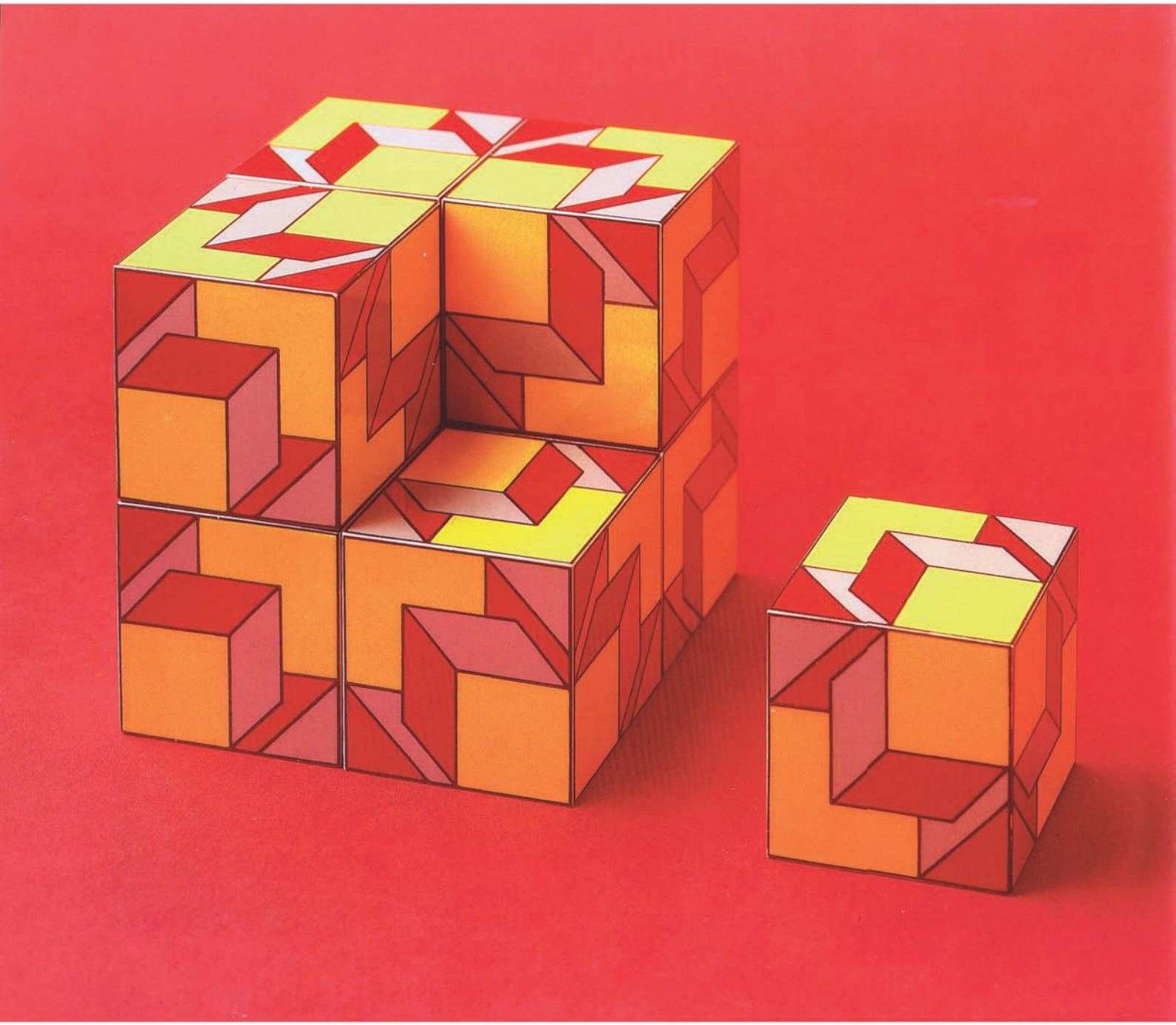


Graphic Permutations I No. 1 1972

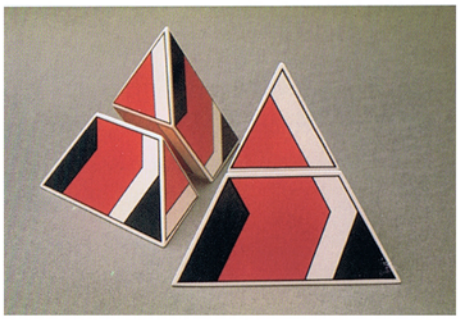
Bone China
10.5 x 10.5 x 10.5 cms

Glenys Barton

by Edward Lucie-Smith

Speaking of her own work Glenys Barton quotes the curator and art-historian John Elderfield's comment on Matisse – that "he was working towards serenity by means of simplification". She adds: "This exactly describes what I would like to be doing."

Like that of many artists, her work falls into several distinct phases. Each of these, she points out, is connected with a particular working environment. From 1972–76, for example, Barton shared a cramped, rather dank little studio slotted into a railway arch behind St. Pancras station with her lifelong friend Jacqueline Poncelet. She had travelled a comparatively circuitous route in order to get there. Born in Stoke-on-Trent, the centre of the commercial ceramic industry in Britain, she comes from a working-class background. Her father was a miner, later disabled, who became a newsagent; her mother was a hand-painter on china; her aunts v gilders. She began her career by training to be a teacher in Bristol, though she nevertheless admits that even in those days she "did pottery all the time" and treated the training college as if it were an art school. At the same time, she did a lot of dance and movement – something which she now believes had a crucial impact on her early work.



Pyramid I No. 2 1972

Bone China
11.5 cms high

After completing her training, she taught at Risinghill, a tough London comprehensive school. After eighteen months of this she had a nervous breakdown. After her recovery, she worked at the Institute of Education at London University as a potter's assistant.

The pots and drawings she was then making were seen, more or less by accident, by someone who worked at the Royal College of Art. She was encouraged to apply, and, after what she describes as "a stormy interview", was accepted, at the comparatively late age of twenty-five. It was, nevertheless, a propitious moment to begin a career as an artist – Pop Art was just coming to the end of its first and most important period of development; Minimal Art was gathering strength.

However, Glenys Barton did not at this moment believe that art would be her career. When she entered the RCA what she wanted to be was an industrial designer. At first she showed every sign of succeeding in this ambition. While still a student, she designed a range of domestic wares for Habitat, the department store founded by Terence Conran, which had pioneered a new set of attitudes towards the British domestic

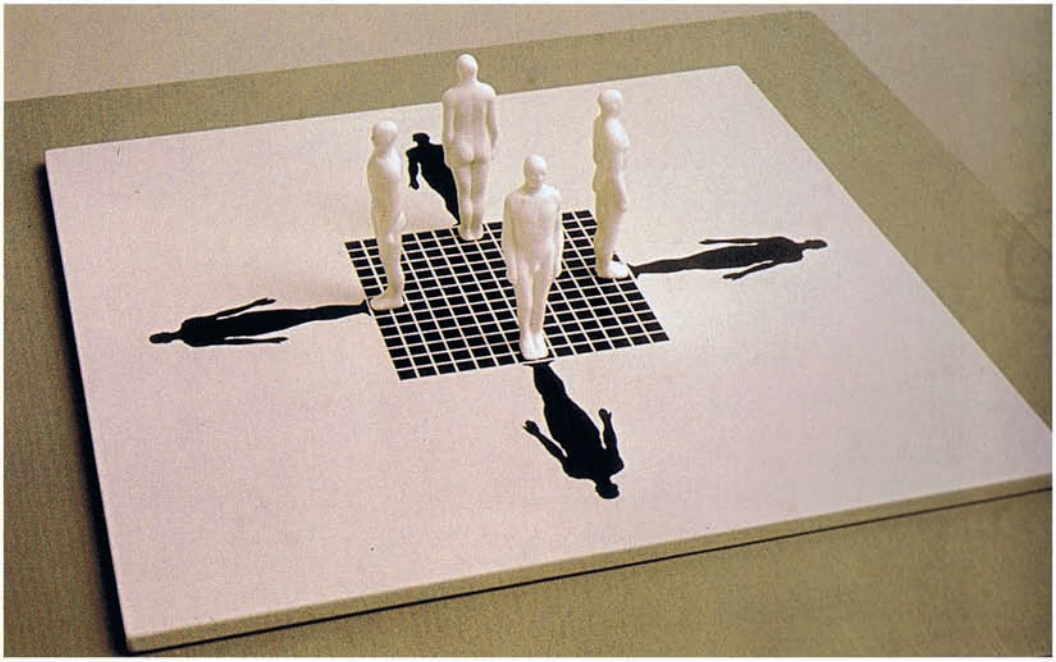
environment. This range was accepted and put into production – the fulfilment, as Barton herself has since remarked, of every ambitious student's dream.

Despite this, midway through her time at the RCA she became dissatisfied with what she was doing, and rebelled against the future she had so neatly mapped out. Trying to explain this change of heart, she once told me that she could not accept the compromises which a career in industrial design seemed to involve – both the perpetual concession to the profit motive and, worse still, the lack of imagination which seemed characteristic of the commercial manufacturers with whom she came into contact. What the college had given her was the thing which unfitted her for the career she had originally chosen: a head-on encounter with what she calls "the shock of art". Among those chiefly responsible for bringing this shock home to her, she cites Eduardo Paolozzi and the late Hans Coper, both of whom were attached to the ceramics department of the RCA at this time. She also feels a major debt of gratitude to David Queensbury who was then Professor.

Returning to the idea of purely individual work, she discovered, perhaps slightly to her horror, that it was impossible to go back to the point where she had left off when she decided to commit herself to industrial design. She had lost a certain sort of innocence: "After making precise models, I

Fifth Plane 1974

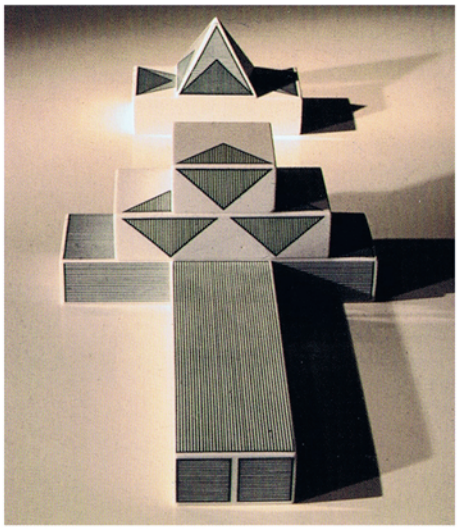
Bone China
30.5 x 30.5 x 7.5 cms



couldn't go back to using clay as I had used it before." Years ago, when I first knew her work, Barton described to me the excitement she felt when she first encountered switch boxes made of electro-porcelain. "Factory-made," she said, producing an example for me to look at, "and accurate to a thou." She then added: "Clay can be either soft or hard. I only discovered its hardness through industrial porcelain."

Essentially this discovery set the scene for the first phase of her career. There were other important and slightly unexpected elements as well. One factor was the dance-training she had had while she was still at college in Bristol:

> 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' [choreographed by Frederick Ashton] danced by the Royal Ballet Company (stark black and white figures on a square of stage) helped to crystallise an awareness of our relationship with space and gave me an ambition to formalise it.[i]



Untitled 1973

Bone China
5 x 5 x 2.5 cms

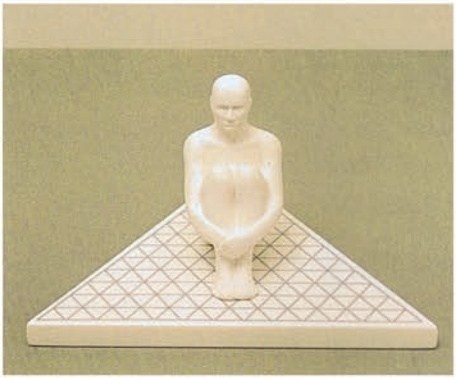
Other influences, dating from her Royal College of Art period, were both diverse and unexpected. One was Stanley Kubrick's film, '2001 – A Space Odyssey'. She was completely captivated by the mysterious monolith which plays such a prominent part in this, and also by the immaculate white moulded interiors of Kubrick's spaceships – "better than any sculpture I had ever seen":

> The last sequences of the film set me thinking about time and our suspension within it... while the final shots of the facsimile room haunted me like a Chirico landscape.[ii]

Less surprisingly, she was, like many young artists of her generation at the RCA, strongly attracted by American Minimal Art. 'The Art of the Real' exhibition at the Tate Gallery, exploring this new trend, had a great impact on her. She liked the 'direct, powerful simplicity' of these sculptural objects, but at the same time resisted Minimalism's tendency to leave things open-ended – to treat the pattern of absolute order as something which could best be completed by the spectator.

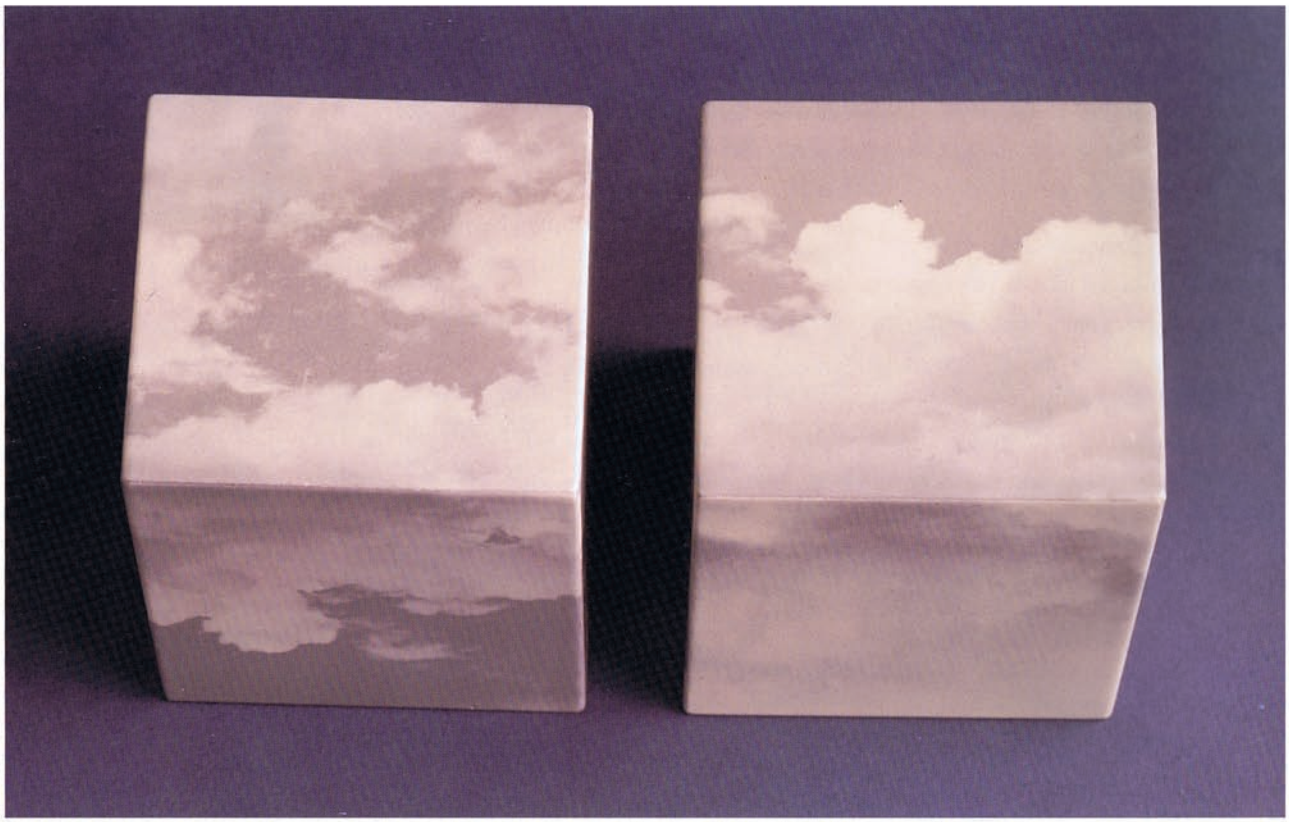
i Glenys Barton, 'A Search for Order,' *Ceramic Review*, No. 34, 1975
ii ibid

Yet another influence was the simplified architecture which was being created at the time – buildings like the black glass slab of the IBM headquarters in Portsmouth, or the solid yet elusive (because reflective) mass of Arne Jacobsen's Bank of Denmark in Copenhagen. In her own mind she compared these contemporary buildings to the visionary projects of the French neo-classical architects Boullée and Ledoux, who were at that moment becoming the objects of renewed scholarly attention. These neo-classicists, Barton felt, longed for extreme purity and simplicity, yet wanted to arouse emotion through the use of expressive forms. Here was something she could empathise with. Later, after a visit to Mexico, she was to feel a fascination with the brutal simplicity of Pre-Columbian temple architecture, and especially with the pyramidal temples in Mexico, with their steep flights of steps.



First Island 1974

Bone China
13.5 x 12 x 7 cms



Cloud Cubes 1970

Bone China
10 x 10 x 10 cms

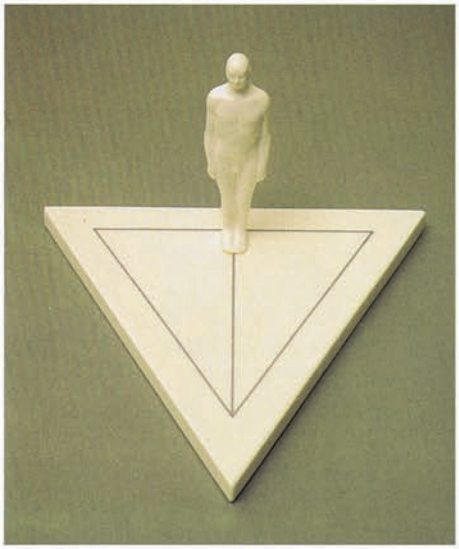
At the same time, however, she had a very British reluctance to banish the human figure – a reluctance which was reinforced by her continuing fascination with the dance. Here a literary source came to her rescue – the early stories of J.G. Ballard, and in particular the short story 'Terminal Beach' in which a lone character, Travern, has trapped himself on a totally man-made island:

> I was so excited by Ballard's work that I based [a] series of sculptures on '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.[iii]

These were the sculptures Barton was making during her period in the St. Pancras studio – basically a most unpromising environment for such precise work. During this period she became identified, like a number of other British ceramic artists of the same generation, with the craft revival which was taking place at that time. She was included, for example, in the major survey show 'The Craftsman's Art', held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1973, and in 'Aspects of British Crafts', held at the Royal Scottish Museum in the same year.

Despite her participation in these exhibitions, the identification with craft is something which Barton has always resisted. She feels in fact that she has sometimes been disadvantaged, and ignored by critics, because she uses a material – clay – which is now automatically associated with the world of craft, even though her own practice has little to do with supposedly craft attitudes. She goes so far as to say that she has had to fight harder on this issue than on the issue of gender. "I want to emphasise," she says in a recent letter "that I never think about [gender] in relation to my work, unless someone else brings the subject up... I just want to be judged as an artist, not as a female one." [iv]

The thing which made this a practical ambition was her encounter with the dealer Angela Flowers in 1974. The two were introduced by Barton's fellow ceramist Carole McNicholl, whom she had met at the RCA. A two-person exhibition was suggested, but Angela Flowers said that, on principle, she only did one-person shows. Henceforth Barton was to be regarded, and treated, like any other artist in the gallery's stable. The materials she used were not an issue.



Second Island 1974

Bone China
13.5 x 8 x 12 cms

Advent 1974

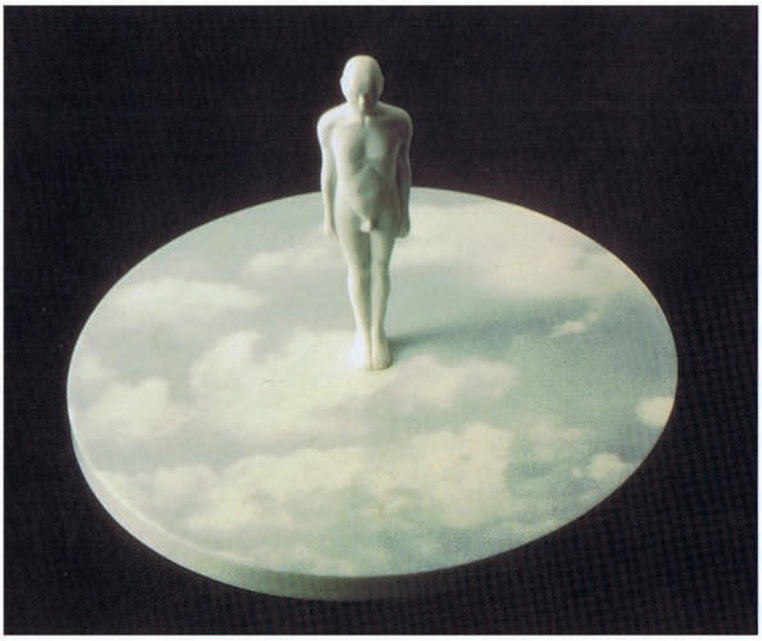
Bone China
11.5 x 5 x 15 cms

iii ibid.
iv letter to the author, February 1997

ABOVE:
Head with Relief Figures 1976/77

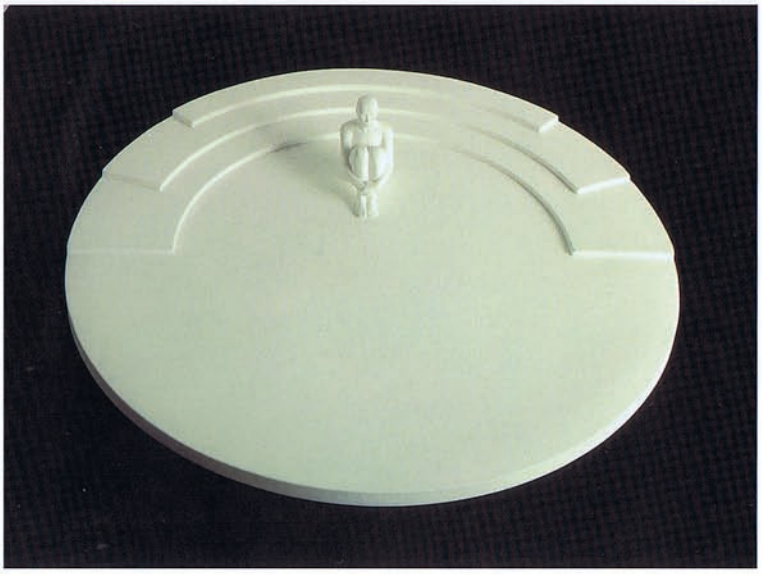
Bone China
17 cms high

RIGHT:
Prototype for Head with Relief Figures 1976/77



Sky Plateau 2 1976/77

Bone China
25 cms diameter



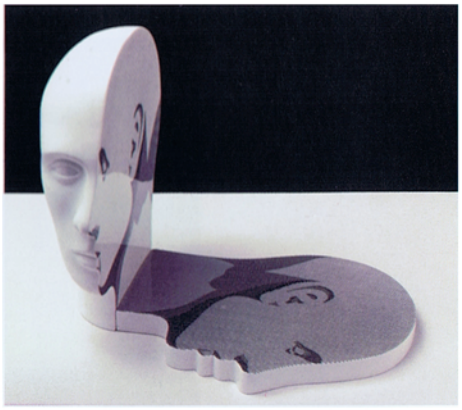
Arena 1977

Bone China
37.5 cms diameter

RIGHT:
Time at Yagul 1976/77

Bone China
17.5 cms high

The small-scale work in bone china which Barton made in the St. Pancras studio led directly to the next phase, which was her work with Wedgwood. The association was appropriate in two ways – first, because the firm of Wedgwood was intimately associated with the rise of the Neo-classical Movement in art, some aspects of which already fascinated the sculptor. Second, because the primary material at Wedgwood was bone china, which Barton was already used to handling. Nevertheless her arrival caused a certain amount of trepidation in the firm, as John Mallet, then Keeper of the Department of Ceramics at the Victoria & Albert Museum, later recorded in a catalogue essay.[v] Barton, too, had to struggle hard on her side to create a working relationship. Her over-riding concern was, as Mallet says, "to achieve the 'absolute perfection' of execution necessary to the execution of her vision."[vi]



Jungian Shadow I 1976/77

Bone China
17 cms high

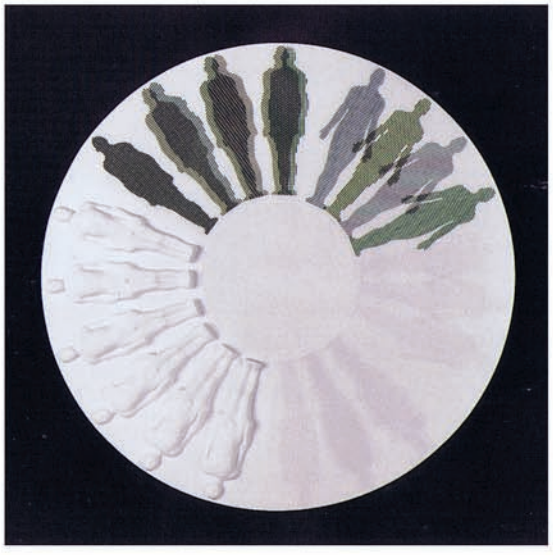
The period at Wedgwood represented the culmination of Barton's experiments with refined, ultra-precise effects – it was the time when she most regularly achieved the foreseen, regular, predictable result which expressed a concept fully formed before the piece was ever modelled or went into the kiln. In a sense, as she discovered when she returned to independent work in London, it also amounted to a dead end.

The next phase was to be very different. She was now, after a brief period working in the front room of a house in Wandsworth, making use of a studio in Brixton borrowed from the sculptor Richard Deacon. This was a very different environment from the ones she had been accustomed to previously – large, ramshackle and not very clean. She was independent of the demands made by a large organisation with its own traditions and firmly established ways of working, and did not have to consider any needs other than her own. On the other hand, the condition of the studio made it very nearly impossible to achieve the clean purity of surface which she had regarded as desirable hitherto. Having decided that she needed to go in a new direction, she embraced the situation she now had, by actually building a primitive kiln in the studio yard in order to smoke her work.

v Edward Lucie-Smith and John Mallet, Glenys Barton at Wedgwood, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 1977.
vi Mallet in op. cit., p.12

Life Diagram I/II/II 1976/77

24.2 cms diameter



Ozymandias 1979

45.5 cms high

Some aspects of her earlier practice continued, while others were quite radically altered. For example, many of the pieces continued to be made in moulds, and the basic form was therefore just as carefully controlled as it had been previously. But this control was often contradicted not merely by the use of smoking, which produces random effects of colour, but by heavily crackled glazes. Barton was now teaching at Camberwell School of Art, and took the opportunity to learn more about glazes from Colin Pearson, who also taught there. A key piece from this period is the over-lifesize head *Ozymandias*, which dates from 1979. This marked a decisive step forward in her development. While the human figure had made previous appearances in her sculpture, it had tended to be small in scale, and linked to a carefully constructed setting. *Ozymandias* was life-size and completely independent. Barton has always been extremely conscious of possible historical precedents for her work. Her exemplars here seem to have been the so-called 'reserve heads' found in certain Ancient Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom period.

LEFT:
Monte Alban 1976/77

Bone China
39.5 cms high

After using Deacon's studio for about a year, Glenys Barton moved to a studio of her own in Barmouth Road, Wandsworth. She occupied this from 1980–84. At the Barmouth Road studio she continued the experiments with smoked surfaces and crackled glazes which she had begun previously. Meanwhile her range of imagery continued to expand. She describes the studio in Wandsworth as being "womb-like" and her own work at this epoch as being part of an often painful process of introspection. Writing about some of the work of this period, the art critic and potter Emmanuel Cooper spoke of what seemed to him its "curious passivity"[vii]. In fact, it seems more accurate to describe some of the pieces as having a kind of stillness and compressed energy.

vii Emanuel Cooper, 'Glenys Barton – Sculptures and reliefs', *Ceramic Review*, No.85, 1984

A Column of Hands

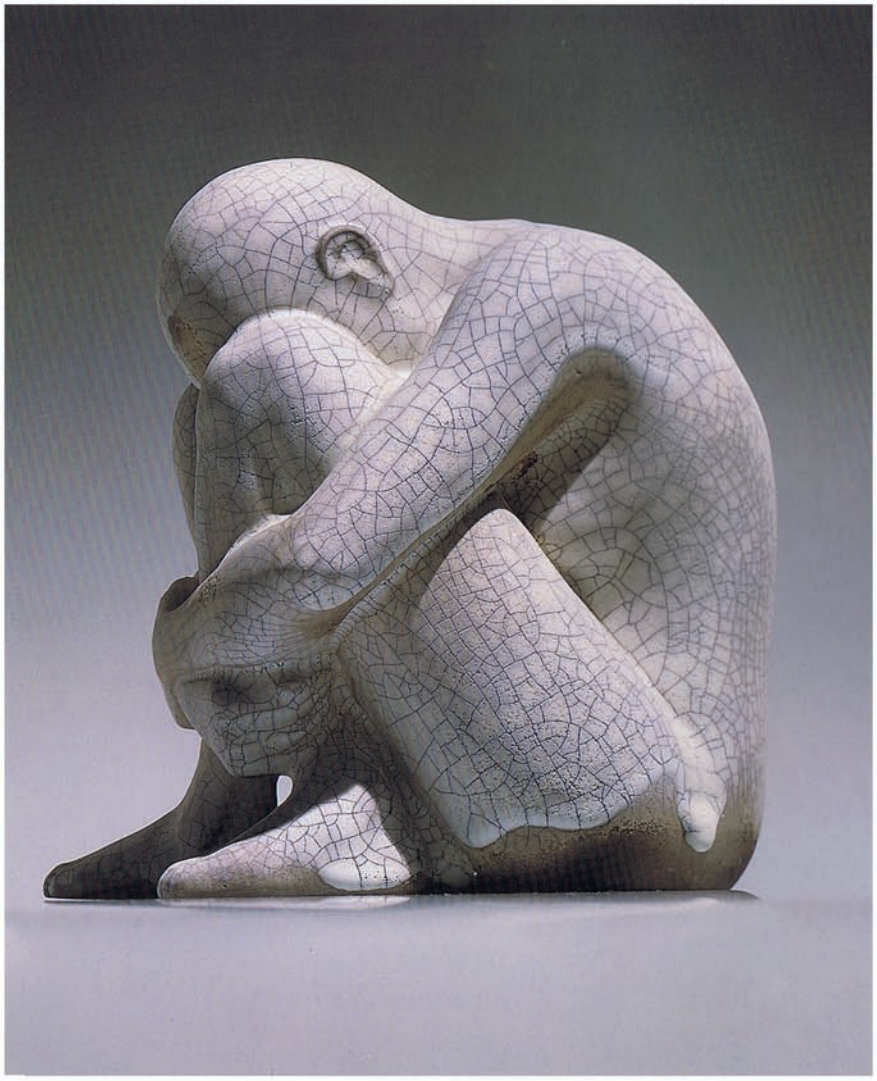
125 x 15 cms
Collection: City Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke on Trent

RIGHT:
Hand

30 x 15 cms

Triangular Hands 1983

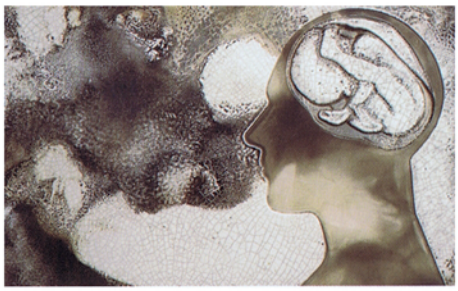
40 x 60 cms
Private Collection, USA



Cooper's attention was particularly caught by the sculpture *Inside* 1983, a crouching female with bowed head and arms locked around her legs – "a figure almost without sex in which the mood is one of self-containment, [and] perhaps, introspection."[viii] In one of its aspects, the figure is a self-portrait, but the sculptor has smoothed away most of the particular details – the head, for example, is smoothly modelled, totally without hair, like all the figures and heads which Barton made at this period. The surface is unified with a raku glaze, sandblasted to reveal a fine network of crazing.

Other significant sculptures from this time include the *Lady with Three Faces* (1980) (see page 68), a piece of which Barton is still particularly fond; some self-portrait reliefs, showing the head full-face and in profile; and reliefs called *I Know* and *I Will Know*. In these latter, a profile head contains a crouching figure. Certain common themes emerge. *Lady with Three Faces* is fairly obviously a sculpture about being forced to make a choice between different identities, and the multiple aspects of the self-portrait reliefs seem to be a way of making a similar statement. The *I Know* reliefs can be read in several different ways – as allegories of a perhaps unwelcome knowledge of self which forces itself on the artist's consciousness, and also (this is especially true of *I Will Know*, where the contained form is foetus-like) as foreshadowing the birth of a child. The artist's son Felix was born in 1982.

viii Cooper, in ibid.

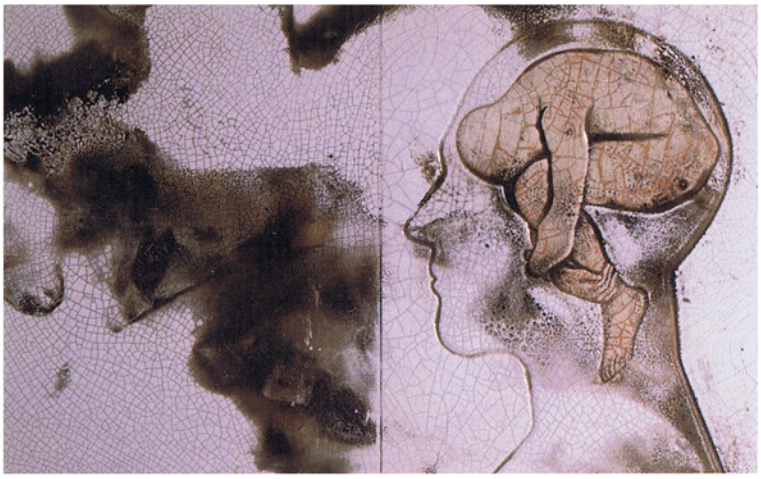


I Will Know 1981

25 x 40 x 3.4 cms
Private Collection, UK

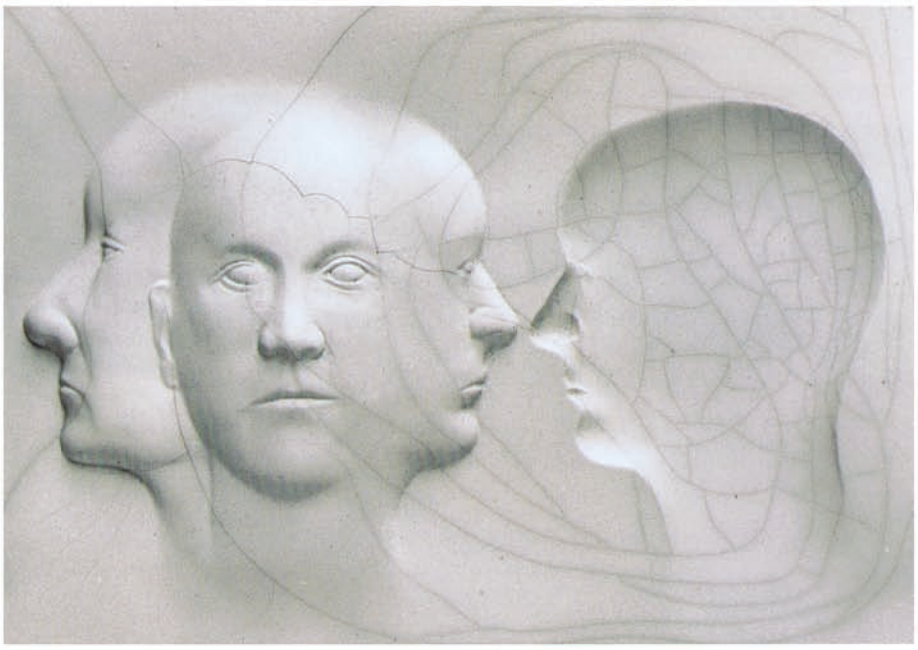
LEFT:
Inside 1983

From a series of 12
9.5 x 15 x 18 cms
Private Collections, UK



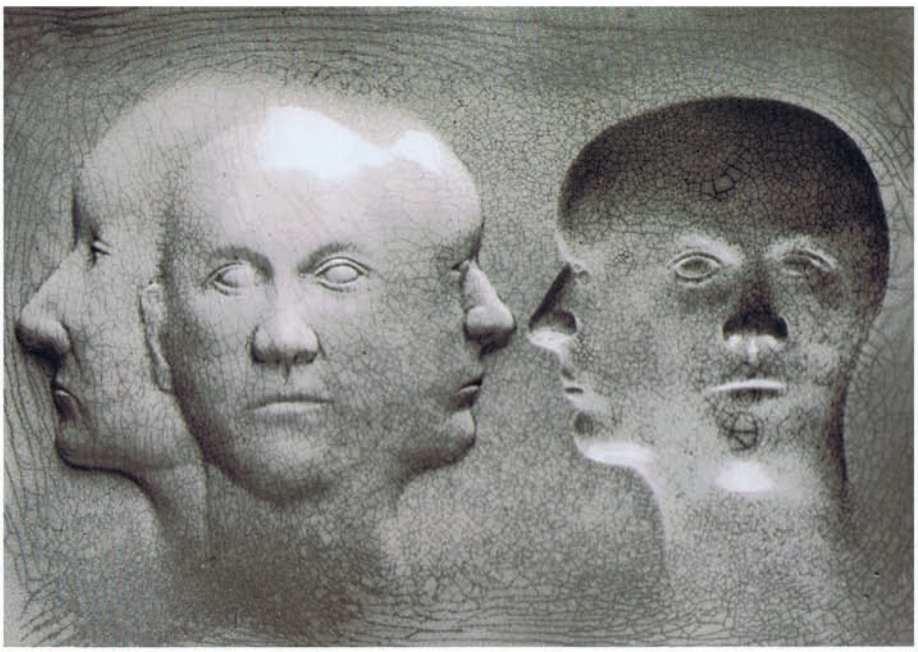
I Know 1981

25 x 40 x 3.4 cms
Private Collections, UK



Self Portrait I 1981

22 x 30.5 x 3 cms
Private Collection, UK



Self Portrait II 1981

22 x 30.5 x 3 cms
Private Collection, UK

RIGHT:
Profile Head I 1986
66 cms high
Private Collection, UK

In 1984, Glenys Barton moved to Essex. Her new studio was the garage of the house she and her husband Martin Hunt bought at Creeksea, near Burnham-on-Crouch. The closed spaces of London were replaced by the immense open skies of the flat Essex coastline, where land and water intermingle, and her work took on a correspondingly greater feeling of openness.

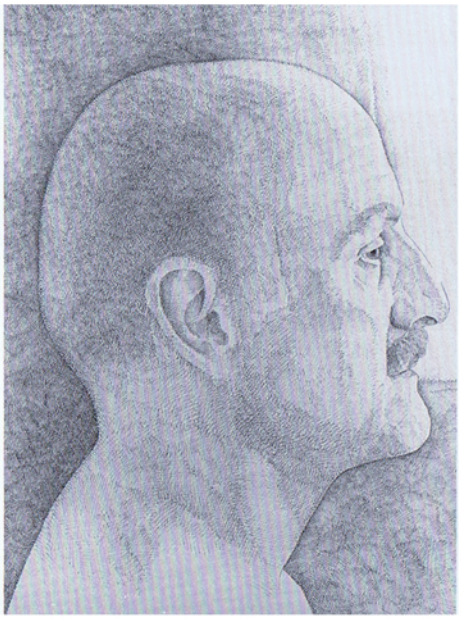
A particularly significant development at this time was a return to making heads – life-size and sometimes larger. During her final period in London, Barton had made one female head, 9½ inches high – therefore somewhat less than life-size. This was based on the appearance of her close friend Jacqui Poncelet, but was not, she now thinks, a fully developed likeness, any more than were the self-portrait reliefs of the same period mentioned above. Now she tackled the problem of making a true portrait, a likeness of the art patron Peter Moores. Moores, with his compact, balding head and fine profile, already seemed linked in appearance to the heads she had been making hitherto. Barton began by making some large-scale profile drawings of him, then, in a complete break with her previous method of work, made a handbuilt, one-off sculpture, with no use of moulds. She sees this as being both a major step forward (her technical methods have been mixed ever since this moment, combining the use of moulds with hand-modelling as occasion and mood seem to demand), and as a reversion to her way of working as a very young woman, before she went to the Royal College of Art.

The way Moores looked impressed itself on Barton's imagination to the point where he became the inspiration for a series of works, including some profile heads – essentially reliefs without the background. Glenys Barton sees in these profiles the influence of Giacometti:

> I realise that I have been influenced by Giacometti's invention of forms for the human figure, for instance to take the flattening of the human head into an axe-like profile shape. I have not, however, been in any way influenced by his expressive style. My favourite Giacometti piece and therefore the one that has been the most influential is the small portrait he did of his mother in 1927 which is flattened from front to back.[ix]

It is nevertheless typical of Barton's development and in particular of her increasing tendency to oscillate between realism and idealisation that the series of Moores portraits should have been accompanied by another and

ix From the artist's notebooks, 14.2.92

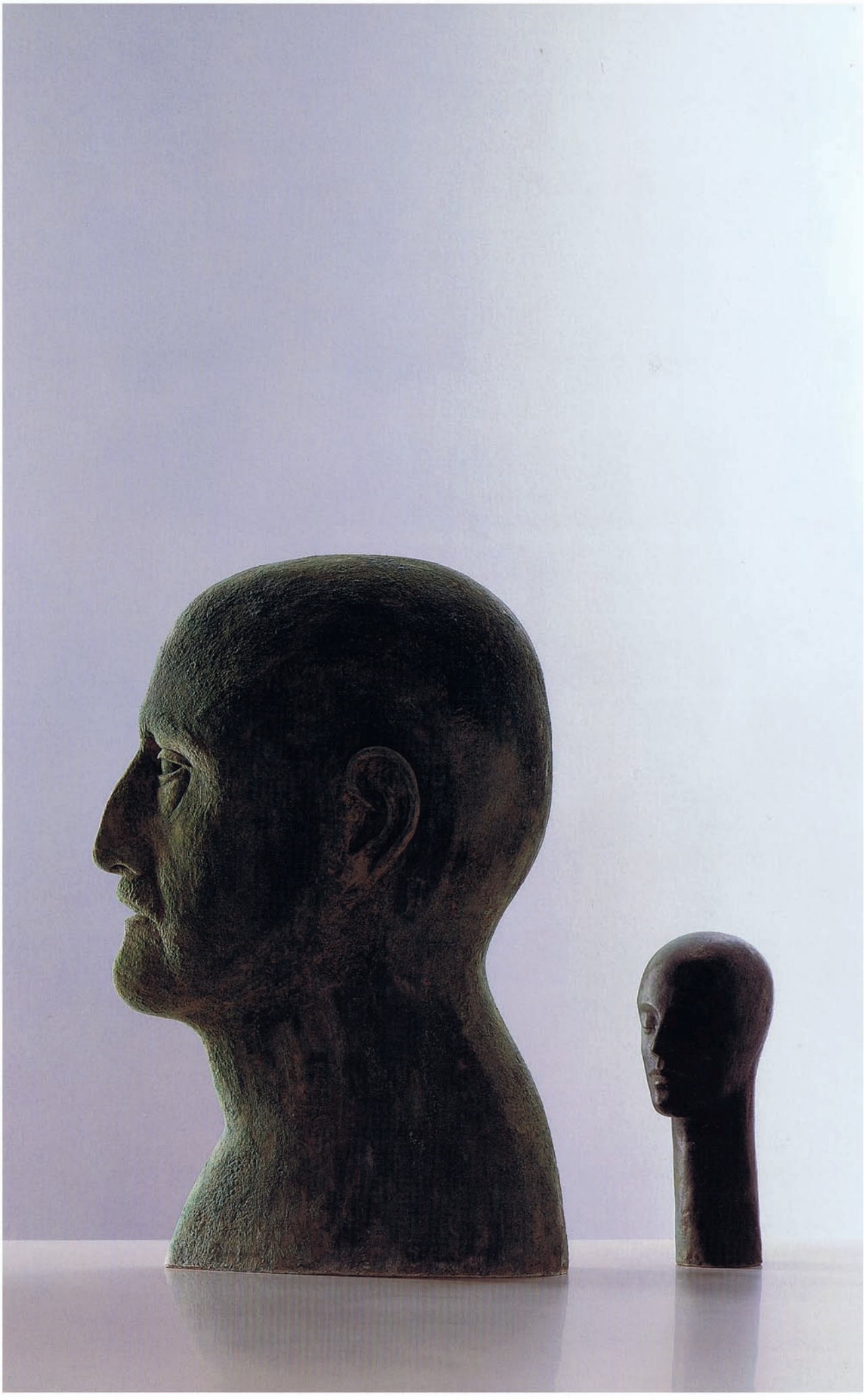


Peter Moores 1985

Ink on paper
99 x 74 cms

RIGHT:
Peter Moores 1990

58 cms high
Private Collection, UK



The Rite 1987

35 x 45 x 45 cms
Private Collection, UK

LEFT:
Green Madonna 4 (Lucy) 1987

50 x 23 cms
Collection: Norwich Castle Museum

quite different one – Madonna heads inspired by Piero della Francesca's famous *Madonna del Parto*. Renaissance art was henceforth to have an ever stronger appeal for Barton's imagination – she strove to emulate its calm regularity and grandeur.

Yet a third series of heads, more idealised than those of Peter Moores but less so than the *Madonnas*, were based on the appearance of Jacqui Poncelet's husband, the sculptor Richard Deacon.

One feature shared by all three series is the fact that Barton used them as a basis for renewed experiments with both colour and texture. She glazed her heads blue, then sand-blasted the glaze in order to obtain a matt surface. Continual experimentation with colour and surface has in fact been one of the features of her work, from the late 1970s onward.

The garage at Creeksea was obviously inadequate as a permanent workspace, so a new permanent studio was built beside the house. In 1987, while she was waiting to move into the new space, Barton's concern – and often anxiety – about the actual scale of her work reached one of its periodic moments of climax. She experimented with a large head covered with ceramic mosaic, and also with a grouping of kneeling figures, *The Rite*, where the component parts, arranged in a circle, create a sculptural environment. These attempts to work on a larger scale continued after the new studio was ready for occupation. The first piece she made there was a large self-portrait with a mask, where the material was not her customary ceramic, but fibreglass. She soon gave up these attempts, however, both because she disliked the medium, which is in any case very unpleasant to use, and also because she felt that these larger pieces in some mysterious way became "invisible". Later she wrote in a notebook:

> A question of scale. When does one recognise that the scale of the work is right? At what point can this become a lack of challenge? Rightness or complacency? I think I have found the right material and scale in which to express myself. Now I have to expand or consolidate my ideas to reach that ideal expression of the human spirit.[x]

Her occupation of her new workspace was accompanied by other important changes in the rhythm of her life. For example, she finally gave up teaching. The major advantage was it gave her more time to work, and meant an absence of interruption. Yet there were disadvantages as well.

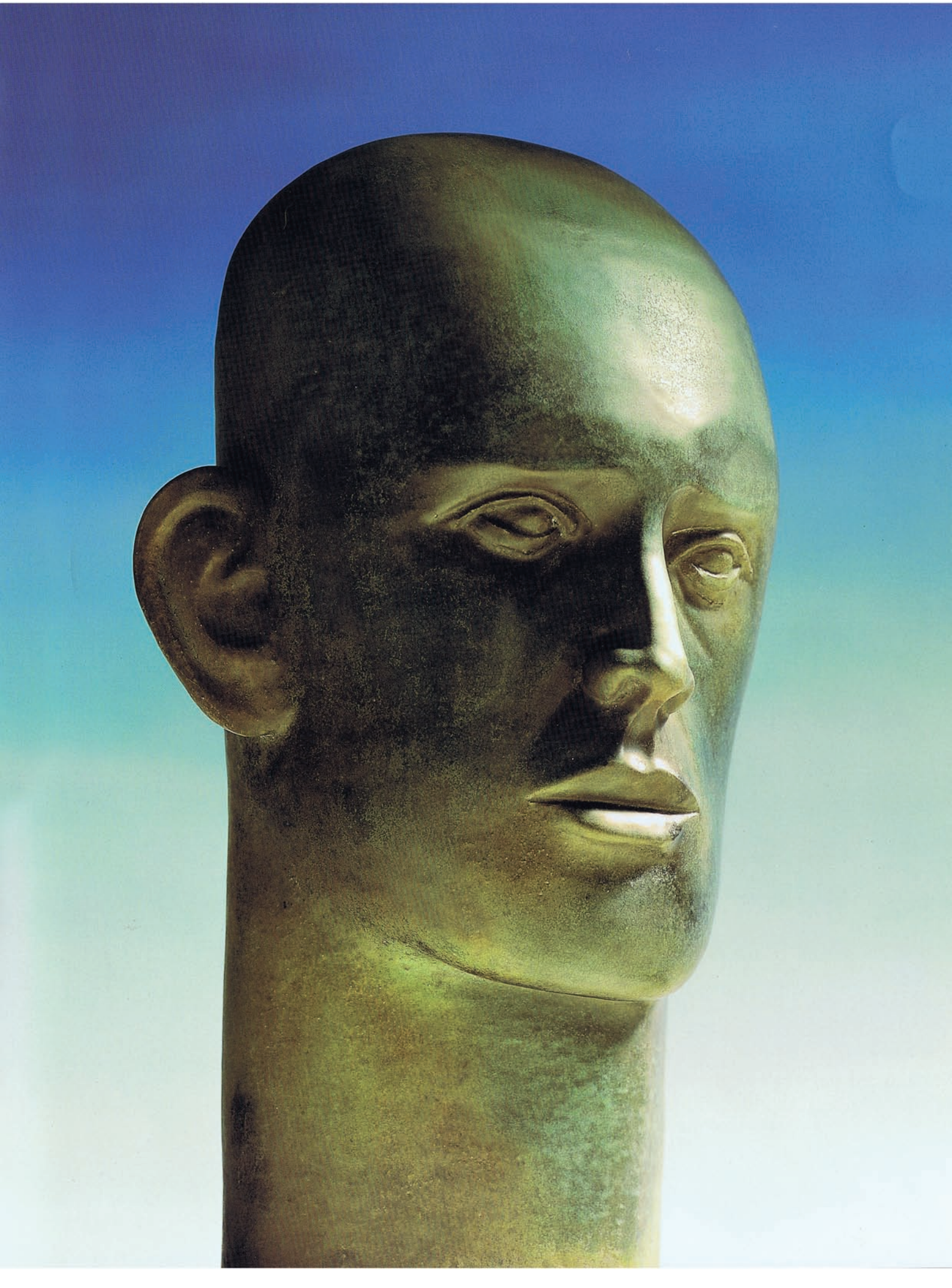
Self Portrait with Mask 1987

155 cms high

RIGHT:
Richard IV 1986

48 cms high
Private Collection, USA

x From ibid., 23.2.92



While, for example, she now had more time to study, she was cut off from the resources of the library at Camberwell. Because of this, she began to collect illustrated books on art in a much more serious and systematic way, as references for her work. Living a much more reclusive life, her true companions, as she now says "were early 20th century artists from my books: Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Giacometti."

Reclusiveness was balanced by occasional extended trips abroad – to Thailand in 1990 and to India in 1995. Both these trips had an important impact on her work. The Hindu sculpture she saw in Thailand reinforced her interest in multifaced imagery, particularly images of the god Brahma, and she was also impressed by the centred calm of the Buddhist sculpture she saw. In India she looked at Jain sculpture, and visited both Hindu and Buddhist sites – Ranakpur, Ajanta, Benares and the great temple at Khajuraho, with its teeming erotic figures.

LEFT & BELOW LEFT:
Multi-faced Head I 1990

28 x 20 x 25 cms
Private Collection, UK

BELOW RIGHT:
Multi-faced Head II 1990

31 x 20 x 27 cms
Private Collection, UK

Her work from the late 1980s onwards shows much greater variety and is also a great deal freer in conception. As previously, however, one can make a broad distinction between works which are realistic in impulse and works which are idealising. Amongst the most poetic of the idealising sculptures are those in which the idea of the multiple head or face is developed in three dimensions. Barton's notes on this subject are suggestive. One runs in part:

> An approach –
> Make a form and then add faces – see what happens.
> The faces may change the form or not. As people move within crowds and within relationships to fit in with each other, so could the parts of the sculpture.[xi]

Another reads as follows:

> While working on a multi-faced piece.
> Sometimes the form takes over: – considerations of form take first place. Sometimes the faces [subject] take over... Letting things 'just happen' is very difficult for me. I am not that kind of person but I am getting better at it. [xii]

xi From ibid., April 1992
xii From ibid., 15.9.92

BELOW & RIGHT:
Facing 1995

33 x 52 x 33 cms

Untitled 1992 & Untitled 1993

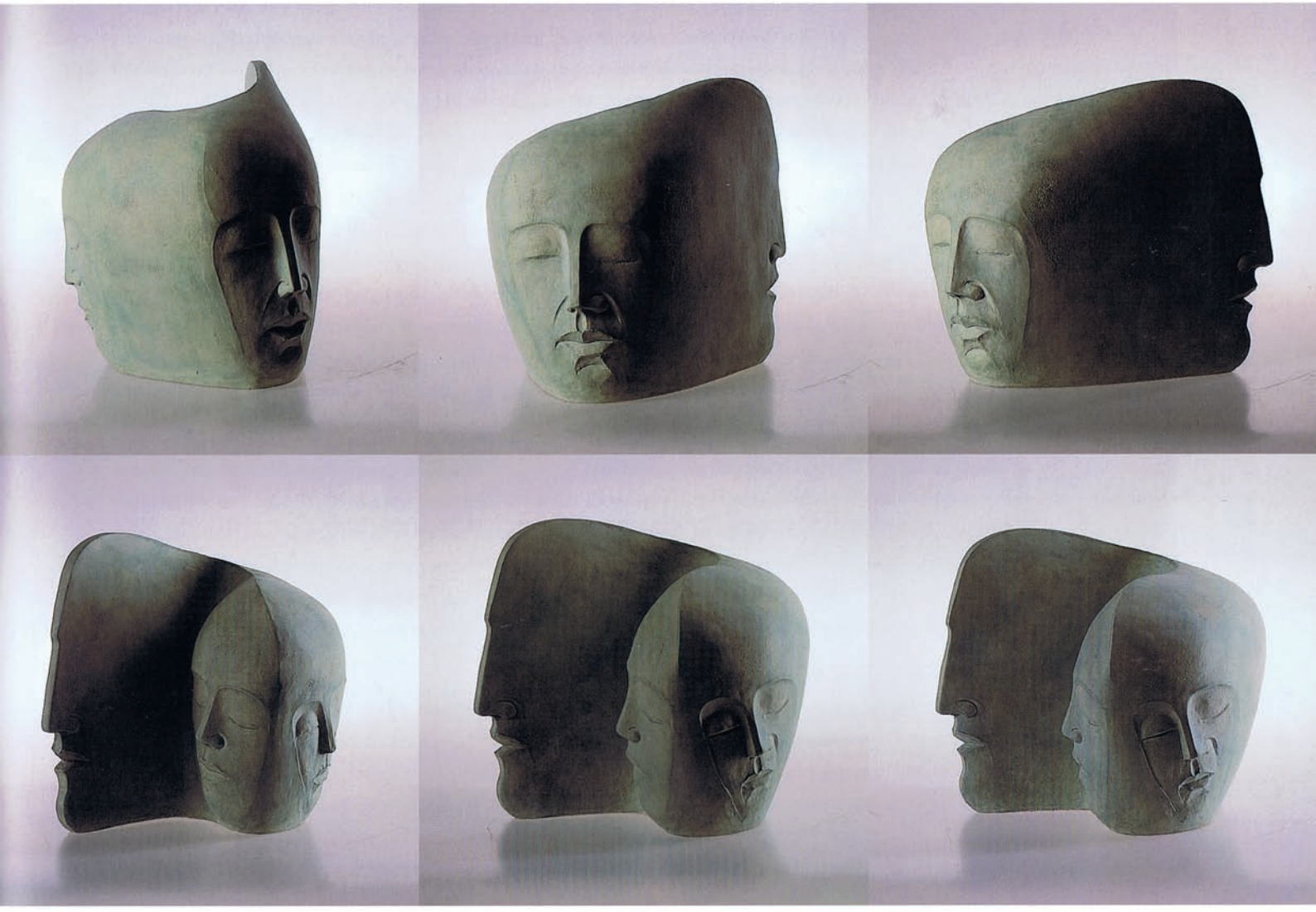
26 x 26 x 22 cms/26 x 29 x 22 cms

On the Inside 1996

48 x 63 x 58 cms
Private Collection, USA

Dreaming Edge 1994

28 x 30.5 cms



The multi-faced pieces do in fact demonstrate a clear development both towards something more integrated and towards something which is more clearly organic in form. Gradually separated shapes become one shape. Heads which would have been treated in full relief are now raised from the matrix so subtly that it is difficult to distinguish between passages of fully rounded modelling, passages which are in very shallow relief, and other passages which are simply drawn upon the surface in sgraffito. One especially fascinating aspect of these works is that they absolutely demand that the viewer move round them – there is no one standpoint where they can be seen complete. Very often, too, the spectator is required to come closer, and actually look downward and into them. This is the case, for instance, with two pieces of 1995, *Facing* and *Inside Edge*. Each of these consists of two separate curved forms, placed so as to face one another. Overlapping visages appear on the inside curve of each form – there are details which can never be seen completely if one stands at a distance from the sculpture.

One striking characteristic of these sculptures is their fluidity and their relationship to the idea of time. Barton's early work makes use of rigid, sharply defined forms. Here the aesthetic is quite different. Though the heads offer sharp, crisp profiles – the frontier where the form ends – within the boundary things melt and slide into one another. The eye reads the relationships first one way, then another, and both readings are equally valid.

Similarly, in early work one is often conscious of the sculptor's fascination with the idea of the remote past. *Ozymandias*, with its direct reference to Old Kingdom sculpture, is a good example of this. But there is never a suggestion that time, so to speak, is still flowing through the sculpture itself. The moment is frozen. The opposite is the case with recent sculptures featuring multiple faces or heads. The spectator's own movement around the piece seems to trigger this flow – the sculptures are kinetic in a peculiarly personal and subtle way.

In strong contrast to these 'idealising' pieces is Glenys Barton's production as a portraitist. In an age when good portraiture of any kind is increasingly rare, and when good portraiture in three dimensions is especially so, she has been carving out an important place for herself in this difficult field. The portraits of Peter Moores which have already been discussed in this essay are transitional. His appearance was, by happenstance, already closely linked to the work which Glenys Barton was then producing. The new series of portraits represents a breakthrough into a rather different way of looking at things. Many of them, though not all, represent women, and Barton has had to invent new ways of getting a likeness. Her intelligent plundering of the past has obviously played an important role in this. Her own list of influences includes things as different from one another as Tudor portraits, Etruscan figures seen in the museum at Barcelona, early Iberian art, and the work of Cézanne, Modigliani and Picasso.

The earliest of this new series of portraits are those of the couturier, the late Jean Muir. Muir's spare, pared down aesthetic was obviously very sympathetic to the artist. So too was her personality, as expressed in her characteristic stance and gestures as well as in her style of dress. In most of the portraits Barton includes Muir's hands. The bust is extended to accommodate this. There are also some full-length statuettes, which make the most of Muir's slenderness, and her raised shoulder pose, at once contemplative and slightly sardonic.

What makes these pieces so extraordinarily telling is the way in which Barton has simplified appearances, keeping only things she found telling and significant. She seems to have learned this technique of simplification from ancient art, Etruscan terracottas in particular. Compared with the vast majority of contemporary portrait sculpture, the Jean Muir portraits have extraordinary spontaneity and freshness. They also have traces of a popular accent. It is perhaps not straining things too far to find in them, and especially in the small full-lengths, references to nineteenth century Staffordshire pottery figures.

Jean Muir 1992

Edition 8
67 x 13 x 3 cms
Collections: National Portrait Gallery, London and Private Collections, UK & USA

Through her portraits of Jean Muir Glenys Barton came into contact with the National Portrait Gallery. The 20th century curator, Robin Gibson, immediately appreciated the quality of her work, and Barton was commissioned to make a portrait of another celebrated female personality, the Member of Parliament and former actress Glenda Jackson. In some ways this was a far more problematic enterprise than the portraits of Jean Muir, since Jackson is notoriously uninterested in and unselfconscious about her own appearance. Asking for photographs to work from, for instance, the sculptor found that Miss Jackson had kept none from her time in the theatre. Nevertheless Barton had such vivid memories of her subject's performance as Gudrun, in the film of D.H. Lawrence's 'Women in Love', that she decided to combine an image taken from the film with one of Glenda Jackson as she is now. The result was an extension of the theme of the multiple head.

In other portraits from this time Barton restudied people whose appearances she has used before, in a more remote and stylised fashion. She made a naturalistic portrait, for example, of Jacqui Poncelet. This too incorporates the sitter's arms and hands.

One of the things which Barton had to do, when embarking on a much broader range of portraits, was to find ways of dealing with things she had hitherto managed to avoid. A particular problem was hair, in particular the coiffures of her female subjects. Hitherto Barton had always avoided representing this – hair does not generally form a compact mass; the strands move and shift and the whole surface constantly changes its form. The process of learning what to do was gradual. Neither Muir's neat geometric cut, nor Glenda Jackson's hair, which she now keeps short, presented insuperable problems. Since then, the sculptor has gradually learned to deal with coiffures less immediately amenable to her methods – like the fringe in *Amanda I* (p.96), a portrait of the painter Amanda Faulkner. This, in turn seems to have led to increased freedom of handling which embraces other details as well. *Nick and Megan I* and *II* (p.104/105) are near half-length sculptures inspired by the Italian Renaissance, Bellini and Botticelli Madonnas in particular. The forms are subtly flattened – what looks fully three-dimensional exists chiefly in very subtle low relief. Barton has become more and more adept at manipulating the spectator's perception of depth, and she uses this skill to surround the form with a quivering atmospheric envelope.

RIGHT:
Glenda with Hand 1993

51 x 46.5 cms

In addition to making portraits of people she knows and has actually seen (though she also makes extensive use of photographs when actually creating a portrait) Barton has made some of people whom she does not know personally – of her heroes, the great artists of the Modern Movement. Her primary source for these seems to have been the photographic portraits included in a book of my own, 'Lives of the Great Twentieth Century Artists'. Among the artists whom she has depicted, using this source, are Mondrian and Umberto Boccioni. The portraits are much simpler and less specific than those of still living subjects. *Mondrian*, with his bald head, is perhaps related to the likenesses of Peter Moores, but the approach is more direct. *Boccioni*, with eyes incised rather than modelled, is an apparition rather than a portrait in any conventional sense of the term. These 'likenesses' express the enormous respect which Glenys Barton feels for these great predecessors, her reverent feelings for what they were able to accomplish.

Another source of inspiration in recent years has been details from great Renaissance frescos. The illustrations she finds in books of seminal Renaissance masterpieces like Masaccio's frescos in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence encourage her to approach this material in a peculiarly modern fashion. These illustrations enable and indeed encourage the spectator to focus on isolated details, where the audience in a pre-photographic age would clearly have read the compositions in a different way. The heads singled out by the camera, and often reproduced nearly full scale in major publications on Renaissance art, have already undergone an initial process of simplification. The dry, chalky tones of fresco also have an affinity with matt ceramic surfaces. There is another, subtler link as well to the things that Glenys Barton now does. Masaccio and his immediate followers in Florence, and Piero della Francesca in Umbria, were especially fascinated by the problem of expressing volume through the use of colour and line on a flat surface. Barton, too, continually juggles with our perceptions of volume and depth.

Boccioni I 1989

43 x 25 x 10 cms
Private Collection, USA

LEFT:
Dreaming II 1996

42 x 45 x 26 cms
Private Collection, USA

The idealistic spirit, always so strong in her work, does not confine itself to the contemplation of the universe of art. In a recent letter to me she says:

> Although directly political work does not usually interest me, underlying everything I do is a deep concern for our survival both socially and environmentally. I listen to Radio 4 current affairs programmes every day as I work. [xiii]

Examples of this concern are Barton's *Green Warriors*, a variant on the medieval theme of the Green Man, which appears in medieval church carving (particularly in capitals and roof bosses). This image also interested Elisabeth Frink who made a number of *Green Man* heads towards the end of her life.

In Frink's case the Green Man symbolised a personal hope of recovery from illness. In Barton's the references are different. When she was in Thailand in 1990 she was impressed not only by the Hindu and Buddhist sculptures she saw, but by the pollution in Bangkok and by the devastated condition of some rural parts of the country. When she returned home this devastation was matched by the damage done by a gale to her own home at Creeksea. Her studio has been damaged, and a number of trees blown down. The *Green Warriors* are an act of mourning for the latter, and also an emblem of hope, of faith in the power of nature to regenerate itself.

RIGHT:
Green Warrior I 1990

49 x 24 x 27 cms

xiii Letter to the author, dated 3. 2. 97

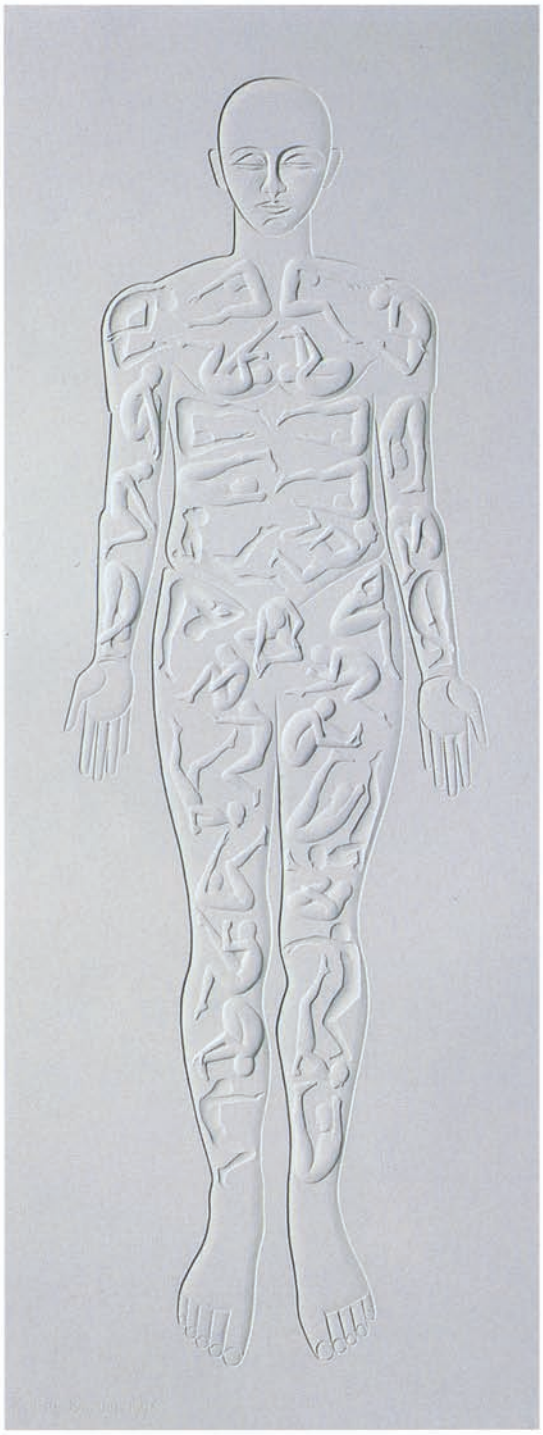
ABOVE LEFT:
Small Green Warrior 1990

38 cms high

ABOVE RIGHT:
Still Green Warrior 1990

47 cms high

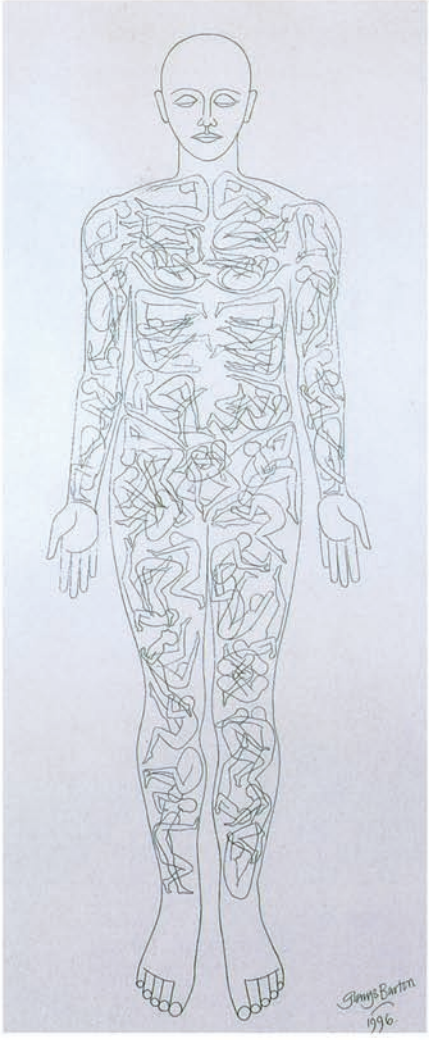
RIGHT:
Green Warrior I (Back) 1990



The work Barton is engaged on now reflects her social and environmental concerns more directly than ever. She speaks of her feelings "about the encapsulation of society within itself and the individual being indivisible from his surroundings"[xiv]. At the moment of writing, the initial expression of this is a large drawing – a single figure, in a pose reminiscent of Jain sculptures, contains many other figures. Barton sees this design as emblematic of her anger and frustration over what happened to British society in the 1980s. It is also surely much more than this. Almost from the beginning of her career the figure or head containing another figure has been a leitmotif, and it is not surprising to find her returning to a variant at this moment in her career. It is part of her vision of things that she continually searches for some kind of inner or hidden truth.

It is also part of her artistic make-up to experiment with new ways of doing things. She is now, for example, speculating about computers, and looking for ways of using them in her work.

Barton will never, despite this, be an artist who is committed to a mechanistic view of things. Nor is she a sculptor whose concerns are essentially formal, concerned with making shapes and creating relationships between forms. She cares passionately about the state of the world, and her sculptures are essentially the product of this concern. On the one hand she feels that the solitary individual can do little to ameliorate a situation she sees as one which is steadily worsening, both sociologically and ecologically. On the other, she feels a duty to attempt to do something. However, she also feels something else: that, since she is an artist, the effort must primarily be made through her art. Many artists, when they become campaigners, separate this activity from what they actually make. This is not the case with Glenys Barton. In fact, the idea of an artist who campaigns is probably repugnant to her.



There is no such thing 1996

Pencil on paper
150 x 68.5 cms

LEFT:
There is no such thing 1996

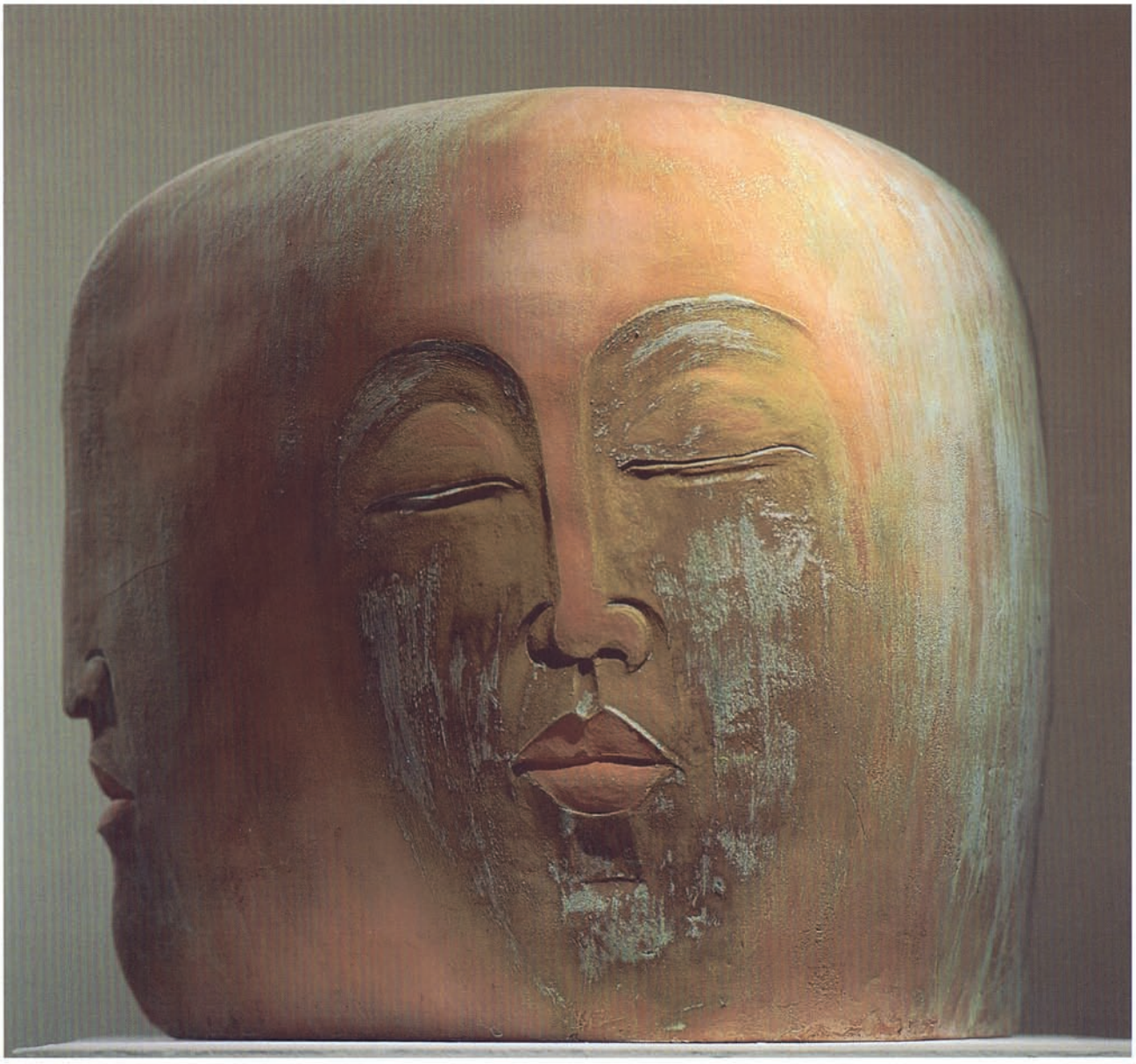
Plaster
155 x 64 x 42 cms

xiv ibid.

One reason why the religious art of Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism appeals to her so strongly is clearly that she herself has a meditative temperament. Her idealised heads and figures, in particular, are objects for contemplation. Still more so are the recent multi-headed and multi-visaged sculptures, where the features often seem to melt into the basic form that contains them, then rise up from it again.

BELOW & RIGHT
Dreaming III 1996

Terracotta
48 x 55 30 cms
Private Collection, Saudi Arabia



Inside Out IV 1996

30.5 x 24 x 28 cms
Private Collection, UK

OVERLEAF FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

Profile Head II

66 cms high
Private Collection, UK

Richard IV

Richard I

Pink Madonna

This contemplative bent is balanced by a lively response to other human beings – the primary reason why she has recently enjoyed so much success as a portraitist. One feature of her portraits is their informality. They have all the freshness of a completely spontaneous response – something which is much more often met in drawn or painted portraits than in sculpture. This response is linked to the material she uses. While she has on occasion complained that being a sculptor in ceramic, rather than in supposedly 'nobler' materials, such as stone or bronze, she is aware, not least from long familiarity with it, that clay responds with almost unique sensitivity to the maker's hand. Today her concern as a technician is to find a balance between the wide variety of processes which ceramic permits. It can be moulded so as to give a crisp, almost rigid result. Or it can be modelled with complete freedom and spontaneity. Something which adds to this freedom is the fact that it also offers a surface both for incised lines – that is, for a kind of drawing – and, through the use of glaze, for colour. Its textural variety is almost infinite.

In one sense, Barton stands somewhat apart from recent developments in sculpture. She is not a practitioner of *arte povera*, making art from discarded elements found in the environment. Similarly, she is not a maker of environmental, scenographic works which surround and enfold the viewer. She makes precisely designed, finite objects, and these objects, in turn, are the product of laborious technical processes which impose their own rules and sequences of action. Every maker of ceramic objects knows what disasters can take place in the kiln if these rules and sequences are not followed. Though ceramic is, as I have said, a material which invites spontaneity, it is also one where the development of that spontaneity is brought to a halt at a certain point by the nature of the technical process. Once the piece is fired, it is very difficult to have a change of heart and make radical alterations.

Another reason why Barton's work stands apart is that she is obstinately figurative, and this figuration is not 'found', but created *ab initio*. For her, as for the sculptors of the past, the human image can be used to encompass all the many meanings she finds within herself. Her sculptures offer a continual dialogue – they ask questions about what it is to be alive in this particular epoch. And they often leave room for more than one answer. This is why I, like many people who have come into contact with them, find them fascinating and moving.