



Re-think.

An exhibition of ceramics by Tony Briffa

We are living in a world that constitutes an infinite surge of objects and like the obesity epidemic that afflicts most Western cultures; the avalanche has never been bigger. The ‘object’ in today’s age is one that takes on many forms yet function seems to be very short lived and no sooner that an object is born does it become obsolete in replacement of a bigger, better or bolder brother or sister. Our relationship with these objects, with our possessions, is one fundamentally tied with identity and how we see the world. So what are we to make of a surge of objects which have lost their functions and identities and taken out of their habitual contexts? Within such a context does artist Tony Briffa base his practice and through a re-collection of his work, he challenges us to reflect on our material culture and ask questions.

Curated by Vince Briffa and currently on display at Spazju Kreattiv, *Re-Collection* exhibits a range of ceramic works from sculptural objects, vessels and wall-hanging pieces that have been assembled together in a thought-provoking manner. At its core, this re-collection pursues a new discourse of objects which have been dislodged from their familiar contexts and placed within another in order to rethink meaning and identity. Speaking with the artist, he tells me how he has essentially tried to re-assemble his experiences into one and how he has used this exercise to carry on questioning the function-form paradigm within objects. Reflecting on the choice of title, the action of “*re-collecting*” brings to mind an act of organisation or re-structuring of a series of work, but Briffa tells me how this re-organisation conversely aims to disrupt his audience and challenge them in the hope that will go down the

artists' similar path. He talks enthusiastically about his work as he walks with me through the galleries, picking up pieces here and there and turning them over in his hands as if also turning thoughts over in his mind – he is anxious to get back to work and continue exploring this theme. It is clear therefore that this exhibition is about the present and future as much as it is about a re-collection of the past.

Briffa's artistic process is one of borrowing and re-contextualisation, particularly the borrowing of symbolic significance from his local roots which he translates into new forms. This process has been present in art since the early twentieth century when Picasso and Braque reassigned objects from a non-art context into their work and Duchamp realised his ready-mades, most famously his *Fountain*. Yet one can trace this practice throughout the century up until contemporary years. A sculptor by nature, Briffa always departs from *form* and seeks to create movement, whilst *colour* comes in later, particularly through the demand of the ceramic medium. He is in total command of his technique yet there is a struggle that takes place between what he wishes to express and what his medium will offer him. This struggle, accompanied by a constant decision-making process, is precisely what transforms craft-work into art-work.

Throughout the three galleries, I am relieved to find the necessary space between one work and the next; the physical space to walk up closely to one piece yet also take in the whole congregation, which in turn allows for a mental space to digest the challenge of each work. Moreover there is a rhythm and balance to the display of the re-collection, thus even the curation invites you to question. Upon entering the exhibition, one is greeted by the table pieces which at first glance seem pose the simplest of questions. These objects of furniture have been raped of their conventional function and simplified in form where the artist then forced new meaning; an image of the human eye within a triangle, symbols of religion and superstition. He imposes the same images onto sculpted iron-shapes. But how truly 'new' are these meanings? In age of infinite objects I feel that the problem tends more towards a loss of meanings in exchange for a desire towards decoration and aesthetics. Briffa is conscious of this preference and later provides us with polka-dotted iron-shapes, blinding the eyes so instead of imploring meaning he is simply being playful. However, returning to his eyed-tables and irons, the artist has created a portal into an infinity of meanings which we are losing the ability to connect with; an infinity that stretches across the millennia from the altars of Hagar Qim to Horus' eye on the Maltese luzzu to more modern designs. In sacrificing functionality, as these tables rest on prism-shaped legs which give them

movement rather than stability, Briffa reminds us to open our minds to the flexibility of meaning and not restrict ourselves to singular conventions.

Likewise, the two-dimensional wall panels further strengthen this concern with function and decoration. These nine-squared arrangements juxtapose the Mediterranean culture of story-tiles with an unfolding comic-strip narrative. Unlike the three-dimensional works, these tiles remain somewhat true to their form and function leaving the challenge to rest more on the surface that bears them. Briffa is here once more concerned with creating images and not simply colours and makes sure his photographic cut-outs are visually read. These tiles or wall panels, forcing me to conceive them in their two-dimensional element, made me reflect on Maltese tile designs, how they have become a trend for their decorative function and perhaps lost a historic and symbolic meaning.

In the last gallery of the exhibit one finds a trio of large plates, echoing a touch of the artists' mentor Gabriel Caruana. These plates are placed on low plinths, very close to ground level and here we see a stimulating suggestion made by the curator for the challenge in these works is in their placement, or rather displacement, as we are not used to functioning a plate in such a context. A series of figurative works may also be found in this gallery where Briffa presents Man in his most simplified and universal form, making reference to the morality play 'Everyman' and suggesting that the viewer should easily identify with as well as the spiral symbolising infinity. Finally, the three iron-shaped pieces of ceramics which Briffa refers to as *clunks of homeland* are the simplest in form of works in this re-collection, yet in their hybrid and almost unfinished state they resonate an intimacy purely through their simplistic lines.

This re-collection evidently reveals the artists' concern with the form-function paradigm and how he far removes his objects from the comfort of their presently accepted context in order to question the very act and purpose of their creation. Alongside the curator, the two have created a multi-dimensional exhibition where both the ceramic work of Tony and the curation of Vince have become media through which the audience are challenged to re-think.

Re-Collection is on display till the 8th of May at the upper galleries of Spazju Kreattiv.

Sarah Chircop