. By providing the clearest link to the functional origins of virtually all ceramic production, examples of Rowan's *Vessel* series create a context within which his work, both functional and non-functional, can be appreciated. If successful functional ware is defined as objects that either effortlessly support, or intriguingly subvert their users' needs, and that do so in ways that show intelligence and awareness on the part of the maker, Rowan's vessels, as exemplified by his tea bowls, succeed as intriguingly subversive functional objects. Exhibiting rough edges, rounded, unsteady bases, cracks and generally triangular or square shapes, the tea bowls leave us uncertain of how best to drink without spilling. At the same time they are lovely pots, heavy and warm in your hand, animated yet graceful in shape, and entirely successful for those who pay attention to how they are used. In this way, the tea bowls offer a domesticated version of the experience encountered in other examples of Rowan's work, providing formal and textural details that contribute tangible pleasure

while also suggesting a variety of interpretive possibilities. As such, they fulfil their functions vigorously rather than passively, elevating their importance far beyond that of everyday, utilitarian tableware.

Rowan's other vessels share important similarities with the tea bowls, notwithstanding on a larger scale. Despite comparable qualities of heft, roughness and angularity, the larger vessels distinguish themselves from Rowan's non-functional work by isolating and accentuating characteristics that are unique to bowls, vases, or other vessels. By preserving these essential bowl- or vase-like characteristics, the larger vessels remain functional. Yet given Rowan's gift for emphasizing formal elements in visually arresting ways, the *Vessel* series quickly blurs the line between functional work and sculpture. As with the tea bowls, many of Rowan's larger vessels rise above irregular, twisted bases, calmly or urgently as the case may be. While the vessels' twisting bases might compromise their stability to a limited extent, they compensate by lifting the forms upward, creating a sense of buoyancy that is uncanny in works that are generally blocky in form and oriented horizontally. Some of Rowan's most striking vessels contain multiple chambers arranged in interlocking, star-like or honeycomb patterns. These multi-chambered works are spellbinding in the manner of Islamic decoration, yet with our memories of delicate Islamic filigree redrawn as stone-ware slabs that appear limpid despite their bulk.

The value of function, particularly as it relates to ideas of ritual and the perception of time, is an important premise for Rowan. In a statement that accompanied his 2008 Lacoste Gallery show, Rowan wrote, "Utilitarian objects...require physical participation, such as drinking a cup of tea. These rituals of use are also embodiments of time." Rowan's words

Object 101. Torqued Cog. 2008. 12 x 14 x 12 in.



Vessel 24. 7 x 10 x 10 in.



indicate that he perceives the experience of time as an essential feature of ritual and that certain objects used in 'rituals of use' – in this case, a cup – are necessary elements in maintaining the ritual. When he continues, "When I experience real joy I am aware of my mortality and the preciousness of the moment," he implies that the greatest joy is to be found in rituals – presumably, rituals of use – that allow one to experience a heightened awareness of time's passing.

If this interpretation of Rowan's words is accurate, one might expect his work to tend increasingly toward functional ware in the years ahead, if only because of the intensity of his experience when linking a cup, ritual and an awareness of time. However, other elements of Rowan's statement suggest a larger agenda that renders the issue of function irrelevant. In writing of his work in general terms, including both functional and non-functional objects, Rowan states, "The forms that my works take on are simple. They rely on a minimum amount of information and detail ... [and] in this respect require the viewer to actively slow down." By seeking a condition where viewers "actively slow down" in order to respond to works that present a "minimum amount of information and detail," Rowan hints at a detached, intensified form of engagement not unlike the attentive non-involvement of meditative practice, a discipline that has frustrated as many of its practitioners as it has

enlightened over the centuries. Yet despite this risk, Rowan's aim is optimistic, fair-minded, and generous, in that it places his work in a larger context than that sought by most artists, includes no mention of the possibility of failure on the part of his audience, and is clearly based on a belief that viewers are capable of this level of engagement. In the context of this inclusive vision, questions of function are beside the point.

Prominent among the works exhibited at the Lacoste Gallery was a group of new pieces from Rowan's *Bridge* series. Given the series' title, it is not surprising that the various *Bridges* presented graphic architectural profiles that were strikingly different from other works in the exhibition. In place of the monolithic forms of the *Box*, *Cog*, and *Vessel* series, each *Bridge* consists of a horizontal deck supported by three to five vertical legs, with the elongated legs bringing a high centre of gravity and occasional appearance of precariousness into play. Yet by juxtaposing the prominent vertical and horizontal elements of the legs and decks, Rowan carefully negates any sense of instability, instead achieving equilibrium between the counterbalancing axes. What the individual works of the *Bridge* series may lack of the *Boxes'* metaphoric content or the *Cogs'* lyricism is counteracted by this finely-tuned dance of horizontal and vertical components. At the same time,

Object 105. Five Part Bridge. 2008. 8 x 13 x 4 in.



the repetitive rhythm of the *Bridges'* multiple legs provides a surprisingly satisfying effect when seen in the context of Rowan's other, more freely-formed works.

A key example of the *Bridge* series is *Bridge With Nails* (2008), a stark, yellow-gray object with a horizontal deck that bristles with hundreds of short spikes, variously thorny, aggressive, stubbly or humorous, depending on your mood. The nails might seem provocative in the context of a body of work that generally relies on clay alone for its effect. However, the gentle, sweeping motion created as *Bridge With Nails* lists to one side softens the impact of the metal quills, while simultaneously refining the angularity of the form. As a potentially threatening object that is transformed by a simple gesture, *Bridge With Nails* reveals its kinship with Rowan's *Cogs*, despite any outward differences of structure. In the process, it demonstrates how Rowan's concept remains allusive in its manner, flexible in its effects and fully formed in terms of its communicative potential. It is as if Rowan has created a rudimentary language that is capable of poetry – not the poetry of wilted flowers and lovers' tears, but rather, to again quote Mary Oliver, "a living material, full of shadow and sudden moments of up-leap and endless nuance."

In Oliver's words, one finds something of the substance of Rowan's work and more: her words disclose the distance travelled from our first impressions of Rowan's output, with its initial evocation of simplicity and power, to our response on fuller acquaintance, when the work is seen to be graceful, surprising and suggestive, yet no less powerful. To create work that is increasingly rewarding over time is the goal

of every artist. Tim Rowan, despite a relatively brief career to date, has already achieved that goal, with the promise of much more in the years ahead.

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Top: *Bridge with Nails*. 2008. 11 x 12 x 6 in.

Below: *Tea Bowl Pair*. 2008. Smoked. 4 x 12 x 5 in.

