

16 JUNE TO 29 JULY 2006

PHILIP EGLIN

Philip Eglin is not cautious about making large statements, and arguably his bigger pieces are the most wonderful. Eglin has developed his formal and decorative language by making several types of work and all are hand-built. He has worked with form undecorated, as figures and also latterly small jugs in series. Such pieces, modest in scale, have become increasingly defined by the pattern of relief textures and details borrowed from other kinds of object. These plain glazed pieces are sometimes white porcelain, or buff clay dipped in the muted honey brown, ochre, green and black glaze palette of traditional earthenware. He has explored the busier relationship of the painted surface on elaborate form, with the brush strokes and graffiti slogans slapped and dripped across the figure, that first made him known in the eighties. In recent years he has frequently chosen a very simple form, a cylindrical 'bucket', that can be loaded with printed, scratched, and painted imagery and text on the surface referencing a great variety of things - and these buckets can be huge, almost a metre high. The iconography often includes quotes from the newspaper, preoccupations of his children, celebrity, mundanity, football, Jesus, the humorous predicament of contemporary life, the everyday and the sublime crashed together; but it would be fair to say of the totality of his work that women and art have both been a constant source. Most women have been naked and many have referred to the long limbed innocent looking women in 16th century paintings by Cranach, but a few have been clothed and these ones have a religious bent.

The big Madonnas that Eglin began to make in the late nineties brought his work to an imposingly larger scale and powerful imagery, and they are among the works in clay that have most enlivened the field here in the last ten years.

Echoing European Gothic sculptures in wood, Eglin's large polychromatic earthenware Madonnas, of which ten or so were made, (none, regrettably, now in British museum collections) mimicked the architectural ambiguities of their inspiration, part woman / part building, column and niche. Viewed from the front the Child sat stolidly on the Virgin's knee, both enfolded in rippling painted garments that implied the sculpture-in-architecture attributes of load-bearing structure. The backview was emphatically that, the back, indented and awkward, the part the public doesn't normally see, that offered a visual disjunction and his decoration of the surface added layers of provocative imagery in the recess. A reminder, perhaps, of the iconoclast wrenching the figure out of the building.

The freedom and ease in the way potters have sometimes painted the undersides of plates - Hispano Moresque platters come to mind - has always been a joy to this viewer, and the backs of Eglin's Madonnas brought the same kind of frisson. The massive forms provided liberating stretches of surface for Eglin to make his secular marks on, churning up the familiar with heartening brio.

Irreverence is a great characteristic and it is one that Eglin manipulates well, it is cheek contained and upheld by the beautifully realised construction of his forms.

One of the larger pieces in the current exhibition is a Bucket with a triptych of figures painted on it's outer wall; the last Pope, Wayne Rooney, and Jesus all in typical, significant, and related poses. They are combined because of a recent survey of children under ten in Britain who were asked to name the most famous people they knew of. After God, Wayne Rooney, Jesus, and David Beckham came top in that order. As might be expected, layers of other contradictory messages and signs, print, transferred drawings, big brush-marks, and suggestions of relief overlay the essential trio to enrich the graphic confusion and engage our attention. The piece is entitled *Let Us Play*.

Besides the bucket this exhibition brings together two other types of Eglin's current work. There are five sets of six small jugs, specifically grouped and modulating closely toned plain colours and rhythmic variations of ribbed textures and skinny handles. These are shown on wall shelves and can be read like sentences, and in the viewer's awareness of the repeating jug features: lip, neck, shoulder, belly, foot, etc., probably sentences about the pot as a metaphor for human form.

The rest of the room is filled with figures, two large and five smaller ones, and we are back to nakedness, but with complex decorated surfaces. The women sit, stand, recline, and crawl. They are clothed in painted marks, relief textures, scribble, inlaid drawings and printed lines; and little conventional Stoke flowers ornament some of the blocks they are supported on. The women are not smooth and ideal bodies. They have a slightly crumpled but calm air, of accommodating the reality they find themselves in, and real flesh sags a bit.

They have a potent presence as female images. As clay objects they intrigue on another level at the same time, in the layered complications of their skilful composition. Eglin builds them up from the bottom, supported by the block they rest on which is made first, with soft clay slabs held till firm by inflated balloons. 'As much as possible I want to leave the uniqueness of the surface quality obtained through pressing clay onto plaster untouched', he says, and this is the first time that the imprints of plastic packaging, his vocabulary of the blobs and corrugations from the vacuum presses of the manufactured consumed world, have also been used in the large scale figures. He now wants to model as little as possible - toes and fingers, even eyes and noses, begin with an impression on a piece of soft clay from plaster casts of packaging when a suitable niche can be found.

A transformation of dross, of the chaotic over-packed consumer culture we navigate day by day, is attempted in this urge to recycle both stuff and meanings. Eglin's great achievement is to make *wholes*, poised and affecting images that are not bitty or derivative or fanatically 'crafted', out of three kinds of complexity. Over the years he has been working, complexity has deepened. First he invented a way of building with a slab of clay on which he had picked up a fine line drawing in a dark coloured slip. The drawing was made by scratching on a plaster bat and filling the lines with slip which was then scraped back. This need for integral ornament was later incorporated into building a figure (knowing about the support systems of the Staffordshire figurine and how men on horseback lean against tree stumps) built up from many different pieces of clay. More recently the flat slabs of clay have been processed further by pressing them into plaster moulds of detritus from the modern world. (And the reason that plastic bottles are so enchantingly corrugated is for added strength in a thin plastic wall.)

Through these discoveries and the evolution of his making language, both the form and the surface have referenced more and more aspects of painting, news, junk, newness and oldness, the personal and the political, high and low culture. Bravado and irreverence is the key to it, iconoclasm and the building of new icons.

'It's about the material' he says; but it's about us too.