

TWO REVIEWS: BOTTOMLEY ON BOTTOMLEY

Review One

Bottomley's work shows little immediate evidence of cohesion. There seems to be no unity of style or approach. He doesn't appear to be able to make up his mind if he is a craftsman, a sculptor, a writer, a musician or a two-dimensional visual artist. Perhaps it is better that he remain thus undecided, for if he were to specialise in any of these he would be doomed to discover the extent of his inadequacies.

Take his sculptures, for instance: Most of them are ultimately derivative. Some show the unmistakable influence of Hepworth and Moore, and of Bottomley's one-time teacher, Tom Bass. Almost all show the mark of the enthusiastic amateur, and quite a few appear to lack diligence in their final finish. There are a few original pieces, but they either work merely as visual puns or use crudely obvious, even clichéd symbolic devices.

The same lack of attention to finish is particularly apparent in his wood turnings. Occasionally this contributes positively, resulting in a pleasant surface texture but more often than not one is left with the feeling that the maker couldn't quite be bothered towards the end. And Bottomley would do well to consider going "beyond the bowl" if he is going to avoid being boring.

As for his music, the biggest initial impression is again one of slipshodness, especially at the final, mix-down stage of recording. Given the recording technology available today one would expect him to be able to do better than he has in this regard, even if he is doing the recording in the bush on solar-powered equipment.

Coming to the actual music itself, again we have that odd mixture of material - of styles, idioms and references - that characterises his other creative efforts. He is certainly no classical musician, as his occasional excursions into notated music confirm. The greater part of his musical output has a slight coherence in that it is nearly always improvised, but again, the improvising ranges over an absurdly wide range of styles - none of which he has mastered. And one can't escape the suspicion that perhaps he leans heavily on an improvisational approach because then he doesn't have to be bothered to go to the trouble to Get It Right. Which fits with his already-remarked lack of attention to detail in other fields that he blunders around in. Furthermore, improvising is a chancy business anyway, and to succeed it calls for reserves of musicianship that Bottomley wasn't issued with. It is probably enjoyable for Bottomley himself to sit in his trendy mud solar house and experiment in this way, but he should think twice before recording his efforts and inflicting them on the ears of others - who are probably not all that interested anyway.

His writing needs a good editor. He is much too wordy. He seems unable to use a simple word if there is a polysyllabic one he can think of. Further, his sentence constructions are frequently ungainly, and he hasn't been able to completely expunge the sociological jargon that infected his prose during his time as an academic - despite the passage of many years. And, predictably, he is stylistically all over the place.

Bottomley's two-dimensional output has been left till last. It is the most contentious of all. Some of it is so bad that one wonders why he perseveres. Admittedly there is a tiny percentage that shows a faint promise, but it is as if viewed through wine bottle glass darkly - nuances are absent, and the whole project of artmaking seems to be improperly understood. The fact that he spent 12 years in the advertising world might explain why so much of his work looks like artwork commissioned by a second-rate advertising agency for a low-budget client. It is said that putting a frame around a work enhances it. Perhaps that is why Bottomley chooses to frame some of his

output - god knows it needs the enhancement. But of course it doesn't succeed. His work betrays an obvious lack of any elementary formal instruction, and he himself clearly lacks an eye sufficiently critical of his own work.

So what are we to make of the body of work that is the result of Bottomley's presumptuous forays into all these fields for which he is so spectacularly ill-equipped? Does this bewildering splatter of undisciplined output have any redeeming features, or is it nothing more than the detritus of a deluded dilettante?

Well, I suppose it could be argued that doing what he does keeps him out of mischief, by and large. And if he weren't doing that he'd probably spend even more time than he does now whingeing about just about everything and getting on everybody's wick who is unfortunate enough to have to endure his company. As far as the merit of his work goes, the fact that some people actually pay money for some pieces has to be ranged against the fact that you can sell anything, eventually. You only have to look at McDonalds.

But the most troubling aspect of all this is how embarrassing and difficult it is for friends and onlookers to see his illusions about his competence obliterate all awareness in him of the extent of his own mediocrity. Like an Alzheimer's victim he doesn't know that's what he's like. In this he is not alone, of course.

Review Two

Bottomley is a generalist. He views specialism as akin to digging one narrow hole very deep, and the further down you go the less you are able to communicate with others. He would rather dig a whole lot of shallower holes all over the place, and not lose sight of the overall picture. This is evident from his creative output, which extends over a wide range. Not content to stop at painting, graphics and woodworking, he also considers music and writing to be legitimate fields for his explorations.

Of course his competence in any of these areas does not bear comparison with that of a person who has devoted their efforts to any one of them in a specialised way - he is certainly no da Vinci. But as a generalist, he attains a reasonable standard of technical proficiency, given the profusion of techniques and materials that he explores.

This can be seen in his woodturnings. Like most hobby turners; his major focus is on the bowl, and while many of his bowls look similar to the sort of thing most other wood turners do, a few of them have a feeling of rustic straightforwardness; others have a textured patina that sets the best of them slightly apart. Bottomley believes that turned bowls should reflect the gutsy nature of wood, so many of his bowls have thick walls and often a chunky, heavy feel to them. He is also dismissive of the orthodox practice of striving for walls of even thickness, holding that as long as the inner and outer surfaces work together sculpturally the wall need not be of uniform thickness - that a thickening towards the base can aid stability and need not be seen as a sign of tyro workmanship. Inspected carefully, the degree of finish on his bowls can appear somewhat careless. Fine scratch marks are visible in the right light, and sometimes blemishes and imperfections have been left that most woodworkers would remove. But Bottomley feels that most of his pieces are not sufficiently good to warrant the time, effort, and energy resources that would be required to take them to a blemishless finish - and that "bringing out the natural beauty of the wood" is not the only way to go, especially so since the wood being used is usually found or recycled, and not always endowed with much in the way of natural beauty (and most of the figure in the grain will fade with time anyway). Consequently he has experimented with scorched,

abraded and other sorts of textured finishes which he hopes will give some of his work a different feel to the more commonplace output of what he calls "the retired bank manager-turned-hobby-woodturner set". It is certainly some sort of relief to be spared the gloss polyurethane finish so beloved by hobby turners. He is not a virtuoso woodturner by any means, and the Woods' and Raffans need never fear him as serious competition, but he does nonetheless turn out vessels that are sometimes quite pleasing objects in their own right. Bottomley's own assessment of the value of his work is reflected in the prices he puts on the pieces, which are in the main quite low compared to some of the inflated prices to be found in galleries. He believes that you shouldn't have to be rich to be able to enjoy a handmade object, and that his work is affordable and unpretentious - if you happen to like it.

A recurrent theme in his sculptural pieces is the stack. The placing one atop the other of all manner of things and materials is evident in most of his work in this category, while another recurrent shape is the part-coil, usually enclosing something so that it alludes to a protective seed pod or a sheltering hand. (This motif crops up in his two-dimensional work as well). Both the sculptural and the turned pieces derive from recycled materials, found objects and other gleanings from the detritus of modern society. This approach to basic materials has become rather trendy in recent years, but Bottomley has always taken this approach - initially for reasons of parsimony, but more recently for environmental reasons as well. He carries this through to his pictorial and graphic work too, using recycled and scrounged paper, hardboard, old masonite etc for his grounds, and only buying the minimum of materials new. He says it gives him greater satisfaction to work within these stringent environmental constraints. Of course it is also one of the reasons that so much of his output looks like it could be a careless "second" - the other main reason being a personality quirk where, once he's seen how what he's making is going to turn out, he finds it difficult to take it to what he calls "a gallery finish". He seems to have an ingrained prejudice against the gallery part of The Art Business, and is always at great pains to dissociate himself from it. But one can't help suspecting that these are little more than excuses for the fact that he is simply not capable of the painstaking and meticulous attention to detail that is required if one is to be in the first rank. (Not that he has any pretensions of being in the first rank, it must be said).

Within his output in two-dimensions, the graphics succeed more often than do his ventures into acrylics, water colours or washes. Some of his pensketches show promise, but like too much of his work they tend to be a bit tight and self-conscious. Some of the linocuts and monoprints are quite attractive; but there is a feeling about them that they were something in the way of flukes - the lucky survivors from a whole lot of other less adroit attempts that have been jettisoned. Most of his paintings and drawings are not much more than decorative, and while there is a political bite to some of his work this is sometimes subtle.

Bottomley's musical ability is far enough down the track to be acceptable to non-musicians; but as he himself is only too well aware, he is only on the lower rungs of the ladder of musicianship. Despite this, on rare occasions he manages to catch on tape some worthwhile improvisational material that works quite well for a time. On rhythmic pieces, too often his sense of easy swinging begins to flag, and he tends to fall prey to the dreaded harmonic cliché more than is comfortable. You could put his tapes on quietly in the background at a social occasion and people would probably not notice anything awry, but if making music were all that he wanted to do in life, then Bottomley would be well-advised to go looking for a reliable day job.

His writing is undistinguished. It is literate but not articulate. It is a far cry from being a paragon of lucid simplicity. This shortcoming is magnified in some instances by the fact that Bottomley has an unhelpful predilection for 100hp ideas while unhappily only possessing a 60hp mind. It is the same with writing as it is with his excursions into other fields: he can hardly expect to be as good as those who have concentrated their efforts in only one or two areas if he is determined to spread himself so thinly.

So what does this all add up to? It adds up to someone who undoubtedly has a creative bent, but not in any disciplined or rigorous way. He'll never achieve excellence, because he is unable to resist distraction and the temptation to experiment. This is not to say that what he does turn out is worthless, or that he is necessarily as far up himself as he sometimes fears he might be. His output is undeniably unique - not a lot of people operate across such a wide range of activities, and despite the disparate nature of the works there is a kind of unity in their diversity nonetheless. This shows itself as a contempt for fashion in the arts and crafts, a deep distrust of the art establishment in all its manifestations, an almost reflex iconoclasm, a commitment to environmental considerations, and a too-often uncompromising and therefore abrasive insistence on stripping away social falsehoods to expose reality. And underpinning all this is a keen awareness of his lack of formal training in the visual arts and crafts field which too frequently undermines his self-confidence (no matter how much he might remind himself of the self-taught genuine success stories).

Perhaps all this is best summed up in his own description of himself as "Mr Sixty Percent" (which was his class average in high school). But given that generalism is hardly in vogue in these days of specialism (though the increasing appreciation of the ecological need for diversity might bring to generalism a reversal of fortune in the future), in order to evaluate the merit of Bottomley's *oeuvre* what is needed is some idea of how many percent represents an acceptable level - which of course we don't have. Probably it boils down to the fact that some people like some parts of his work, others like other parts, and still others like none of it, and he himself feels ambivalent about most of it most of the time.

Bottomley's comments:

What shits me is that these two "reviews" are merely another expression of my insecurity. Otherwise, why would I have written them, if not for reasons of self justification? And what does all that matter, in the end?

There's a paradox here, in that I genuinely have no desire to be a "name" in the Creative Biz. I don't particularly want to be "known" - in fact I really don't think I'd like that at all. And I certainly want to stay clear of the Art Merchants and their galleries and their hype and their exploitation. (This aloof attitude wouldn't be an option if I had to make money out of my products, but since I don't have to - so far - I'm happy to enjoy my aloofness as one of the rare luxuries that come with voluntary penury.)

Yet nonetheless, somewhere deep down in me is the need for some sort of accreditation - some reassurance that there is a qualitative difference between most of the stuff that I do and the sort of stuff that is done by an enthusiastic but deluded amateur. I know some of my stuff is no more than that, but I'd like to think that some of it is also better than that. But how do you measure "better"? There are no agreed yardsticks, just as there are no accrediting bodies whose endorsement would mean anything to me. After all, what credible institution would be likely to introduce some sort of status award for achievements in the pursuit of generalism? I can see it now: W.J. Bottomley, A.C.E. (Award for Creative Eclecticism).

I'm sure my work would improve if I could somehow get beyond these corrosive self doubts, but perhaps I'd be impossibly up myself without them. Maybe I *am* up myself anyway - especially to those who don't like me. C'est la vie, Archie.
