

## FrameWork 6/26

### Jeremy Laing on Ella Gonzales and Derek Sullivan

I spot a House through the leaves. A Celadon-glazed porcelain vase by Harlan House (its limpid jade tint and baluster curves tell me so). I recall Derek mentioning Harlan being a family friend (or something to that effect) so it makes sense he would have a House at home, in his collection of ceramic vessels, which serve now as subjects for his new suite of poster drawings.

The tell-tale shape that stood out to my collector's eye comes from the Meiping vase, an iconographic form in Chinese Song dynasty ceramics, named for what it holds best: plum blossoms. In early June in Southern Ontario—say in Lonsdale, where ceramicist Harlan House has lived and worked since the early 1970s, honing and elaborating on the Meiping form among others—it would hold lilacs just fine if plum blossoms were in short supply, or were it a plum-ish colour you were after, swatched to the bruised skin of the fruit itself.

In Derek's speculative four-paned page-proof drawing, his Harlan House is scattered with the scribbled shadows of grocery store tulips, pencil crayon grinding down to expiration faster than the blooms might become exhausted. I have one of Harlan's vases as well, a glassy 1977 Meiping with a silhouette just this side of impossible in postmodern porcelain, ancient form and glazes (Tenmoku dramatically poured on Celadon) vibrating with novel and extravagant effects.

I see a Heather Goodchild piece, too, drawn from Derek's collection, sketched in the shade of fern and carnation; a similarly friendly vessel, its well-behaved contours also grown from the germ of the antique but hailing from the Hellenic rather than the Chinese, and not so plumbly, unless you account for the rusted pit (Heather just might; purple-leaf plum leaves and pits are often used in natural dyeing, a specialty of hers).

Pots from history, pots from friends; a collection of empty vessels holding myriad relations, scaled from the intercultural, to the interpersonal. Mouths mirrored on Derek's pages (some are upside-down), his collected ceramics echo into each other, vessel to vessel, void to void, emptying-filling.

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(A collection is about containment,<sup>i</sup> perhaps especially when it's all empty vases, but what it holds most are its own gaps. Every new entry comes with vacancies to either side; filling a hole creates two new ones. As in Derek's drawings, infinite possibilities reverberate between adjacent finite forms.)

There's a Zin Taylor piece, Derek tells me, and I can see it now, impressed with shapes, inverted on the page, suspended like a bell, resounding back to the gallery in pencil crayon where it was first displayed in terracotta.

*A Bell is a Cup Until it is Struck* (Derek's title for drawings 179, 180, and 181, quoted from the British post-punk band Wire's 1988 album)... and a cup is a bell when it rings true. Every collector of ceramics knows the sound of integrity is sharp and clear, while a crack interrupts the resonance.

Ella's paintings here are all reverberant echoes, too, gathered from memories of spaces where she has lived and worked, some—this very gallery, that studio building—shared with Derek, rooms occupied and thresholds crossed years apart. Each work is a conduit *Through* (as titled); portal; passageway; a window in a window in a window in a window; delicate confabulations laid in wet whispers on pineapple fiber and silk.

*Through, 137* encapsulates the show's title and address, and oneirically floats together the location's garage door, interior view from the entry, its stairs, banister, bookcase, and oval desk, its railroaded double shoebox length; gallery indeed, architecturally speaking, as well as functionally, in the display of its own ambiently self-spatializing dream maps.

House's Celadon finds its reflection in Ella's *Through, corner studio*, thin aqueous layers pooling in the depths, building to solid jade-like saturation around a single dash of plum, submerged, an inclusion in the stone.

*Through, current* implies both a present place (Ella's home, I think) and a passing movement, via, across, into and out. One thinks of settling in to a new (now) place, but really we're just eddying a while, in the calm pocket—one hopes—of the current, taking the shape of our containers in the

moment and their memories with us as we pour into the next; a series of rooms, a collection of vessels.

Entirely analogue now, Ella's rendered reminiscences are drawn out of memory, not from digital precomposition, and as such, in a way that feels accurate to the space of recollection (and the recollection of space), nothing quite lines up—within them at least. The paintings' material edges, though, form a palpably justified horizon. Each of Ella's scrim is scaled to the shape of the wall on which it is centred, dragged and dropped over a distant vanishing point—like thumbnails; zoom in, zoom out—diagraming the geometric and conceptual place of origin in a space of as many flights of elaboration as returns to “neutral” ground.

Reverie requires a home, auspices to depart from and come back to without having really left,<sup>i</sup> and here—for Ella and Derek, former employees, currently exhibiting artists—the gallery provides its shelter. Within it, Ella's referential schematics—gestures in space and across surfaces—cup Derek's pieces, which dance on the downbeat around the homing centres she underscores. (See Derek's #182, *Off-centre*, whose selfie-reflection places him in the not-quite middle of the gallery or the page, via the drawn device of a Regency-era mirror appropriated by Marcel Broodthaers as an artwork in 1973 and as a subject by Derek on several occasions now.)

Two bodies of work syncopated one inside the other inside the other, like a stack of bowls on a shared and foundational shelf, glimpsed through memory and a partially opened door. Yank *Cicada's* cord (one of Derek's bell sculptures in bronze and walnut) and a piercing clarity resets the rhythm. I fantasize about using one to announce dinner.

Pulling my focus back to the gallery, I walk up the stairs to Ella's painting which continues them: *Through, up and down*. It is hung above eyeline, but noticeably lower than her work downstairs, because, as Susan tells me, the ceilings aren't as high up here. The centres differ.

<sup>i</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, Duke University Press, 1992, pg 159.

<sup>ii</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, Penguin Classics, 2014, pg 63.