

These Mad Hybrids: John Hoyland and Contemporary Sculpture

Feb 3 — May 12, 2024 | Royal West of England Academy, Bristol, UK

In 1994, Hoyland – a prominent British abstract painter - made an unruly group of twenty-five ceramic sculptures. Loaded with colour, humour and zoomorphic qualities, he called them *‘these mad little hybrids’*, referring to their unexpectedness and the difficulty of fitting them into conventional categories. Remarkably, they have never been publicly displayed since being made.

Hoyland’s ceramics now appear remarkably contemporary and completely in sync with a broad range of current sculpture. To emphasise this, the exhibition brings eleven of Hoyland’s ceramics together with sculpture by Caroline Achaintre (b.1969), Eric Bainbridge (b.1955), Phyllida Barlow (1944-2023), Olivia Bax (b.1988), Hew Locke (b.1959), Anna Reading (b.1987), Jessi Reaves (b.1986), Andrew Sabin (b.1958), John Summers (b.1974) and Chiffon Thomas (b.1991).

Individually, these artists work with hugely diverse materials, ranging from cement to synthetic fabric, papier maché to glitter. By turn playful, complex and challenging, their work combines human and animal forms, furniture, everyday objects and architecture into new and hard-to-categorise sculptural hybrids.

Consequently, *These Mad Hybrids* seeks to shine a light on the importance of sculptural ideas to Hoyland’s abstract paintings, for which he is renowned. Alongside paintings - dating from the 1960s to 2000s - are small sketchbooks, which are full of casual, bold and intimate drawings in highlighter pen, and the first display of Hoyland’s polaroid photographs – which were an important tool in his practice as they enabled him to move his imagery between two and three dimensions.

Known for his contributions to the Colour Field painting movement and characteristic bold, vibrant use of colour, Hoyland’s work was also recognised for its emphasis on geometric forms and abstraction. He was also influenced by American Abstract Expressionism and his work often featured large canvases filled with richly layered, intensely coloured shapes and forms. During the 1960s, his dynamic style drew a number of comparisons, not least with the likes of not least with the likes of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Barnett Newman (1905-1970) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970).

Hoyland made the series of ceramic sculptures in conjunction with David Harrison, a student at the Royal College of Art, where Hoyland was working at the time. He explained: *“I had not touched three-dimensional ceramics since I was seven years old until I began this group of work at the Royal Academy of Art. After my initial optimism at the ‘idea’ of the project I began to realise that it was harder than it looked, but guided and encouraged by David Harrison we produced this group of work.”*

He added: *“What I really enjoyed was the freedom to ‘try anything’, the unexpected results with some of the colour, and also to indulge in the possibility of introducing irony and even humour to these mad little hybrids.”*

Strangely, the ceramics produced went unnoticed, despite being prominently displayed in his studio on custom-built shelves. Now, for the first time since they were made 30 years ago, they will be displayed in public and form the centrepiece of this fascinating exhibition.

It was not until 2020 that sculptor Olivia Bax, the exhibition's lead curator, first encountered them. Bax was invited to see the ceramics by Sam Cornish and Wiz Patterson Kelly of The John Hoyland Estate who saw a relationship between her sculptures and Hoyland's ceramics. Bax could not understand "*why nobody had shown them off*", and set out to do just that, beginning a conversation with Cornish and Patterson Kelly that ultimately resulted in their co-curation of this original and unexpected exhibition.

Exhibiting sculptor, Andrew Sabin, has explored Hoyland's ceramics in-depth by remaking the same forms in his studio, enjoying their experimental character and "*quick, unfussy, vigour*", while John Summers, whose work is often covered with gold, glitter and other gaudy surfaces, has likened Hoyland's glazes to, "*energetic sketches, unable to sit on the clay*". The exhibition will be California-based artist, Chiffon Thomas' first exhibition in Europe.

Olivia Bax, sculptor and the exhibition's lead curator says: "*The first time I saw Hoyland's ceramics, I wondered how they had managed to stay under the radar, particularly considering the interest in clay as a material over the last decade. Despite being 30 years old, they looked as if they had just been made. This started a conversation about what made them contemporary and I am delighted that we can now see them, for the first time, in dialogue with other sculptors championing colourful, odd, immediate and funny sculptural hybrids.*"

Beverley Heath Hoyland, widow of John Hoyland, says: "*John made many wonderful paintings, but always wanted his works in other materials to be better known, especially these ceramics sculptures. I've been lucky to live with them for many years and am delighted that more people will get a chance to enjoy them.*"

Kathryn Johnson, Curator & Head of Exhibitions, RWA, says: "*As a gallery with working artists at its heart and a busy art studio onsite, the RWA is thrilled to stage this exhibition, which demonstrates just how important and joyful it is for artists and amateurs alike to experiment freely - even after decades of practice. May it inspire many more 'mad little hybrids'!*"