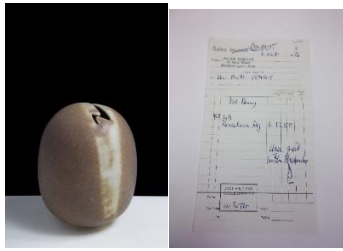


From the Ismay archive. by Alex McErlain

Val Barry b.1937



Val Barry b.1937. Ovoid form, porcelain with matt glaze, h. 10.2cm.

Purchased from the Peter Dingley Gallery, in 1976. Photograph Phil Sayer.

'I hope my pots have a feeling of peace and tranquillity about them. But the peace and tranquillity of a landscape with a potential fertility inherent in it. A movement and rhythm of life. Vulnerable, fragile finely balanced but optimistic and reassuring in their earthiness.' Val Barry, c 1976.

I have chosen to write about this pot because of its visual and tactile appeal. I also wish to raise awareness of its maker, who was a highly regarded potter until the mid-1980's when she abandoned ceramics to work in other materials, such as bronze.

The 'egg' inspired form has been a subject for many potters to explore but few have done so with such accomplishment. The pot sits comfortably within cupped hands and evokes the kind of feelings you get when handling a large sea worn pebble. The obvious difference however is that this work is as light as an empty eggshell. It encourages physical exploration; revolving the form around in the hands, feeling the base and cut top; it's a rather sensuous object.

The pot is made in porcelain, turned to smoothness, its base delicately recessed with the signature 'ValB' scratched in there. The distinguishing feature of the cut 'z shaped' slit, tempts the viewer to peer inside. I always thought the piece was hand built, so was surprised when I shone a light into it and saw rather pronounced throwing rings. It has been glazed with a tactile satin matt white glaze, dipped on each side into a stain, resulting in the speckled brown-green colour. The vertical pale band which remains, serves to emphasis the egg shaped form. I think it captures the vulnerability which Barry refers to in the statement above.

Bill Ismay's collection at York Art Gallery is much more than just an archive of pots. There are thousands of bits of paper ephemera that may be accessed and these include correspondence, exhibition posters, invites, price lists and other material which helps give a context to the pots. I trawled the archive for items related to Val Barry whose work I had long admired. Amongst many items referenced was a statement, written in the seventies in which she also revealed her Yorkshire origins. *'I am very conscious now of the Yorkshire landscape, its sense of order and balance. Terraced houses blackened with coal dust, farmland, moors, people, all co-existing. I feel I owe my sense of form and shape, balance and vulnerability to this childhood environment.'* The eldest child of a Barnsley miner's family, Val Barry worked in an office then as a nurse before moving to London in 1964. She was 30 when she enrolled to study ceramics at the Sir John Cass School of Art. Her studio was in North London. Ismay bought six pieces of her work and there are a further fifty, acquired by Anthony Shaw, now housed in York. The York collections are full of almost forgotten gems and I plan to dip into the archive throughout 2015 to raise awareness of more works that I

think are worthy of a fresh look. This series of articles also celebrates the reopening of York Art Gallery and many of the items I've selected will be on display in its new Centre of Ceramic Art (CoCA).



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