

Fired by Clay

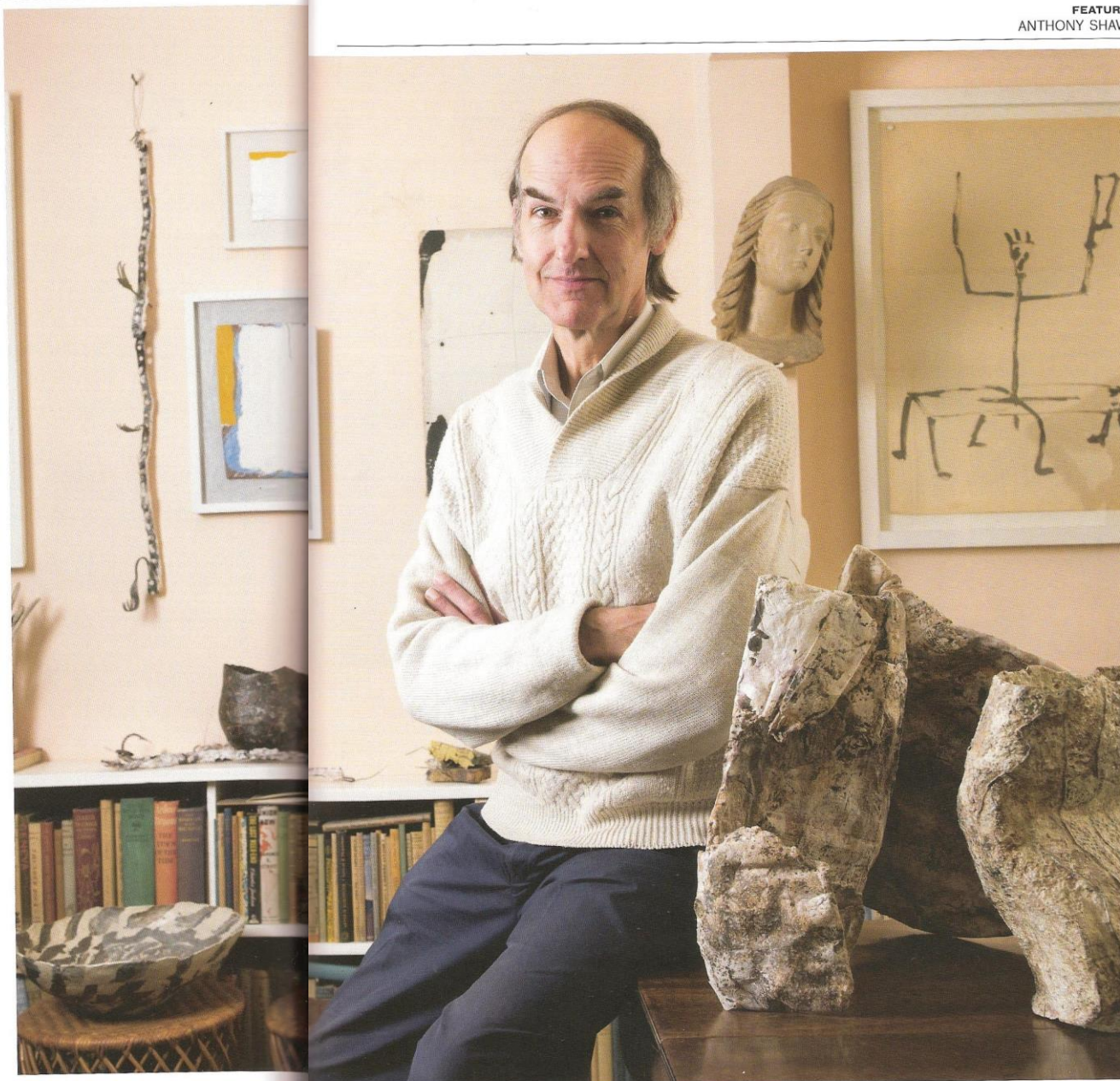
Anthony Shaw's collection of modern British studio ceramics, open to the public since 2004, is among the finest in the world. He talks to Apollo about the inequality in status between fine art and ceramics and his decision to give his collection to York Museum on long-term loan

WRITER RUTH GUILDING
PORTRAIT DEAN BELCHER

Anthony Shaw is talking about his childhood in the small terraced London house where he grew up. 'Things were bought and put away,' he says. Two wooden sculptures jostle for space in the tiny back garden behind him. Every surface in the basement and entrance floors displays pieces from his collection of modern British studio ceramics, which he has opened to the public since 2004, and more are marching up the stairs to the half landing (Fig. 8). But they represent only a small portion of the collection and there is a palpable sense of more unseen rooms on the floors above, pregnant with boxed, wrapped and stacked items. Later he uses the same phrase when talking of his parents: 'I was put away to school in Hampshire.' It was their small disbursements during his teenage years

that enabled him to make his first purchases.

In just over 30 years Anthony Shaw has acquired 600 pieces by 50 artists. The bulk of them are by the innovative, radical artists to whom he refers as his 'top five' – Gordon Baldwin, Ewen Henderson, Gillian Lowndes, Sara Radstone and Bryan Illsley (Figs. 4–7) – all of whom have also become his friends. 'I wasn't building a collection really until I met Ewen and Gordon,' he explains. Although most of the pieces in his collection are made of fired ceramic, none is functional. To Shaw they represent a logical development from British Modernism, the abstract art movement for which St Ives was the crucible in the 1950s. 'They were 10 years behind but they came out of the modern Brits. These were artists who were using clay as another medium.' The enigmatic potter Hans Coper



1 Anthony Shaw photographed in Billing Place, London, among his collection of modern British studio ceramics and paintings. Behind him are four paintings by Bryan Illsley and in the foreground is *Zig Zag (Butterfly)* by Ewan Henderson and *Shoulder Form with Lines* by Sara Radston
Photo: Dean Belcher



2 had already referred to the occasional 'absurdity' of practising a craft with 'ambiguous reference to purpose and function'. But for Shaw, 'These were things I felt were very formidable and they were my form of art. I couldn't afford Nicholson and Hepworth.' Nor did he want them. 'Now everything is about how things look' he continues. 'Most of this work is made in the making.'

Shaw continues to feel frustrated by this perceived inequality of status. 'I don't understand why the galleries don't see the art,' he says. 'I don't understand it, art is art.' Nor is he made happier by the rising value of his collection. Later he will tell me, without any apparent satisfaction, that a bowl by Gordon Baldwin, 'a very controlled black bowl, an interior designer's piece', was auctioned recently in New York for \$25,000. 'Gordon was always expensive,' he acknowledges, but sold his work to Shaw at half price in gratitude for his early support. 'That made it possible, getting work directly from the artist. The first



piece I got of his would have retailed at about £50 in 1977.' The field of competition was comparatively small, although he bought one otherwise unaffordable Gordon Baldwin pot jointly with the collector Liliana Epstein, receiving it when she died in 1998. He then found himself buying more with a bank loan when Epstein's collection was immediately sold at Christie's by her two daughters ('She would have hated it!' he cries).

Most of the makers whose work he prized survived by teaching. Ewen Henderson at Camberwell College of Art, Gordon Baldwin at Eton College. 'In their day you could live on nothing and no one had debts. But after a brief heyday when, 'exhibitions were very busy, there were queues and often you could only buy one or two pieces', the market collapsed. 'I would go to exhibitions and the work didn't sell. Austin Desmond had a show of Ewen's, they sold only one piece, to a friend of his, so they never did it again.'

The fact that his private collection will shortly join a public one is an indicator of how



2 A display of three ceramics from the current exhibition, 'Final Selection at Billing Place' (until 28 February). From left to right is *White Vessel with Signs* by Gordon Baldwin, *Millenium Cup Collage* by Gillian Lowndes (front) and *Upright Wrap* by Ewan Henderson
Photo: Phil Sayer

3 A selection of Anthony Shaw's ceramics. On the mantelpiece is *Double Vessel 2* by Gordon Baldwin and above is Nancy Baldwin's painting *Seascape*. Positioned on the floor are works (from left to right) by Bryan Illsley, Ewan Henderson, Gordon Baldwin and Sara Radsgane
Photo: Phil Sayer

4 *Vessel Round a Square*, 2007
Gordon Baldwin (b. 1932)
Earthenware, ht 65cm
Photo: Michael Harvey

5 Dish, 1977
Ewen Henderson (1934-2000)
Stoneware and porcelain, 8.5x37.5cm
Photo: Michael Harvey



5 times have changed again. Shaw's first idea was to find 'a little stately home' where the collection could be shown, but at the end of last year he and his trustees decided to give it to York Museum on long-term loan. 'London has too much, I want to get things out of London,' he continues. 'York is gradually coming up to date, they're going to make themselves the national centre for studio ceramics.' Now his childhood home in Billing Place will be sold to provide a support fund for this gift and allow him to recoup some expenses. A deal has been brokered to recreate their current domestic setting there, using the same wall colourings, furniture and curtains. 'Of course, after I'm gone that may change,' he says slightly wistfully. York Museum already holds the studio pottery and paintings belonging to the Very Reverend Dr Eric Milner-White (d. 1963), a former dean of York, better known as the founder of the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols broadcast by the BBC from King's College Chapel each Christmas Eve. To this they have added Bill

Ismay's collection of 3,500 pieces made between about 1950 and 2000, and the residue of Henry Rothschild's collection, 'So with mine, they will have the 20th century very well covered,' he explains.

So where do Peter Lanyon and Keith Vaughan (for he has work by both) come into your scheme of things, I ask? 'They were the beginnings of what I was looking for, they were saying what I was looking for,' he replies. 'Paintings are very important to the collection because, in a sense, they're all paintings. It continually irks me when people come to see ceramics or to see pots and don't look at the walls.' He defines his studio ceramics as 'paintings in another form'. 'This work is made in the making, whereas most of the work nowadays seems to be made before it's made, it's designed, the artist has an idea exactly how they're going to make something, how it will be finished, what colour it's going to be. I don't like things that are terribly finished, so-called perfection, that's an ending for me and once you end something it becomes pointless.'

Shaw is nostalgic for the brief experimental period when clay became a general medium. 'Gillian [Lowndes] started as a sculptor at Central St Martins and then found that very limited, because they were all carving copies of things, there were so many more exciting things happening in clay.' He is a connoisseur of the accidental quality of the work, the transmutations that can occur with firing and the fact that it can frequently be blown up in the kiln. 'With Ewen [Henderson], because he was working against everything, he was mixing his materials and overloading the clays with oxides to give these effects. Whereas Gordon [Baldwin] was like a painter with a canvas, he got a flat surface and then he would paint and repaint, and he would refire and refire... Gillian's [Lowndes] work has a different physical quality, it's very much about the materials.' Control is an anathema to him. 'I hadn't twigged that John Ward is such a control freak,' he explains. 'I commissioned a flat bowl which I wanted to be almost collapsing, and of course he made me a very stiff, upright, controlled bowl. Then it dawned on me: 'I wonder whether he particularly enjoys these 'uncontrolled' pieces as an antidote to the couture clothes which he makes for a few private clients, having begun by sewing a friend's wedding dress at the age of 18, and briefly considered working for Valentino. 'Yes, and this is the reason, it's too easy to be able to make something and finish it. It's very satisfying, I enjoy the physical making, it's almost all handmade.' The collection has driven his life along for four decades. Now he wants to get away from 'that easy satisfaction' and try his own hand at ceramics, 'to make things work like Bryan [Illsley] does and yet tie an essential down'.

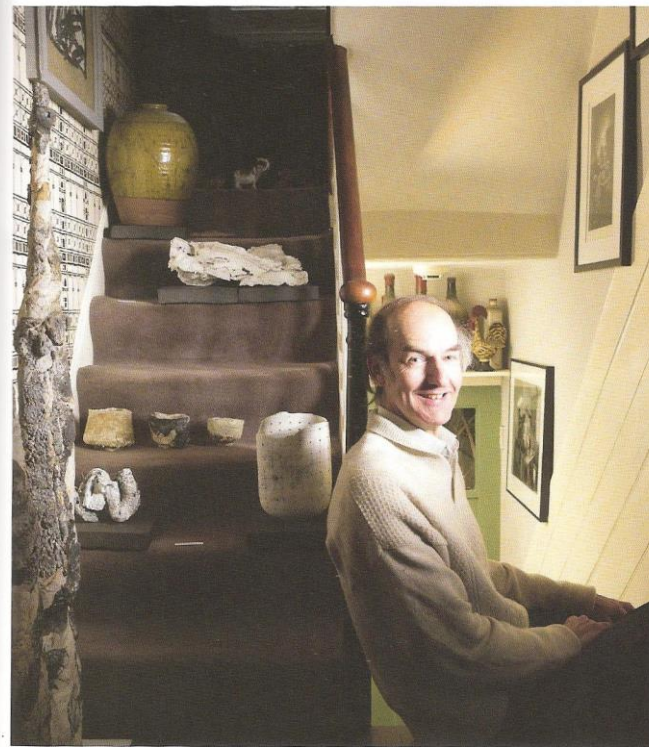
Shaw's was a loving and settled childhood. 'I was looking at very beautiful things. The taste was mostly my mother's.' He was an only child, and she opened the world of aesthetics and taste to him. 'Initially it was pots, it was glazes, quality of form. We had functional things by Winchcomb Pottery, Ray Finch, and there was a [Michael] Cardew.' In the mid-50s Shaw's mother started buying

from Primavera, Henry Rothschild's gallery on Sloane Street, which she passed on her way to work each day, and he became a family friend. Her job with the British Overseas Airways Corporation enabled them to travel all over the world. Museums and churches were their destinations, and Shaw was amazed by some of the collections housed within them. Their house, with its vivid canary yellow front door, dark chocolate basement dining room and chaste antique wooden furniture, was mostly his mother's style, 'the simpler the better'. 'One time my father [an architect and town planner] brought some things back from Nigeria but I was shocked, they weren't right you know.' Did his parents show off what they had, I wonder? 'No, there was very little on show, one or two paintings and the books. It all had to be kept quiet. We never spent money like that. Funds were limited always, I was brought up to be careful. I was the weird one who started spending money. My father used to say, you've still got that money haven't you, and I would say yes, so it was a little bit surreptitious.'

I had thought that Anthony Shaw might have approved of the Victoria and Albert Museum's new ceramics galleries, but he considers them to be an absolute disaster. 'It's all storage,' he explains, 'there's no dialogue between pieces.' For him, interest lies in what each piece 'has got to say for itself'. Perhaps even a Wedgwood teacup mass-produced at the Etruria Works has its own voice, but Shaw's pieces are all highly individual, reflecting his intensely personal choices, and the exhibitions which he has staged at Billing Place are posited on this. 'Final Selection at Billing Place' shows small groups of work chosen, and in some cases arranged, by 30 invited 'guest curators'. But to me the result still looks as though it has been mediated by Shaw, and he admits to tinkering with at least one of these arrangements because it was a bit 'blocked'. However, he says it is more exciting for him when other people introduce one piece to another. 'John Christian, he put that Lucy Rie with a Ewen tea bowl, and immediately you could see where Ewen had



'I don't like things that are terribly finished, so-called perfection'



got some of the sense of surfaces and colour from Lucy – I wouldn't think Ewen was conscious of it.' In fact, it is a very homogeneous collection, as he begins to recognise. When I remark on the serenity of the colours, shapes and glazes that he has brought together, I am surprised to learn that Shaw is colour blind. 'I love subtle colour but I'm not keen on shiny glaze,' he says. 'I don't want it shovelled on, I want mystery, abstraction, other possibilities, that's why I'm not going for a very decorative coloured finish.'

More than once Anthony has commented on how little he has seen these works in the intervening years since they were bought and put in storage. 'It never occurs to me, where I'm going to put something when I buy it,' he admits. 'As a grown up I've lived in and out of this house but it wasn't my space. I've only had work out like this since I opened up, it's always been in my mind.' Perhaps it is the mixture of outgrown attachment to his childhood house, combined with Shaw's slightly

dispassionate remove, that has allowed it to assume such an exceptional identity as a private museum. But despite this, it has failed to become well known. Since opening Billing Place in 2004, he has drawn the cognoscenti and many foreign visitors but disappointingly few from London. Students from Bristol have visited, some of whom came under their own volition, and three groups from Camberwell School of Art. 'I wish there had been more,' he says. 'In the end I almost get the feeling that tutors were reluctant to come, because the students might then be trying to do more adventurous things, and just create more problems for them.'

Later we drink coffee from cups made by Harry and May Davies; as Shaw points out, the quality is sensational. They bring us back to the discourse on utility, the divide between those ceramics and the ones that he has collected. 'Well, there are other uses for them,' he counters. 'I ask questions, they suggest things. They remind me of occasions, they remind me of feelings.' Rather like Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, I wonder? 'A little bit

- 6 *Tomato Root Number 2*, 1991
Gillian Lowndes (1936–2010)
Mixed media, length 40cm
Photo: Michael Harvey
- 7 *Sea Spray*, 1980
James Tower (1918–88)
Tin-glazed earthenware, ht 57cm
Photo: Michael Harvey
- 8 Anthony Shaw seated on the staircase at Billing Place, London. Behind him is a selection of ceramics placed on the staircase
Photo: Dean Belcher

like that. I talk to them, I have this feedback, I'm very challenging with the work when I first see it, and if it doesn't talk back then I'm not interested.'

'I noticed that I wouldn't fully know whether I'd made a mistake or not until I brought the thing home, to the family, to the group,' he goes on. Is it like your family, I ask? 'It is! I didn't have relationships or family, these have become the family,' he says unselfconsciously. 'So there was a sense of finding things that would fit, but also of trying to get things that wouldn't. That's a trial,' he points to Kerry Jameson's piece, *Chair*, a seated totem, warder-off of evil, 'and it worked!' Conducting me around the upstairs front room, he reiterates, 'As soon as I saw Gillian's *Industrial Mug* I realised it was going to be part of the family. I think they're priceless, I've realised how important it is as a group. I'm in the lucky position of having no one else to inherit. I find someone like Alistair McAlpine, who sold everything in 1980, sad.'

But for his taste the current multi-curated show is far too crowded. 'They know the space is limited, they shrink and pull themselves in,' he confides. 'They're made by hand and they have a very physical presence. People have noticed that they've seen these works elsewhere, and they say that they've changed since they've been here. On their own they are majestic, they expand.' As they go on show before a much greater audience, his pieces – sculpture, studio ceramics, works of art, call them what you will – may expand yet further, but he hasn't puffed up with pride of ownership. Conversely, as the collection has become more public he has contrived to retire behind it. 'It's not a natural thing, trying to blow one's own trumpet,' he says. 'It's all about the work.' **A**

Ruth Gilding is an art historian and freelance curator.

'Final Selection at Billing Place' runs until 28 February 2011. For further information, go to www.anthonysawcollection.org