

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode Three

Kai Althoff
goes with
Bernard Leach

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello and welcome to Here Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators, and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artwork. My name is Jane Scarth, Curator of Public Programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring Whitechapel Gallery Director, Iwona Blazwick, who is also the Curator of our latest exhibition, Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach, an exhibition showcasing the career of the German painter and installation artist, Kai Althoff. Iwona will be in conversation with artist, potter and writer, Edmund de Waal, who in addition to his artistic practice is well-known for the globally claimed memoir, the Hare with Amber Eyes, and is a leading scholar on the work of Bernard Leach, which also features strongly in Kai's exhibition. Here they speak about the ideas behind Kai's show and share reflections on the enduring appeal of Bernard Leach to contemporary artists. The exhibition is free to view in Galleries 1, 8 and 9, and is on display from 7 October 2020 to 10 January 2021.

IB: My name is Iwona Blazwick and I'm the curator of an exhibition here at the Whitechapel Gallery of a contemporary German artist called Kai Althoff. He's primarily a figurative painter and he also makes sculptures, films and plays in a band. He's called his survey Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach and alongside nearly 100 of his works, he has selected over 40 jugs, dishes, vases, tiles, and even buttons made of stoneware, earthenware and porcelain, and dating from 1910s to the 1960s by the great British potter. In a statement that accompanies the show, Althoff says that he wants his painting to function like one of Bernard

Leach's pots. He regards each of his pictures as a vessel for experience, and in fact, Bernard Leach himself once said, a pot in order to be good should be a genuine expression of love. Although it is 50 years since Bernard Leach passed away, these two artists have much to share. They believe in authenticity, truth to materials, and in decorative arts rooted in tradition. In 1997, an influential book tracing Leach's life and work was published by the contemporary ceramicist and writer, Edmund de Waal. As well as being a renowned artist, he is author of the celebrated *Hare with the Amber Eyes* and *The White Road, a Journey Into Obsession*. He's also a curator as well as putting together a beautiful display about the colour white in the Royal Academy's Library; he's recently installed a Library of Exile in the British Museum where he juxtaposes his own delicate porcelain works with some 2,000 texts by a global roster of writers in exile. Edmund, could you describe Bernard Leach's aesthetic?

EdW: No, I can't, because he's one of those complex artists who evolves through different stages of his life, and as he goes, he wonderfully, lyrically and dogmatically changes his view on what his work means and what kind of work he should be doing. So there are strong lineaments going through the whole of his work right from the very start, from his early days in Japan right to the end of his life. But actually his aesthetic, no, because as any visitor who comes to see you in the Whitechapel walking round this extraordinary group of works will understand, is that there is actually no common style within these works. It's a sort of panoply of colour, texture, shape, form, use, non-use – strong aesthetic, actually holding it all together, no.

IB: The kind of narrative that we know about Leach is that he brought an idea of traditional Japanese pottery into dialogue with an English almost medieval sensibility to create a modernist language. But he'd actually studied drawing and etching at the Slade. What happened in Japan that made him take up ceramics?

EdW: So you're quite right, he goes off to Japan as a very earnest young man with a Slade School education under his belt, and he goes to Japan and he starts there teaching etching and engraving and falls into contact with an extraordinary young group of intellectuals, well-off intellectuals called the Shirakabaha group, the white birch group, who are novelists and poets and translators, and they're all looking at Western art and Japanese traditional art and trying to work out – you used the word first – authenticity, what makes an authentic work of art. And so in this sort of melee of young, earnest people, Leach starts to experiment, he starts to make furniture, he starts to make Raku pots on this low fired Japanese technique where rather wonderfully you see the pot within an hour of its firing, it's plunged into a red-hot kiln and then it comes out and you have it in your hands, and he starts to bring together his life as a Western artist, Japanese understanding of pattern, and also critically – and this is something we'll talk about with Kai – he brings together storytelling into his graphic work and into his pots.

IB: You describe in the book this wonderful party, and I'm really inspired to try and do something like this at home, where the guests would be presented with blank pots that hadn't been fired and a paintbrush and a pot of glaze. So what was that tradition?

EdW: So that's the Raku tradition, and what that does of course, apart from it being a party which is always a good way of creating art, is something very interesting, because it's actually about an image of transformation happening before our eyes. And what that does, you have a cold pot and a couple of brushes and some glaze materials and then within an hour, within an hour you have a warm vessel of glowing with colour, vitality, vigour, which then you can use, you can then have a tea ceremony, you can fill it with sake and drink, you can do whatever you want. So it's this social activity of art that makes sense for this rather gawky Englishman, and that's what he gets, he gets this idea that pottery isn't just some rarefied thing going on elsewhere but is a way of connecting – as he puts it, endlessly – hand and heart and also storytelling.

IB: It also points to the fact that quite often he had other people make his vessels and that his part was often the more decorative or the graphic part of it which seems to me to connect back to that early training.

EdW: Well, it's very interesting because this is one of the reasons why my book is absolutely hated when it came out by various people, I actually had hate mail which is not something you expect, because actually I do point out very straightforwardly, Leach uses Japanese craftsmen, I mean, it's a completely accepted tradition, that's how many artists in Japan work. But that's not the story he told about himself, he talks about himself as someone who is the only begetter of his work, that he holds that line from making, decorating and firing intact. In fact, in practice he is like many artists now, someone who works with a team, with a studio, with other peoples' skills and pulls in, in conversation with them, all kinds of ways of manifesting his ideas. But we might come back to this...

IB: Yes.

EdW: ...authenticity is a vexed question.

IB: Yes. It seems to me that your very evocative description of that group and the characters within it, that in a way they were not unlike all the other avant-gardes that were popping up across Europe at that time, quite dogmatic, often dismissive of other traditions, keen to proselytise and also to regard themselves as the genius, the origin, originator of, in a way, the future. So do you think they were proto-modernists?

EdW: I think they are proto-modernists, and it's very interesting because actually when you look at the people they're thinking about, they're thinking about [John] Ruskin, they're thinking about Walt Whitman, they're thinking about [William] Blake, they're thinking about these great characters who talked to them about what it might be to be an authentic human being, and [Leo] Tolstoy as well. And when you look at people, for instance, in the omega group, you know, in London exactly the same time, often they're looking exactly the same people and reading those same texts and getting hyped about why these people talk to their idea about making art in a new and authentic way.

IB: He was also influenced by Chinese primarily and Korean ceramics, could you say something about that?

EdW: Yes, so he has a rather difficult couple of years in China where he experiences Chinese pots for the first time, and what he sees there is couple of things. One is he sees a culture which takes ceramic seriously, that's one of this great things about Leach, he

understands the centrality of ceramics to a culture and he sees that in China. Second thing he understands is that austerity, having a form and a glaze and a minimal kind of decoration on an object brings it into the realm of abstraction, it brings it into the realm of an abstract work of art, it's difficult to make it anything other than it is. It's in itself something which holds its own integrity. That's what he sees in Chinese pots, and he carries that back to England when he arrives in 1920.

IB: This year is the 100th anniversary of the Leach pottery in St Ives. How did he come to live and work in Cornwall?

EdW: Desperation. He had no money, he needs to make a studio, make his life as an artist, and a well-off benefactor offers him the chance to come to St Ives to Cornwall, where of course there is already this artistic community which has been going for 40 years in that seaside town. So St Ives is a sort of default place for him, doesn't really particularly know anything about it, and he arrives with a substantial cheque in his pocket from a benefactor in order to bring pottery to the English.

IB: You made the point that St Ives was not naturally suited to the making of pottery in terms of its natural resources.

EdW: Hopeless, Cornwall has got no woods for firing pots, it has got all kinds of minerals which if you're intrepid you can dig up and different kinds of clay if you can find it, but it's not Stoke-on-Trent, it's not in the middle of the country, it's got no communication links to speak of. And so curiously enough, what that does for Leach being all that way away from metropolitan, noisy art life, is to in many ways focus him on this sense of

contramundum, I'm against the world, that I am going to do this dramatic thing of becoming the first English artist potter away from everyone else, and if they want to see my work, they'll have to come and find me here, so it adds into Leach's sense of isolation.

IB: What was his attitude to the industrial potteries at Stoke-on-Trent?

EdW: It was complete hatred, I mean, it was a visceral dislike, when he writes about Stoke-on-Trent, about those perfectly produced, technically lambent works that get made in their tens of thousands, he sees them much as Morris saw the factories of late Victorian England, he sees them as work of the devil, he sees them as symbolically alienating the hand, the heart, and the object. The fact that to be honest he didn't really know very much about ceramics and that he could have actually done with quite a lot of Stoke's technical knowledge haunted him, but he hates it, he absolutely hates Stoke-on-Trent.

IB: Didn't he have the same problem that William Morris had in that both these artists aspired to bring beautiful design to ordinary homes, but that the labour intensive nature of the process, the unique quality of it made their products just too expensive for the average person?

EdW: This is at the heart of Leach's complicated relationship with money, and complicated relationship with function, because he has this deep desire for the ordinary working man as he rather patronisingly puts it, to use his mugs and his bowls and his jugs and to have them in everyday life. But his work is hugely expensive, it's hugely expensive to make, it goes wrong the whole time, his kilns are disastrous, the seconds, the pots that

come out of the kiln wrong or broken, it runs at 30-40 per cent throughout the 20s and 30s. And it's only right at the very end of the 30s and the beginning of the Second World War when there's a need for utilitarian pots during...the functional need for Britain to make its own pots. But actually his standard ware, this great catalogue of repeatable shapes, comes into existence, and that happens because suddenly he has his studio full of apprentices and assistants and conscientious objectors, Patrick Heron famously, one of them making pots in his studio, and at that moment, finally after 20 years of struggle, it's possible to buy his pots more cheaply.

IB: In discussing his legacy you've been quite critical of the hierarchies he made between artisans and art students. How did he differentiate between them?

EdW: Oh, I mean, it's basically how well-spoken you were, he was a crashing snob, I have to say, I mean, really terrible. He talked about – again this doesn't go down very well with the acolytes – but he talked about having local lads, you know, local Cornish lads who would mix the clay, fire the kilns, pack the pots, and start to make things. But he didn't see them as people who would necessarily be the people who would come in and train to be studio potters and decorate pots, so he holds his Edwardian sense of social structure very firmly in place. And I have to say it never sits very well when thinking about Leach, because his greatest pots almost entirely throughout the 40s and 50s are made by other people, beautifully thrown by other people and decorated gloriously by him, but there is no sense that he is able to say that out front.

IB: I suppose there is this idea about that the art education gives you a sort of critical distance or some extra

consciousness about the aesthetic, and I suppose as you said earlier, you could see that as a very traditional atelier kind of system where you have different skills and technicians and...

EdW: Absolutely, but the muddle, the muddle at the heart of this is a very pernicious one, because what it does is that he – and he's a great writer, he's a great, dynamic, lyrical, persuasive writer, *A Potter's Book* is a book from the 1940s still in print, it's an extraordinary, it's called the bible for potters. But in it he talks about the unknown craftsman, about how we should honour and respect those artefacts that are made over the millennia by people who make work through repetition, who make work for use and to have at the hearts of our lives, everyone's lives. But by calling them the unknown craftsman, he sort of valorises them, but he also really says, they don't need names, they don't need names. We can see – we, educated people, can see how beautiful...they couldn't see what they were making, it's us, the educated, aesthetically minded who can understand the beauty of the everyday. And that's a muddily and complicated inheritance.

IB: What was his impact on 20th century pottery and crafts?

EdW: Enormous, profound, in a couple of ways, firstly what he shows in his life is that it's possible to make a living as what he called an artist craftsman, very gendered, artist crafts-man. So what you see with Leach is someone successfully making a public life as someone who makes objects, having exhibitions, talking about them, making a space for the crafts within British culture. So that's one thing. But the second thing I think is very interesting, he brings the anxiety about the status of crafts into play, because actually the pots he

valued himself that he made are the big exhibition named jars, you've got some in your exhibition – the pots that look like they belong in art galleries. And so even though there's a sort of tidal swell of him talking about pots for use and vessels at the heart of our life, actually his practice is saying the pots I love, the pots you should value, are these.

IB: It strikes me though that – and again, you make this point, that if you think about the legacy of St Ives and mid-century British modernism, we can see how his forms also relate to perhaps the work of people like Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore, that there is the stoniness of the stoneware. You really do get that feeling of these robust, chunky forms which are really quite sculptural and a minimal decorative...just a few brushstrokes, something which is very condensed, almost like haikus on each pot. And I'm always struck by the heft of them, they're very different from the sort of very superfine porcelain tea sets, for example, that would have been typical of the more industrial kind of production. Is the mug one of his legacies would you say?

EdW: The brown mug, very interesting, yes. So just on that, I absolutely agree, you look at early [Henry] Moore, you look at [Barbara] Hepworth and Leach and you see a truth to materials, a working with your hands, and also a valorising of local materials. This is Hornton stone, this is a beech tree that came down in the field by the studio, this is clay from x, y or z, so there's that sense of grounding yourself in a landscape which I think is absolutely of that moment, and it's also there with [Peter] Lanyon and many of the other St Ives people as well. But the mug, the legacy of the mug, the brown mug, because actually so many of those mugs are glazed of course with oriental glazes, that particular

brown is a Chinese glaze called Tenmoku, it's a beautiful brown breaking to rust glaze which was used on imperial tea bowls, but there it is, it turns up in the life of St Ives, and yes, every single village in the 60s has someone working down a lane making brown mugs, and why not, because actually that's a good legacy to have.

IB: Edmund, your book has never gone out of print, can you say why Leach is important today?

EdW: Oh, I can, Leach is important today because objects matter, because the place of objects in our life is consistently, complicatedly at the heart of who we are as human beings. How we make things, what we make, how we value them, how we pick them up or don't pick them up, how we put them in vitrines or have them in our kitchen cabinets or on our tables, how we serve food, all these are questions about who we are as social human beings. And Leach with all his muddle, all his different complexities and dated views of the world, damn it, he actually tried to live out a life trying out making pots and bringing them into peoples' lives, so he will always remain significant. And I have to say that this exhibition is the biggest exhibition of Leach's work that there's been for 20 years in London, it's an extraordinary, extraordinary thing to have this for four glorious months in our London life.

IB: It's really striking also that despite the fact that almost every art school in Britain closed down their ceramic studios, what I've noticed over the last decade is a huge surge of interest among artists in making ceramics. And I wonder, do you think that might be almost a reaction against the digital?

EdW: There's an absolute need to connect with a haptic, with our hands, with how we understand the world through touch, and clay in any form is exhaustible. It's one of those materials that rather beautifully as [Lucio] Fontana said, when it moves, you move, you move, it moves. And so actually to be present in the world with clay, which is what so many people, artists, I mean, you can't walk down a high street now without finding peoples' pop-up studios and people desperate to make pots, to make sculpture, to have their hands in clay. And while as you point out, all the art schools disastrously and shamefully abandon their ceramics courses, people are making pots, people are using clay because they need to touch material and to connect with what it is to be a human being.

IB: Well, I think that message is something that couldn't be more pertinent to this very strange pandemic moment, the idea of making as reconnecting not only with oneself but with our humanness and with society is something that everybody I feel really has a hunger for right now. Thank you so much, Edmund, for sharing your great knowledge of a great artist. Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach is on at the Whitechapel Gallery until 10 January and you can book your free entry online. Thank you.

EdW: So much.

JS: Thank you for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Kai Althoff goes with Bernard Leach, from 7 October 2020 until 10 January 2021. Goodbye for now.

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