

1 *Rock Bowls* (detail), stoneware, slips and glazes, 2008/2009, W23cm max
2 *Seedling Plates and Bowls*, Gifu mountain clay, Shigaraki clay, slips and glaze, 2007, Ø21cm max

The Kimono of Food

Jill Fanshawe Kato reflects on her training in Japan and her work as a potter in London.

Chance encounters in life seem to have led me by invisible pathways to become a potter. I grew up in the small village of Kingskerswell in Devon, loving the rich red earth and entranced by the honeysuckle, bluebells and meadowsweet that grew from it, but almost unaware that I was living on top of one of the largest deposits of white ball clay in the world, deeper underground. The profuse bird and animal life gave me a lifelong love of nature, which is reflected in my ceramics, but who knows by what magnetism clay entered my soul? Pottery was not taught at school nor, subsequently, at art college. Apart from making occasional unfired animal models from the clay in the garden, I did not discover clay until later on.

JAPAN From an early age I had always drawn and painted, which led to my studying painting at Chelsea School of Art in London. Soon after graduating I had an opportunity to visit Japan, arriving in Tokyo via the Trans-Siberian Railway. Being almost penniless I ate at a cheap student restaurant but even here food was served artistically on a variety of beautiful, often handmade, dishes. The grilled fish was on a long rectangular plate, just right for the shape of a fish, and behind the counter blue and white porcelain glowed softly alongside orange shino yunomi cups. Each meal was an encounter with beauty. Seduced by the magical world of Japanese ceramics I ended up studying with potter Yosei Itaka in Tokyo for four years.

In Japan I discovered the importance of clay to Japanese studio potters. Many dig their own and have an intimate awareness of the forces of nature, via earth and fire. Walking through a high mountain forest, one may come across an ancient tree, or a venerable mossy rock encircled by a straw rope with white paper prayer strips attached, revered by local people for centuries as the dwelling place of the forest kami or spirits. This animistic belief in the nature of things can be seen in traditional crafts to the present day. As the volcanic mountains weathered, finer material was carried down into the valleys by streams to form beds of fine clay uncontaminated by fossil remains and lime. The clay differed from valley to valley and became an accessible and easily usable material for potters from earliest times.

Local pottery villages produced ceramics suited to the nature of the clay, to become the one hundred or more distinctive pottery villages now in existence. The clay has kami too and is treated with respect for its innate material and spiritual qualities. *Nendo o ikasu* or 'give life to



clay' is the underlying ethos of much Japanese pottery, a communion with clay allowing it to speak for itself, expressing the soul of earth and of the potter.

As a student I immersed myself in pottery, trying many clays, glazes, techniques and kilns, going to exhibitions and visiting rural potteries. Before returning to London in 1977 with my husband, Japanese photo-journalist Setsuo Kato, I had a small exhibition in Tokyo, which was received with so much enthusiasm that I have continued to exhibit there ever since, every other year or so. This year I will have my fortieth exhibition in Japan. I had left England as a painter and returned as a potter.

ENGLAND Back in London I was invited to be a tutor on the (now gone) postgraduate ceramics course at Goldsmiths College, where I taught for many years. The first question often asked of students was



‘What is most important to you in life?’ The emphasis on individuality started on day one. It was very different from the long years of hard apprenticeship, leading eventually to individual expression, that I had seen in Japan. I consider myself fortunate to be heir to both ways of thinking.

Since 1977 I have lived and worked in North London, exhibiting not just in Japan but around the UK and internationally. Most of my work is handbuilt but I also throw on a Shimpo wheel and fire with light reduction in a Laser gas kiln. I make many clay and colour tests in an unscientific way, ten or more in each firing and use a range of slips and a few glazes. Form is important to me and, whatever imagery I might put on the surface, I want it to enhance, not overwhelm, the form. Wave-worn rocks on Cornish beaches, seedpods, coconuts, ancient structures such as Angkor Wat and ceramics of all eras are some starting points. A continuing preoccupation is how to improve





the quality of the bought clay used – I have taken to adding small quantities of local Devon clay to give it vitality.

INFLUENCES My ceramics are inspired by my life experiences, the natural world and travel in particular. For example, my husband and I have an allotment and enjoy growing plants from seed. I carry a sketchbook when I travel, and have drawn mountain plants in Japan and Spain growing from impossibly rocky places. Images of plants springing from seeds appear on my pottery because they fascinate me. Growing up in Devon I cared for many injured and orphaned wild birds and currently belong to two RSPB birdwatching groups. Birds appear on my ceramics as a symbol of freedom. The blue sky, shadows and moon of Andalusia have influenced the colour and imagery of my jugs. Abstraction, asymmetry and simplification are current concerns.

When exhibiting in Japan, I show large and sculptural pieces, but also consider the culture of food there. A typical meal will have six or more varied dishes and a *yunomi* teacup on a tray no more than twelve by twelve inches, so I try to remember the context of Japanese cuisine when working in my studio.

The dining table as gallery lies at the heart of the Japanese pottery lover's world and eating is a great creative adventure. The gourmet



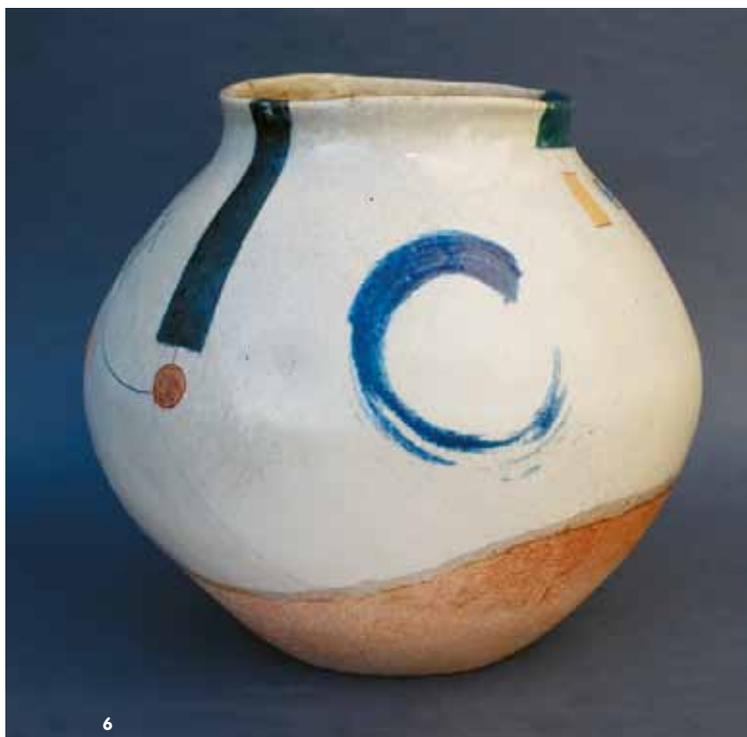
chef and renowned potter Kitaoji Rosanjin described pottery as 'the kimono of food' and his mantra was 'without extraordinary ideas there can be no extraordinary results.' As a foreigner exhibiting in Japan, I try to make individual pieces new for each show and not copy Japanese ideas, as there are so many extraordinary potters there already. The evolving nature of my work means that it does change and many of the pieces in my forthcoming exhibitions have been made in Japan.

3 Bird Dish, stoneware, slips, underglaze and glaze, 2008, W26cm **4** Moon Jugs, slips and coloured glazes, painted, 2008, H30cm **5** Sushi plates (detail), slips, poured and etched, underglaze colours, 2008,

W52cm **6** Vessel with Blue Brushstroke, stoneware clay, slips, clear glaze, 2008, H24cm **7** Oval Shrimp Bowl, stoneware, slips, paper resist, underglazes and clear glaze, 2008, W24cm

Photography Setsuo Kato
Exhibitions Keio Department Store, Nishi Shinjuku, Shinjuku Ku, Tokyo, Japan, 5-11 March 2009; Gallery Tohka, Aoi-ku, Shizuoka Shi, Shizuoka, Japan, 18-28

March 2009; Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh, 9 March-4 April 2009
Email jillfanshawekato@talktalk.net
Web www.jillfanshawekato.com



I am fortunate to have enjoyed a long friendship with the radical Japanese potter Ryoji Koie, at whose mountain studio I sometimes work. A truck ride up the mountain to dig clay is the starting point, from then on all is experiment and risk-taking far from any familiar comfort zone. Even washing the many small dishes after a meal is an enjoyable learning process. Working beside such an inspirational figure as Koie opens new doors and ultimately leads my work in new directions. ☞

Tilted & Skewed

Bonnie Kemske is mesmerised by Robert Dawson's intriguing tiled walls.

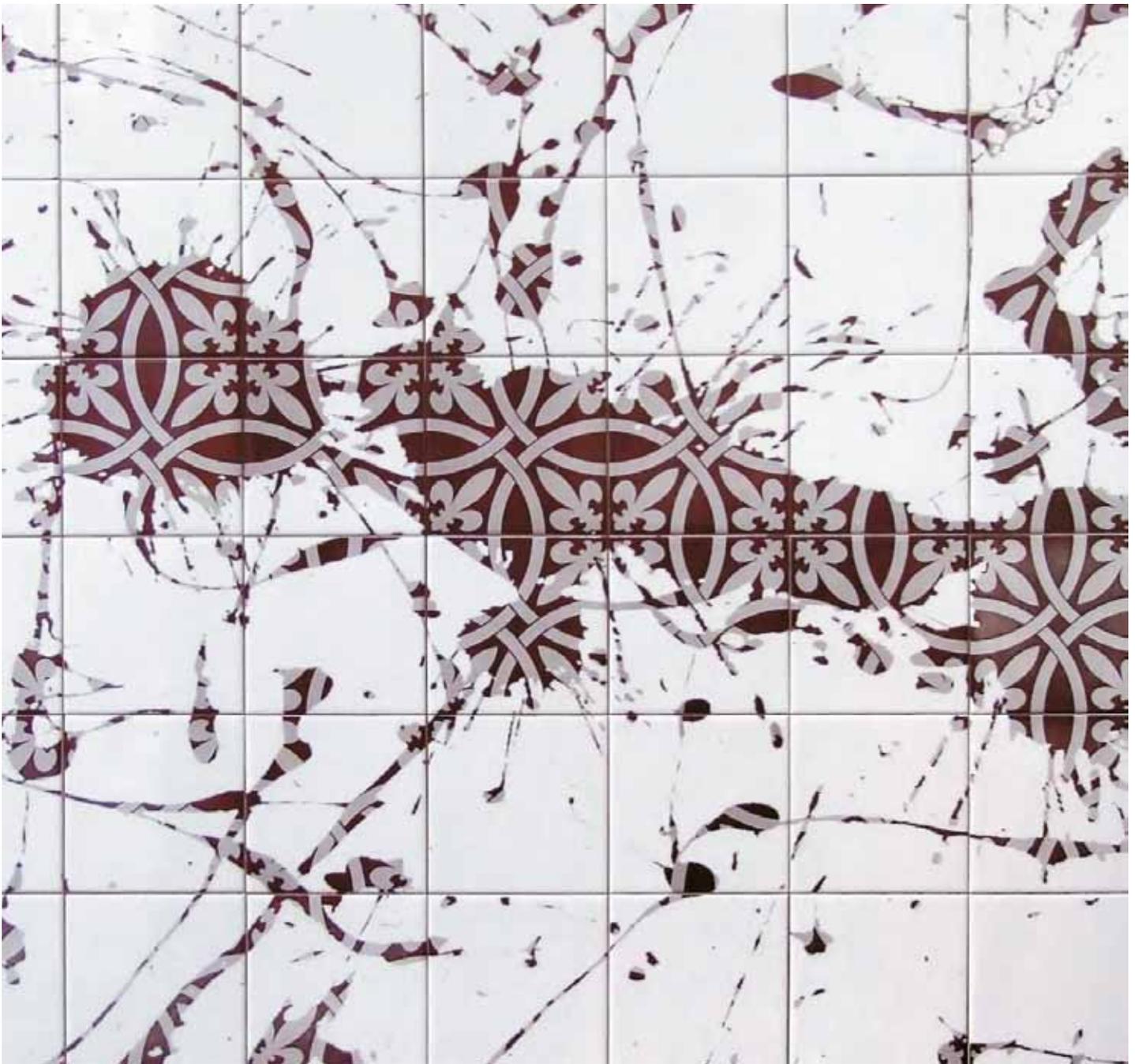


In *The Eyes of the Skin* the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa challenges our culture's emphasis on visual clarity. His statement that our experience is adversely limited by our obsession with 'focused vision, conscious intentionality and perspectival representation', can just as easily be applied to contemporary ceramics. He proposes that we cultivate our unfocused and peripheral vision to take us beyond being 'mere spectators'. Robert Dawson's works, in particular his large tile installations, exploit these issues as he plays both clarity and perspective off each of their opposites and off our own expectations.

When speaking to Dawson it is easy to see that these artistic issues arise from a view of the world that is, to say the least, unsettled. Perhaps this view is partly due to his undefined identity. Most of us are given our cultural and national identities – Dawson seems not to have inherited one. Although now London-based, he was born in the USA and raised in Geneva, but considers neither his

home. 'The world is so uncertain', he says, 'and I've always felt uncertain about myself. It's like being stoned or something, where things are tilted, skewed. But not just the outside things – things on the inside too'.

He has turned this unsettled outlook into a strength in works such as *Don't You Know It's Gonna Be All Right* (2004), a large tiled mural of a repeated familiar motif that visually pulls away, distorts and disintegrates in the centre. Our normal orientation is challenged in works such as *Verticality* (2007), where dinner plates based on the Willow Pattern, which you would expect to see flat on a table, are mounted as a vertical wall installation. Again, in *Floored* (2008) an image based on Victorian Minton floor tiles is mounted on the vertical. *Yellow Brick Road* meets *Alice's Looking Glass*; the tiles lead you towards a vanishing point somewhere in the distance, but rather than being underfoot, they go up and into the wall. As you look at *Shallow Bond* (2008) you suddenly recognise its purply-blue



waves as the marks in the adhesive that a tiler makes to secure the tiles to the wall, what Dawson calls the professional tiler's 'action painting'. What was hidden has migrated to become the focus.

Dawson's earlier well-known plates with distorted and fragmented blue Willow Pattern – for instance *Can You Walk From the Garden? Does Your Heart Understand?* (1995) and *In Perspective Willow* (1996) – were made through the use of photography, especially the wide-angle lens. 'You get these angles that don't really exist and you can employ many camera angles, because we live in a world where the language of photography now exists and we are familiar with it. Like you can put a movie camera on the floor and shoot from there, but in the past nobody would paint a picture from a position such

4 *Play On*, The Art House, Wakefield
5 *After Willow Pattern* platter, Ø32cm
6 Untitled (floor tiles), print on ceramic tiles, 2003, W15cm each
7 *Verticality*, print on bone china, Ø27cm each
8 Untitled (tilings with urinal images), print on ceramic tiles, H210cm (with Steve Bunn)



as that.' The photographs were then screen-printed (in the earliest work) and reproduced using a photocopier (in the later).

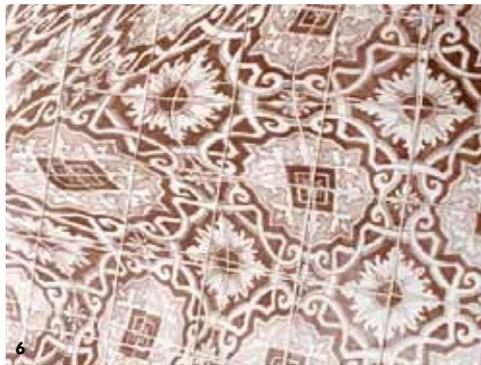
In the current work photographs are manipulated on the computer, then pushed beyond the software's limits to create unfocused areas and, in some cases, 'tide marks' and what appear to be contour lines. An example of this is *You Too Can be Confident* (2000), a 1.2 x 4.8 metre wall installation, where a focused aspect becomes simply blue and a baroque pattern becomes unreadable. Dawson has stretched the normal constraints of the software to produce this 'accidental' blurred decoration, rather than the rigidly focused and more controlled and defined images normally associated with the use of the computer.

Another large tiled project that could not have been created without the computer was a commission at the Churchill Hospital, Oxford, installed in July 2008. Made in standard 15 x 15 centimetre tiles, the mural consists of one image, a close-up of a giant tilted blue Willow Pattern plate that more than fills the wall, spanning 3.7 x 7.5 metres. Of all Dawson's wall work, this one may be the most immediate and powerful to date. The giant plate appears to be dramatically sliding off the wall to the floor beneath your feet.

THE GRID Underlying all the visual warpings and distortions he uses is the permanence of the tile grid. Dawson uses perfectly formed industrially-produced tiles. 'The grid becomes the sanity that shows up the insanity'. He has further exploited this in a commission for The Art House in Wakefield, Yorkshire, which provides studio and exhibition opportunities to disabled and non-disabled artists and craftspeople. Entitled *Play On* (2007) the piece comprises approximately



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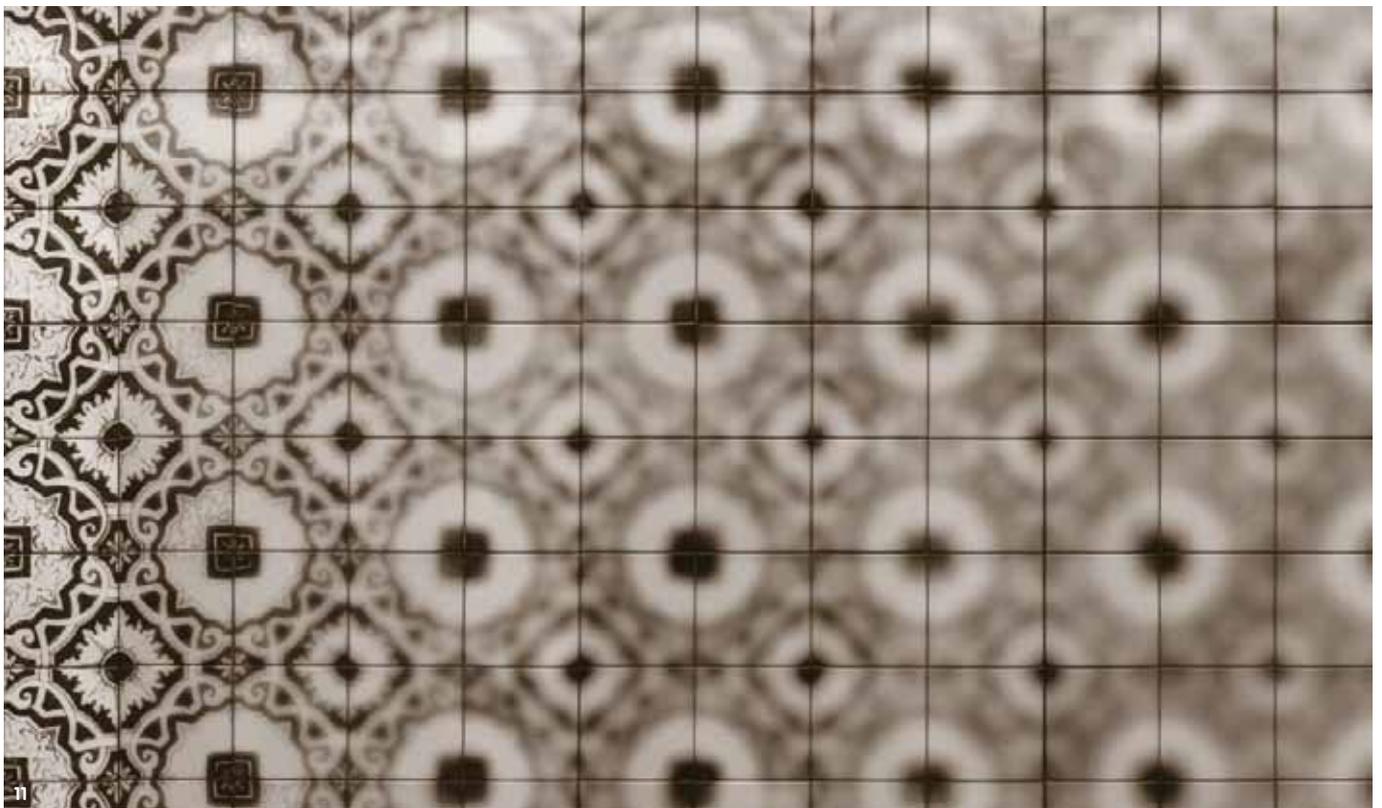
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2,500 tiles and through seven discrete panels spans 28 metres, almost covering the upper area of the building's façade. In this multi-sectioned mural the original black and white grid of a chessboard goes from small to large with Escher-esque corners, twists, and impossible angles. As with much of his work, the optical illusions have multi-stability, the images move inwards and outwards, being visually neither stable nor totally unstable.

Not all the tiled work is on the scale of public art however. *Durbar* (2008) is made up of two panels of nine 15 x 15 centimetre tiles in 3 x 3 grids. This piece takes its inspiration from the Durbar Hall in Hastings Museum, Kent, created by nineteenth century Indian craftsmen using Islamic patterns. In this piece Dawson explored and exploited 'accidental' cracking through several different processes, which included photography, laser printing of iron oxide and the cracking quality of clay. Having made nine cracked tiles that make up a square he had photographic transfers made for another nine.



So the image was re-created but with a markedly different quality. The two types of tiles, cracked in reality and cracked in image, were intermingled on the two panels.

In creating new work, Dawson says he is often motivated by a desire to avoid the current fashions in ceramics and the broader art world. When he sees something, he is impelled to create the opposite. He says that this is because he does not look deep inside (and does not want to), but reacts with immediacy to the world

around him. The embrace of the different perspective and the skewed outlook that is evident in his work, leads him to state, "The only thing I'd "worship" is the mystery itself – and instability, change, and our insecurity. If we didn't have these, if we weren't so vulnerable, life would be unliveable." This attitude reflects a kind of self-effacing self-consciousness that is evident in his work, a quality that is both engaging and rewardingly demanding at the same time.

Dawson does not like to be referred to as a post-modernist, yet the uncertainty he expresses both personally and in his work exemplifies post-modernism, as does his discerning references to ceramic history, his use of ornate decorative prints that he presents

9 ...With Sublimation Climaxing, 2005, W800cm 10 In Perspective tiling, 1993, W120cm 11 You Too Can be Confident (detail), 2000, W180cm 12 Can You Walk From the Garden? Does Your Heart Understand?, 1995, Ø27cm each

Exhibitions *Object Factory: the Art of Industrial Ceramics*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, USA, 6 May-23 August 2009; *House of Words: Celebrating the tercentenary of the birth of Dr Johnson in 2009*, Dr Johnson's House, London, June-August 2009; *Fragiles – Porcelain, Glass & Ceramics*, Al Sabbah Art and Design

Collection, Dubai, Summer 2009 (dates to be confirmed); V&A New Ceramics Galleries, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, opening 18 September 2009
Stockist Aesthetic Sabotage, London
Email robertdawson@aestheticsabotage.com
Web www.aestheticsabotage.com



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with both gentle mockery and deference, the fragmentation of those images and the disturbance of perspective that de-centres the viewer. More than any of these, however, it is his quiet use of irony that shouts post-modernism loudest – irony of perspective, of planar orientation and of the sabotage of familiar patterns and images that form part of our ceramic vocabulary. However, it is an irony without cynicism or cruelty, a positive, softly-humoured challenge rather than a brutal attack. ■