



Becoming Established

Alex McErlain discusses his one-time student James Hake's path to becoming an established potter.

After ten years making and selling pots James Hake can justifiably consider himself to be well established. He has a reputation for producing high-quality reduction fired stoneware with an emphasis on glaze qualities. Two years ago he bought a house with outbuildings in Over Kellet, near Carnforth, Lancashire, and converted them into the rather beautiful home and studio that he occupies today. The new studio represents much more than just the journey to becoming established; it is also somewhat of a liberation. At last he is in a situation in which he can capitalise on all his hard work. He has established the main criteria for his style of making and he is at that stage of fluency where he has the liberty to exploit with freedom the abilities he has so carefully nurtured.

The first decade of a potter's career is a formative time; it is the decade of becoming established. Perhaps the most important element for making really good pots is to develop the best circumstances from which they may emerge. The 'circumstances' in this instance are the studio, materials, and equipment; they are also the skill, motivation, and confidence of the potter. The journey to achieving this kind of circumstance is often long and fraught with difficulties. Any potter will tell you that it takes time to become established and that what is meant by 'becoming established' is complex. It involves, among many other things, exploring what to make; the technical decisions about body, glaze, and firing; establishing where best to sell the pots; and, perhaps most importantly, establishing a reputation for producing quality work.

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FORMATIVE YEARS James Hake was one of my students at Manchester Metropolitan University at the turn of this century. He was a gifted student and demonstrated great determination to acquire difficult skills. On graduation, he joined the Crafts Council of Ireland's pottery skills course at Thomastown, in the Republic of Ireland. He was one of the first to be offered a second year of study and he

2 Rectangular bottle with lugs, nuka glaze, 2013, H16cm **3** Meiping jar, chun glaze, 2013, H45cm **4** Three pitchers, applied decoration, 2013, H25cm
Photography Jonathan Lynch



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recalls spending it making as much experimental work as he could, particularly large work. On his return to the Lake District in 2005, he began working out of a studio on an industrial estate near Lancaster, supplying work to local and national galleries as well as undertaking commissions. During this period he gradually developed his range of forms and glazes with which we are now familiar. It was not an easy journey, working alone in unsympathetic circumstances, and he had to undertake a lot of part-time work in order to save towards acquiring a better studio.

RECTANGULAR REVIVAL The new studio houses a large gas kiln, which will enable Hake to fire much bigger pots. The workspace is already filled with an array of very large chargers, *meiping* vases (a Chinese pottery vase shape intended to hold a single branch of plum blossoms), and a batch of the squared and rectangular bottles that he seems to be making better than almost anyone else currently around.

There has recently been a revival of interest in making rectangular bottles by British potters. This is a form that most of us became aware of through the work of Shōji Hamada (1894–1978). Bernard Leach (1887–1979) also made several versions, normally press moulded, with an added thrown neck and foot. The form is one of those genres where the apparent simplicity of the idea is deceptively difficult to pull off. Subtle proportional relationships provide the key to success. The shape presents the possibility of having a front and back, which makes a really interesting set of

parameters within which to work. The technique of press moulding a body allows the potter to individualise the neck and foot. An alternative method of slabbing is a slow and potentially unsympathetic process. Hake takes a very different approach to manufacture by throwing a cylinder without a base then manipulating it into a rectangular shape that he attaches to a separately made base. A thrown neck completes the pot. The resulting bottles are both unique and lively, a refreshing take on a much-maligned form.

CLASSIC GLAZES Hake's interest in large *meiping* vases and chargers is perhaps driven by his desire for differing surfaces to carry glaze. His work is characterised by his passion for using glaze and there are an abundance of glaze trials scattered around the studio. He works with some of the classic glazes: tenmoku, celadon, shino, nuka, ash, copper red; and makes them work for him by layering, to produce a wide range of surface interest. To some extent the forms he chooses to make are developed with the potential for their interaction with the glaze. The rectangular bottles are a case in point. He says that he looks at the top of the form to begin his glaze pouring ideas: 'I think about the top (of the square bottle) and whatever I do there will lead to what happens below on the sides'.



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Forthcoming exhibitions Oxford
Ceramics Fair, St Edward's School, Oxford, 25–26 October 2014; Art and Clay, The Athenaeum, Leasgill, Near Heversham, 23–24 November 2014
Stockists Blackwell Arts and Craft House, Bowness, Cumbria (www.blackwell.org.uk); Contemporary Ceramics Centre, London (www.cpaceramics.com); Junction Art Gallery, Oxford (www.junctionartgallery.co.uk); Leach Pottery, St Ives (www.leachpottery.com). Work available from Hake's studio in Over Kellet (contact first to arrange visit)
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Alex McElain taught ceramics at Manchester Metropolitan University before his retirement in 2010. He now works as a freelance exhibition curator and ceramic advisor



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In an age when many young potters are restricting themselves to one form and one glaze it is refreshing to see a potter unafraid to take on the distinct challenges of maintaining a complex series of difficult shapes and glazes. The glazes may be classics but they are notoriously difficult to produce with the special qualities that define them. His use of poured glaze is often explored on small dishes, which he tackles with freedom, seeing them in some ways as a means of testing ideas that may be interpreted on the very large chargers that he is becoming known for. His admiration for potters of a previous generation like Edward Hughes (1953–2006) is reflected in their obvious influence but he has his own style, his own language of expression, and he is constantly developing new ways of presenting these ideas.

The large *meiping* vases are an ideal vehicle for displaying glaze. This is a difficult form to make and he now has the skills to throw them with fluency and sensitivity. The fullness of the shoulder of the pot encourages thickly applied glaze to move around during the melt. Glaze flowing down the steep sides of the pot must be carefully controlled through application. It is a risky business but when it comes off the result can be enthralling.

SHOWING, SELLING, LEARNING Developing a market for his pots led Hake to concentrate on selling through the many ceramic fairs that are now a major feature of the potters' calendar. Currently his typical working year involves a busy making cycle during the winter months before spending much of the summer attending fairs to sell the pots. 'I learn so much from doing the shows, [for example] by being opposite someone like David Frith and watching how he deals with selling his work and communicating with customers'. *Ceramic Art London* is an important show for him and has helped establish his reputation for making exceptionally high quality work. He has participated in as many as twelve shows over the summer months and now plans to supplement this with an annual studio sale.

Hake is a potter who has the quiet determination to achieve whatever he sets out to do. He says his ambitions are to get familiar with the big kiln and its potential for scale. He would like to broach the international market, perhaps the USA and Japan, but for the moment there is plenty to keep him occupied here in the UK. He can look forward to concentrating on pots and potting now he has established the circumstances from which great work may emerge. **CR**