

Glenys Barton — set of bone china slabs with green graphics — silk screen transfer, 1973



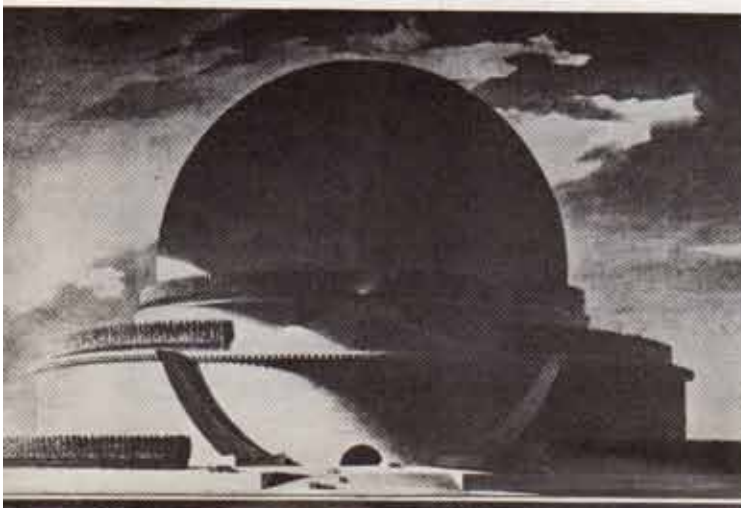
Glenys Barton — photograph Frank Thurston

A Search for Order by Glenys Barton

Glenys Barton has surprised, delighted and shocked many potters with her use of bone china to make hard edged objects decorated with transfer designs. By introducing a traditional industrial material into the world of the ceramic artist she has extended horizons and concepts. In this article she writes about the ideas which influence her work. In a future issue Glenys Barton will write about her working methods.

There is a great pressure to explain one's work, and yet, in the very act of explaining, something of the object is lost. I always hope that people will look at the things I make and be taken into private worlds of their own, where their dreams will be stimulated by the manifestations of mine. Sometimes, if I am lucky, their dreams will be shared with me and my own vision will expand. On looking back it is difficult to discover just how one arrived at any one particular solution, but there are certain experiences and images that remain in the conscious mind over the years to influence every small decision made. Every artist has his obsessions and it is these that make his art. Who knows

Newton's Cenotaph — exterior by day

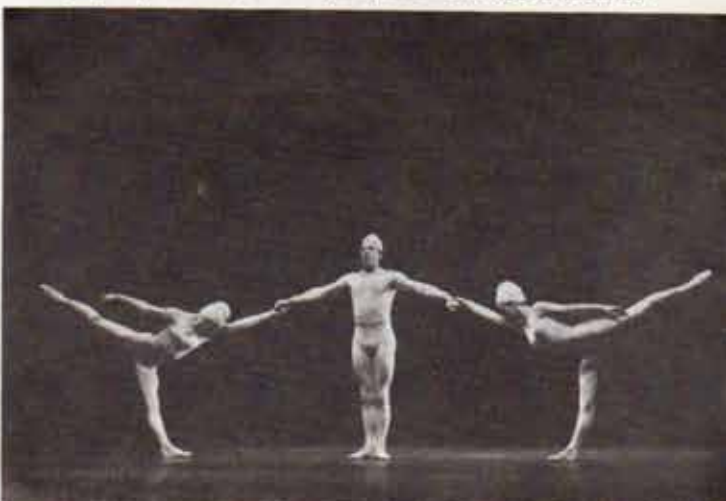


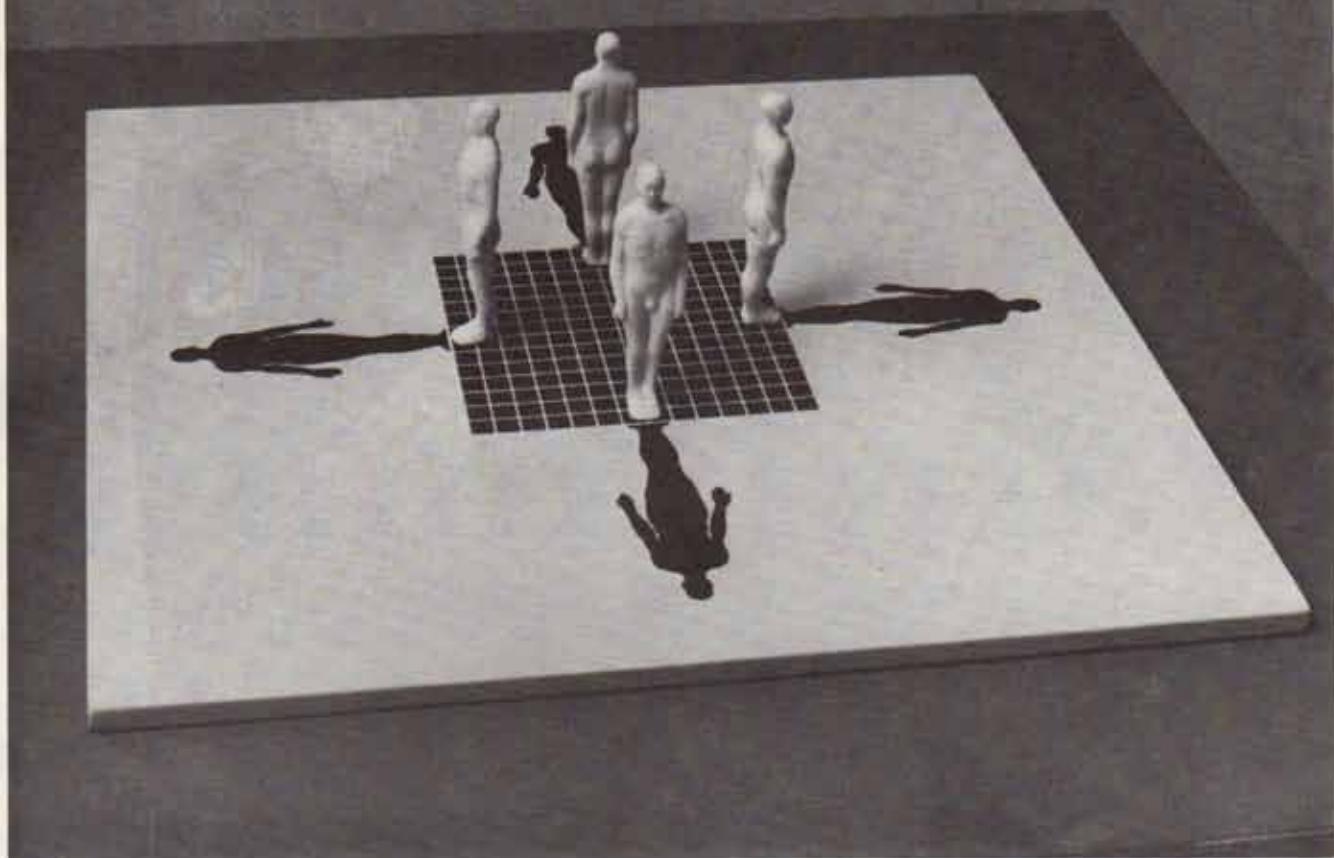
what lies subliminally to contribute?

Some years ago I became involved in dance and also in making pottery. A strange mixture, but there is always a link when one personality is deeply involved in two activities. Dance was for a long time my most vivid artistic experience. It can be so spontaneously creative: the image and the feeling so close and controlled, one's own body diminutive, moving in a void. Studying Laban movement, an analysis of the moving figure in space; moments like 'Monotones' danced by the Royal Ballet Company (stark black and white figures on a square of stage) helped to crystallize an awareness of our relationship with space and gave me an ambition to formalise it. I take any chance to see dance theatre but gave up trying to dance as my preoccupation with sculpture grew.

It was during the time I spent at the Royal College of Art that I saw Stanley Kubrick's film '2001-A Space Odyssey'. I was completely captivated by the monolith, which seemed to me to be the most perfect object:

Monotones, No 2 (Frederick Ashton) — Royal Ballet, Photograph by courtesy of Royal Opera House, Covent Garden





Glenys Barton — 'Fifth Plane' — bone china and stoneware with silk screen ceramic transfer, 1974

"It was a rectangular slab, three times his height but narrow enough to span with his arms, and it was made of some completely transparent material: indeed, it was not easy to see except when the rising sun glinted on its edges."¹

The space ships and their immaculate moulded white interiors seemed to be better than any sculpture I had ever seen. The last sequences of the film set me thinking about time and our suspension within it, (time as well as space have been the main concerns in my most recent work) while the final shots of the facsimile room haunted me like a Chirico landscape.

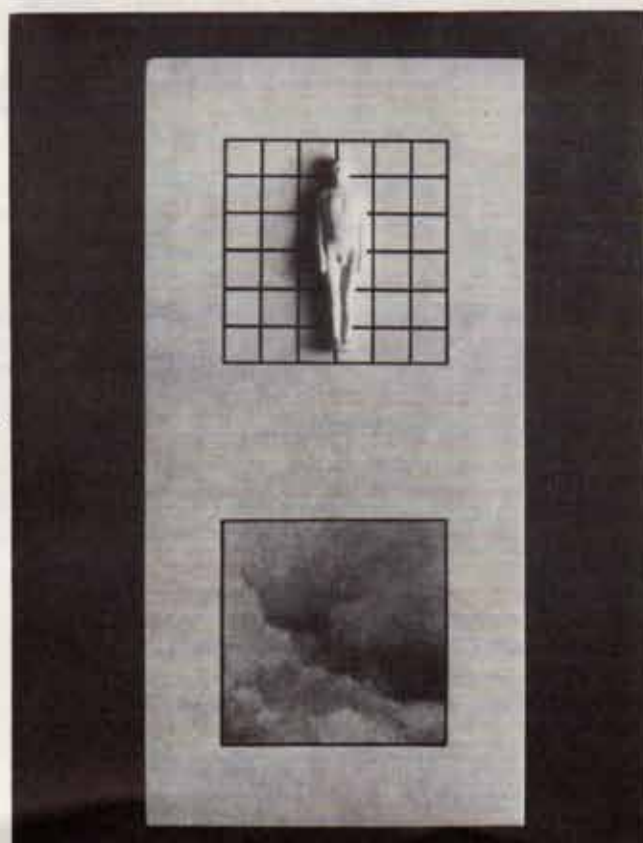
About the same time an exhibition of American Minimal Sculpture came to the Tate Gallery — 'The Art Of The Real'. I found this posed many questions and in trying to answer some of them I started along the track I am now treading. If you put an enormous white cube into a white painted hall, what will be your next piece of sculpture? I made a small ceramic cube, I made it as perfect and beautiful as I could; I went on to put marks on it but I let the need to keep its purity control the marks and the colours. I worked in this way with geometric shapes for some time. In retrospect I realise that I liked the direct, powerful simplicity of the objects in the American exhibition and I could identify with some of the philosophy of American Minimalism. Edward Lucie-Smith comments: "The artist provides a partial image of complete order throughout all the space which can be imagined, and leaves the spectator to fill the rest in". I joined this search for order but always wanted to complete the picture.

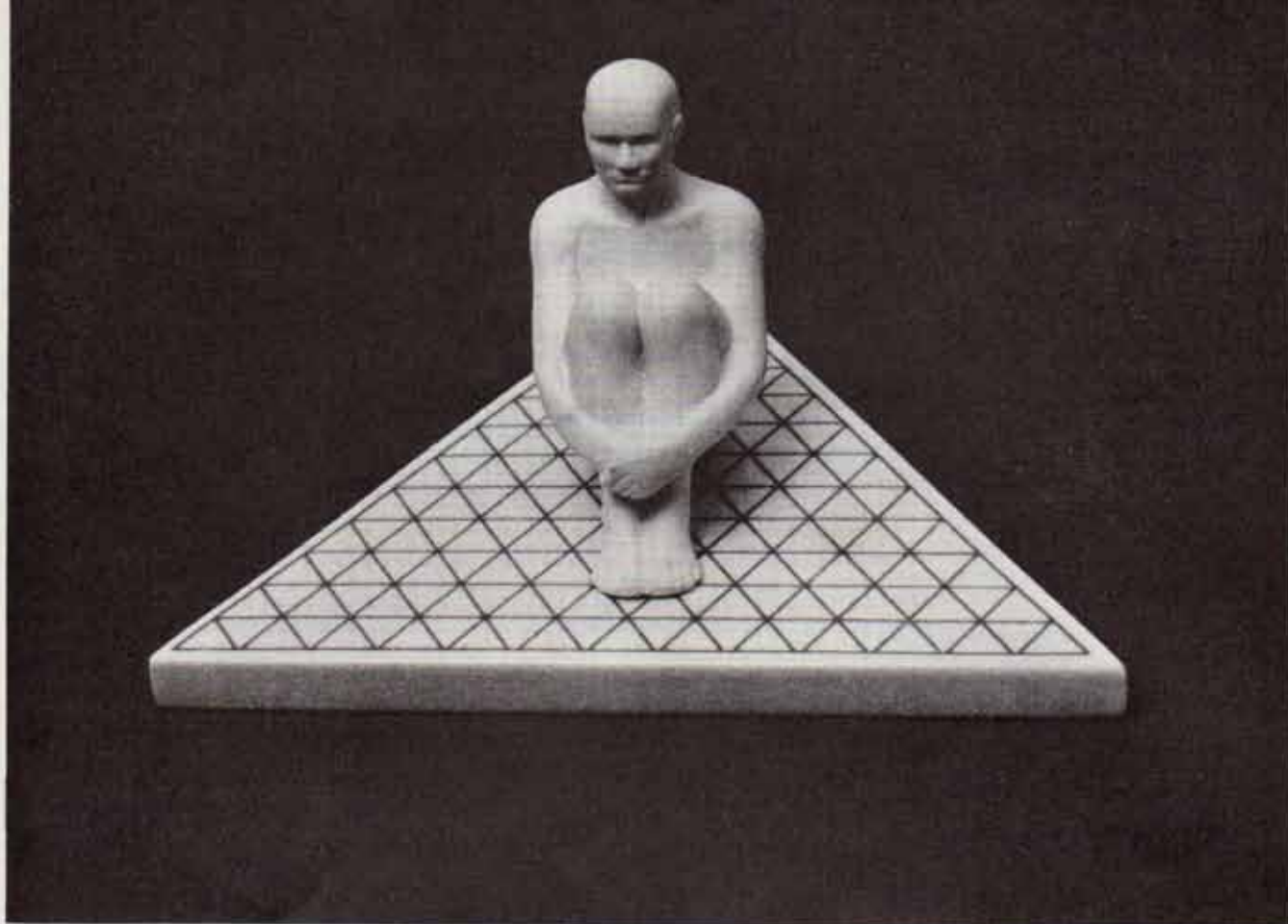
Following these discoveries, I struggled for almost two years to bring technical perfection to the objects that I had conceived. This was frustrating as ideas were held back until technical problems were solved. During this time, however, I did manage to create tiny geometric worlds where a calmness and order, so difficult to achieve within myself, prevailed.

Being a totally urban person the architecture of the city has made a great impression upon me. I have often seen the sky captured and defined in reflective tower blocks. In Portsmouth the I.B.M. headquarters is a gigantic black glass slab which stretches horizontally across the landscape, reflecting the sky above it. Arne Jacobsen's Bank of Denmark in Copenhagen is another solid mass, elusive within its surroundings. Such an idea would have delighted the architect Boullée had he lived

two centuries later. His plan for Newton's Cenotaph was equally concerned with capturing the heavens. By day: "Natural light, filtering through the holes in the vault, creates the illusion of stars suspended in the infinite universe. The sarcophagus on a raised catafalque is the only material object in this cosmic space." By night: "the daylight effect is created by a lamp within an armillary sphere, suspended at the centre of the globe." I feel great sympathy with Boullée and Ledoux, both now known as 'visionary

Glenys Barton — 'Fourth Plane' — bone china and stoneware with silk screen and photo-litho transfer graphics — photograph Frank Thurston





Glenys Barton – 'Island' – bone china with silk screen transfer, 1974

architects'. They "had a longing for cubist simplicity and yet a wish to arouse emotion through the most expressive forms."² I share the conflict.

For sometime the formation of those geometric landscapes satisfied me but after a while I realised that the most fundamental ingredient was missing – man. It was a great challenge to make the right figure: a timeless symbol as pure as his surroundings. However, once I had dared to include him I was able to draw on the stimulus that I had found earlier in choreography. By the time I came to model the second figure (a seated man) I had discovered the stories of J.G. Ballard. It was amazing, finding someone putting into words the very visual images that obsessed me. In his short story 'Terminal Beach' his lone character, Travern, has trapped himself on a totally man-made island:

"On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional, megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon. . . The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudo-geological strata condensed the brief epochs, micro-seconds in duration, of thermonuclear time. Typically the island inverted the geologist's maxim, 'The key to the past lies in the present', Here, the key to the present lay in the future. . . From the plain below it the recording towers rose into the air like obelisks, . . . On their grey walls were the faint outlines of human forms in stylized poses, flash-shadows of the target community burnt into the cement. . . The target lakes were smaller, filled with broken

bodies of plastic models. Most of them lay in inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests. . . To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Travern, one must try to visualise sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth that extended across the central table of the island. . . With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order. . . The landscape is coded. Entry points into the future – Levels in a spinal landscape – zones of significant time."

I was so excited by Ballard's work that I based my last series of sculptures on the atmospheres of "Terminal Beach" and another Ballard short story – "Concrete Island." After reading Ballard, words like zone, matrix, meridian, stratum, eclipse, began to acquire new layers of meaning; sometimes a word directly evokes a visual image which goes on to a piece.

I sense the dilemma of scale against technical practicality. I would like to conceive a cathedral but cannot forsake the timeless, almost precious quality of pure ceramic materials. Plastics, metal and glass do not have for me the emotive power of high alumina bodies and porcelains. They can live at temperatures and in environments where most other media would be destroyed. They are the jewels to survive the holocaust.

- 1 Arthur C. Clark – '2001-A Space Odyssey'
- 2 'Visionary Architects' (Catalogue) University of St. Thomas; Houston.
- 3 J.G. Ballard – 'Terminal Beach'.

Faenza 1975

The following potters, chosen by the CPA and BCC, were invited to submit work to the Faenza Competition 1975 – Glenys Barton, Terry Bell-Hughes, Emmanuel Cooper, David Eeles, Siddig El'Nigoumi, Eileen Lewenstein, Colin Pearson, Mary Rogers. The venture was subsidised by the International Committee of the British Crafts Centre.

West Dean College has a selection of short courses of interest to potters including two one week courses for beginners, and others for the more experienced potter. Full details, dates and fees from: The Director, West Dean College, Chichester, Sussex.