

invited artist

## ANDREA WALSH

ANDREA WALSH is an artist based in Edinburgh. She studied fine art before completing a masters degree in glass at Edinburgh College of Art in 2001.

Walsh set up her studio in 2005 and has since established an exhibition profile within the UK and increasingly internationally. Her work can be found in the permanent collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, and National Museums Scotland, Edinburgh.

Most recently she has completed a residency at Edinburgh College of Art where she explored the inherent qualities, symbolism and historical associations of related materials, in box and vessel forms.



Small faceted boxes, black bone china with 22ct burnished gold and kiln cast glass 2014

# Boxing clever

The glass and ceramic work of Andrea Walsh



**A**cid John sounds like a relic member of a sixties' prog rock group, but he is one of a varied cast of characters from the world of making who have shaped the journey of Edinburgh artist Andrea Walsh. In her studio, there is evidence of that journey in a series of exquisitely cast ceramic boxes waiting in an orderly manner to be gilded and burnished. Rays from the low winter sun pick up the precise edges of the forms and create a shifting pattern of light on the workbench.

Since completing a Fine Art degree in Staffordshire in 1998 when a prescient tutor suggested that she might try further experiments with glass to create the flow of light she was aiming to capture in her sculptures, Walsh has been drawn into an ever more material world. A chance encounter with a glass installation at Manchester Art Gallery by Scottish-Japanese artist Keiko Mukaide led, in turn, to a successful application for a 15-month masters course at Edinburgh College of Art in 2000. The glass course at Edinburgh was then under the technically inventive direction of Ray Flavell, supported by colleagues such as Keiko (as artist in residence) and Alison MacConachie.

Although Walsh acknowledges a debt to this immersion in glass, in Edinburgh, a more decisive material shift came following a discussion with Sarah Jane Selwood in the (now discontinued) ceramics department, about different ways of making moulds to 'contain the flow' of the glass forms she was aiming to create. Selwood introduced her to bone china and so began the first of

a series of forms where the ceramic mould became the visible vessel for the glass, not merely the supporting mould discarded after the glass emerged. Adapting a workshop technique of painting shelf surfaces or batts with a wash to stop unfired works from sticking in the kiln, Walsh coated the fired bone china before adding the glass and refiring, creating a compatible material marriage without fusing the two materials. A group of impossibly white, fragile vessels emerged with interiors partly filled with glass – tiny effervescent poolings in watery shades of blue and green.

Looking back at these vessels now, one can sense the chrysalis from which future work emerged. The modest, almost miniaturist scale; the intersection of different materials being asked to cohabit in unexpected ways; the material experimentation; the technical precision softened and unworked by surface detail: the metaphoric fragility of bone china and glass held firm by a vision of things to come.

**I**n conversation with the artist, one is struck by a core of steel; the conceptual clarity about how objects can function in our lives – as prompts to thought and memory as well as containers of more tangible things – and an intense curiosity about the shape of things, and how she as an artist can participate in the material universe that they inhabit.

A setting up grant from Scottish Arts Council in 2005 and employment as a gallery assistant at the Open Eye Gallery encouraged Walsh to remain in Edinburgh.

Photography: SHANNON TOFTS



Collection of faceted boxes on white glass plinth, bone china and kiln cast glass 2009 - 2013

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These practical networks are vital for young talent to be sustained, and Edinburgh came up trumps. The next creative challenge came with the offer of a three-month sponsored residency at Cove Park in 2007. 'I left my flat, put my belongings in storage and set off', in her hands the rare gift of time in an environment in which art and artists, across all disciplines, are seen as central to cultural and social life. She drew, walked, carved and talked to other residents, remembering with pleasure a trip to the intricate high Victorian object that is Mountstuart on Bute in the company of fellow residents Laura Aldridge and Derek Lodge.

Edinburgh drew her back – partly practical, partly one suspects like the favoured desk or pen of a writer – the place had possibilities. A workshop at the Drill Hall in Edinburgh and then a self-supported exhibition at Ceramic Art London, followed by a showcase at the Saatchi Gallery with Collect in 2009, started to push her newly researched ideas into a wider network. Galleries and dealers began to take note but her rigorous enquiry fuelled a desire for further experiments and in 2009 she was awarded an inaugural artist into industry residency with the Minton brand at the Wedgwood Barlaston factory in Stoke on Trent.<sup>1</sup> The residency was created to mark the first British Ceramic Biennale, organised by Fine Line curators, Barney Hare-Duke and Jeremy Theophilus, both as a celebration of industrial heritage and as a route to

stimulating economic regeneration in an increasingly challenged post-industrial environment.

Walsh's tenacity and curiosity stood her in good stead, as she moved into a culture more reminiscent of David Leland's film *Made in Britain* than productive and creative industry. Up at five every morning, she worked alongside the team of model and mould makers who, despite living amidst the age of bulldozers in Stoke at the time, were an 'incredibly generous, knowledge-sharing group often from several generations of the same family' actively surviving as the skips filled from other nearby factories like Spode. In addition to this exceptional access to tacitly held skill, which included time with the aforementioned Acid John who dips moulded wares into chemical baths to etch surfaces prior to gilding, Walsh also had the run of the storage cupboards – huge archives of intricate moulds and patterns. Her earlier, simpler vessel forms developed, inspired by the living archives around her. The confident late Victorian vases by Christopher Dresser and the richly gilded imitations of Sèvres that form part of the Minton story drew her deeper into ceramic and design histories, her interest growing in how human skill and ingenuity can add value and meaning to even the simplest materials.

It was at this point that the first boxes began to emerge, responding in part to these rich Minton histories but also circling back to ideas of containment and layering found

Photography: SHANNON TOFTS



Porcelain study, lost wax cast glass 2013

in the earlier glass and china vessels. The box form with its own many-tiered history as both practical object and keeper of strange and precious things became a new challenge finding echoes in the intricate carved and cast reliquaries of medieval Europe; the porcelain snuff boxes of the eighteenth century; the lead-lined canisters for teas and spices. Like the shellforms secreted for protection by soft-bodied molluscs, man-made boxes signal something living, vulnerable and valued within.

**T**he rare, the precious and the hidden were all qualities in these new boxes, but also the flow of light – those qualities searched for as a student and never forgotten: light which makes form tangible but is in itself fluid and intangible. Lids were made of finely cast glass – a technique honed following an AA2A residency at the National Glass Centre at the University of Sunderland. Works, still on a small scale, could nestle in the hand. The carving – like occlusions in semi-precious stones – created facets along which the light flowed when picked up and handled. An increasing distillation of complex processes was creating work of striking formal presence – unexpected echoes of our material histories coming back in the almost ethereal fine skinned casts.

Each series – the vessels, the boxes and now new experiments with casting metal forms – has evolved slowly, following what Norman Bryson describes as the deep geological time of everyday things.<sup>2</sup>

Walsh's work seems the antithesis of the fleeting surfaces of contemporary life and yet the forms are free of the pastiche or anachronism of the self consciously crafted thing. They possess instead what the American art historian Keith Moxey describes as a vital heterochronicity – a capacity to unfold many timeworlds simultaneously through the precision and poetry of the forms.<sup>3</sup> When looking at the work, one experiences the materially focused attention of the workshop; the deep history of thinking hands that shape lives and through that the half glimpsed stories of all the human activities that objects have both shared and created. It is an original and refreshingly material world through which you see Acid John, Minton and other forgotten histories of making realigned with the conceptual flow of art.

**AMANDA GAME**, Independent Curator, Producer

<sup>1</sup> By 2009 Wedgwood had absorbed previously independent ceramic factories such as Minton but continued to produce wares from the Minton range, using some of the original workforce.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Bryson (1990) *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. Harvard University Press

<sup>3</sup> Keith Moxey (2013) *Visual Time: The Image in History*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC

