



NEIL BROWNSWORD GOT HIS START AS A MODEL-MAKER AT WEDGWOOD. HIS WORK TODAY MEMORIALISES THE HUMAN DIMENSION TO AN INDUSTRY THAT'S VANISHING. BY GRANT GIBSON

# THE KILN NING FIELDS

PORTRAIT BY STEVE SPELLER

*'I will make machines out of men'*  
– Josiah Wedgwood, industrialist  
*'Why do birds turn upside down when they fly over Stoke? Cos there's nowt worth shitting on down there'*  
– Richard Hawley, musician

'I'LL SHOW YOU where I'm working if you can get in,' says Neil Brownsword with a smile. We're escorted into a cluttered reception room, littered with ceramic shreds, in the artist's Stoke home. An exercise bike that doesn't look recently ridden collects dust in the corner. My photographer Steve accidentally steps back on to a box full of glazed fragments. We both wince but before he can make a hurried apology, Brownsword interjects: 'The cat's been jumping on the bloody stuff. The kids juggle with it. Don't worry.'

We're in the middle of a sweet and ever-so-slightly surreal tour, taking the opportunity to discuss his upcoming exhibition at London's Galerie Besson. Upstairs he has another room, again full of bits he has collected and catalogued, while outside in two outhouses he keeps his tools and his kiln. 'It's finance,' he explains. 'I'd love to have my own space but with my teaching [he's a tutor at Buckingham Chilterns University College] I'm not here a lot of the time, so financially you have to cut your cloth.' It's a couple of days after new year, so the wheelie-bin outside the front door is full of packaging, the Christmas tree is still up in the front room, and his three children are desperately keen to show the strange men what Santa brought. Having persuaded them to play with mum in the kitchen (and pushed the family dog out the door) we settle back in a comfy sofa – coffee in one hand, chocolate brownie in the other – to discuss how the slow but steady decline of his home town has provided the catalyst for much of his art.

I was working on an architecture magazine when I first stumbled across his work. At that time most press releases not directly related to building – or at a push furniture design – went straight into the recycling bin. This I remember distinctly: there was something oddly compelling and other worldly about these strange glazed shards and blobs that made me look, then – most importantly – read. And actually I suspect that reading is the key to Brownsword's output, because it's the narrative he gives these disjointed morsels of ceramic with that raises them from the intriguing, if bemusing, to the genuinely important. Unusually for the sector (I suspect), this is a craftsman with a distinct social and political voice.

He was born in Stoke-on-Trent and raised in Newcastle-under-Lyme, his family long connected

ABOVE Longton,  
Stoke-on-Trent  
OPPOSITE Burslem,  
Stoke-on-Trent





ABOVE TOP 'Remnant'  
(detail), 2000 ABOVE  
CENTRE '16 Salvage  
Series' (detail), 2005  
OPPOSITE 'Salvage  
Series' (detail), 2005  
All ceramic and  
industrial archaeology  
PHOTOGRAPHY © GUY EVANS,  
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POTTERIES MUSEUM AND ART  
GALLERY

to the pottery industry. His grandmother, for example, worked at such factories as Spode and Carlton Ware, lithographing and hand-painting, while uncles, cousins and his brother are still involved in the business now. 'Growing up in the area you were surrounded by the landscape of hundreds of years of industrial activity,' he confirms. At 16 he left school and worked for Wedgwood as an apprentice model-maker. So was working in the ceramics industry a given? 'It was the key employer in the area. The mining industry had just died a death. The steel industry was dying but ceramics was surviving.

'This was prior to computer-aided design,' he continues. 'It was all hand-crafted, you know, turning objects. Pans on a lathe. Pan-modelling stuff. There wasn't anyone instructing you. You were just there. You watched. You were given jobs. More than often you made lots of mistakes but it's that repetition, day in, day out, that knowledge of materials, that knowledge of skill.' As he talks he shows images on his laptop of the pieces he produced as a teenager at Wedgwood. They're

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obviously technically proficient but very different from his current work. Nevertheless, he explains, they've played a key role in his development as an artist. 'They're instrumental to what I'm about now, because the whole work is a reflection on these skills which I had first-hand experience of, really. No one can tap back into that now because the computer has replaced that knowledge.'

After a year of model-making and a further spell in Wedgwood's graphic design department, he was encouraged by his co-workers to expand his horizons, and did a foundation course at Newcastle-under-Lyme College before studying ceramics at the University of Wales in Cardiff. There, eager to experiment conceptually, he began to feel hampered by his technique: 'I was applying all this knowledge of mould-making and model-making with, I suppose, no creative emphasis. It's a double-edged sword really,' he tells me. 'An amazing experience on one hand, but I suppose paradoxically I felt constrained by it as well, you know?' No matter, inspired by bands like the Smiths and The The, he started to produce the aggressive, sexually charged figurative pieces, col-









laged from casts taken from moulds, clay pipes and broken shards of ceramic that dominated his output until the end of the 90s. ‘They explore the politics of relationships. Everything was very biographical in a sense.’ So what was going on in his life? ‘Errr...’ He stalls. ‘The work says it all really. I find it difficult to talk about because they’re quite personal things. That was one of the reasons for making the objects.’

He’s less reticent about the role that drugs – specifically LSD – played in his creative process as a student during his time at the Royal College of Art. Returning to Stoke during the holidays he hung out with old friends trapped in mind-numbingly repetitive jobs at the Wedgwood factory, escaping into what Brownsword now rather charmingly describes as ‘controlled sessions’: getting off their heads and sketching furiously. He shows me some of the results on his computer – undoubtedly they’re rough and ready, but they possess an unarguable energy that feeds into his ceramics of that era. ‘On reflection we were like the characters from *Trainspotting* in a way,’ he laughs. ‘I was interested in the creative side of it. We’d have these huge collections of drawings. What fascinated me was this inner creativity of these people, who weren’t really interested. It was only the chemical outlet that purged all this.’

‘These people have worked on the factory floor for 40 years. When they go that knowledge goes with them’

Over time though the angry young man seems to have mellowed. The figurative work became less introverted and more gently satirical, using his friends as subjects and taking inspiration from the likes of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh. *Don’t Let the Little Head Rule the Big Head*, for instance, was a comment on a former colleague, married with a child but incapable of curbing his infidelity. Did his old mates mind having their lives exposed, albeit in an oblique fashion? He doesn’t seem to think so. ‘There was a rawness to it, but it was the truth in a way. It wasn’t trying to be condescending, it wasn’t saying it was wrong. It was just an observation on this particular culture.’ However, while his figures were garnering critical plaudits, he was increasingly feeling trapped by even this moderate success and by the end of the 90s took stock during a residency at the European Ceramic Workcentre in Holland. A chance

encounter with a friend, who was working for a company contracted to demolish a disused pottery back in Stoke, proved to be an epiphany, bringing the city’s plight in the new economy sharply into relief. ‘You get these unique pieces of industrial architecture that are just being flattened to make way for crap housing,’ he says with a perceptible shake of the head. Put another way, in 1948 there were approximately 79,000 people working in the North Staffordshire pottery industry; by 2003 that figure had been reduced to around 11,000.

Determined to capture the history and spirit of an industry facing extinction, Brownsword began collecting the detritus of the pottery-making process, obsessed less with the finished products themselves – too perfect and clinical in his eyes – but the off-cuts, the imperfections, those areas where the human hand prevailed and, perhaps, a sense of memory lingered. ‘It just got me questioning the notions of quality, and how we perceive what’s of value and what isn’t,’ he explains. At the same time other pieces were deliberately created to ape the ‘wasters’ – pieces ruined in coal-fired ovens that were difficult to control – that he’d seen in the Potteries Museum’s archaeological collections of 18th and 19th century ceramic manufacturing by-products. In 2000, exhibiting at the Crafts Council exhibition *Close* in his new role as artist-cum-social-historian-cum-archaeologist, he used saggars fragments dug up from his garden, kiln props, and other found material, fusing them together with made objects in the kiln. Other found pieces were simply left to stand on their own, quietly commemorating the workers that made them.

More recently as part of his now-completed PhD, he’s been back into the Wedgwood factories to make a set of films about the people that work there. The results formed part of an exhibition he mounted at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery in 2005 entitled *Collaging History*. ‘What I was fascinated by was the extent of the knowledge these people had, with no real record of it. These people have worked on the factory floor for 30 or 40 years. When they go that knowledge would go with them. I was very much interested in getting that oral history down.’ One of the first places he visited was his old model-making department where he trained. I ask him how it has changed since his departure. ‘The extent of change? These people took a third cut in wages, and are just machine-minders at the other end of a conveyor belt now.’ And while he was there, of course, he had access to the company’s archive, where he took impressions from 18th century moulds – typically concentrating on the negative space created in the plaster lining process – as well as collecting

PREVIOUS SPREAD LEFT

‘Don’t Let the Little Head Rule the Big Head’, ceramic, industrial archaeology, 42 cm high, 1996

PREVIOUS SPREAD RIGHT

‘Something So Pure Just Can’t Function No More’, ceramic, metal, industrial archaeology, 37 cm high, 2003



ribbons of clay that come off the plates on the factory floor. These were then fired and, in his words, 'aestheticised' for the show. According to Brownsword the pieces work on at least two levels. Most obviously, he says, they're 'trying to illuminate the whole process rather than this pristine, prissy product in the shop or the museum,' but by the same token 'symbolically just looking at this kind of rubbish, it just mirrored the expenditure of people.' This new work was accompanied by artefacts drawn from the museum's collection, provoking the critic David Whiting to write that the 'stark contrast was unbearably poignant.' Interestingly though, as Brownsword speaks he appears more wistful than angry, all too aware, I suspect, that while his art can highlight the industry's plight, it is unlikely to stem the tide of market forces. The post-industrial, creative British economy only values certain types of knowledge, it seems.

On our visit he's preparing for a new exhibition at Galerie Besson on Old Bond Street. Isn't it a little incongruous that the Billy Bragg of the crafts sector is showing work devoted to social deprivation in one of the capital's more luxurious locales? 'I have difficulty showing work anywhere,' he says with a slight air of resignation. 'So why not, to be frank? It's very contrasting to what the gallery usually shows, so it's very brave of them really.' Once again the work will use unexpected moulds – including old ware boxes among other things – off-cuts collected from factories, plugs from the casting process, and saggar shards dug up from his backyard. In fact the only compromise he appears to have made for a new audience is in the size of the pieces on show: 'I'm thinking that instead of being 2 x 1.5 metres they should sit tidily on a plinth,' he grins.

What a rich London audience will make of Brownsword's clay collages is open to question. It's unlikely that they'll truly understand all its nuances unless they actually go and visit the once beautiful but now largely desolate old factories where many of the fragments were originally made. In fact, truth be told, there's every chance these abstract pieces shorn of context could leave the casual viewer completely bamboozled. Personally I hope visitors take the time and trouble to understand the work because this is an artist who is nudging the perceived boundaries of clay, imbuing this most traditional of materials with rare meaning.

*'Neil Brownsword: Poet of Residue' runs from 20 February – 13 March at Galerie Besson, 15 Royal Arcade, 28 Old Bond Street, London W1. [www.galeriebesson.co.uk](http://www.galeriebesson.co.uk)*

OPPOSITE PAGE

'Transition' (detail),  
ceramic, 2000

ABOVE TOP 'Buller',  
ceramic and salvaged  
factory detritus, 25  
x 30 cm, 2007

ABOVE 'Crank', ceramic  
and industrial archaeology,  
25 x 80 cm, 2007