

Craft/Work

Top Of The Pots: Oliver Beer Draws Music From Ceramics

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From a 3rd century Roman cup to a brand new Edmund de Waal Pot, Oliver Beer finds a pitch in every pot. Will Jennings listens in



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Deep underneath the street outside Bloomberg Space lies one of London's many hidden rivers. Once a strong flow with several tributaries feeding into this final stretch before connecting into the Thames, its waters had been diverted, covered, and subsumed beneath the city streets by the 16th century. However, it is still somewhere subterranean, now part of the capital's sewage system and relentlessly trickling with those of us above ground oblivious to its silent course.

There is resonance between the buried river and Oliver Beer's installation, *Albion Waves*, installed just a few metres away. An arrangement of twenty-eight vessels of various materials hang from the ceiling, some high, some low – and some precariously close to a toddler's grab or gallery-goer's low-slung tote. It is an eclectic collection of decorative, utilitarian, and ceremonial vessels, formed from a variety of materials including terracotta, glass, and metal. On two of the walls, offering backdrop, are a series of variously sized canvases with romantic, blue-hued patterns.

The blue continues to the gallery windows, covered in a bright azure film, perhaps suggesting a ghostly trace of the lost Walbrook flooding into the white gallery. Suitably for such a riparian location, it is also a space now full of waves – though as with those of the lost river, visitors may need help to visualise them.

Oliver Beer is an artist interested in making visible the geometry, histories, and richness of sound. Having studied musical composition at the Academy of Contemporary Music, he then trained further at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford, and cinematic theory at the Sorbonne, Paris. His work since then has weaved between these two discourses of the visual and sonic arts. For *Albion Waves*, each of the suspended vessels has a single microphone hanging within its mouth which is turned on when a visitor walks by, an amplifier above each location then relays the sound of the vessel.

But, you may wonder, what is *the sound of the vessel*? It is not the sound of the object being struck, stroked, or played in any percussive sense, but the innate sonic qualities of the empty form in and of itself. "When you listen to a seashell," Beer explains using the analogy of a child hearing the memory of waves in a shell taken from the seaside, "obviously it is completely inanimate yet seems to make a sound – because all of the ambient sound is filtered through the geometry of that shape." This is what's happening with the twenty-eight suspended vessels in Bloomberg space, the ambient sound of visitors talking, or noises of the street outside coming in every time the door is opened, soundwaves will find their way into each vessel, each reinforcing and resonating it uniquely.

"You only need the very, very slightest ambient sound for the vessel to start reinforcing it, then for the mic to pick it up and then to feedback," says Beer. Each of his selected objects plays a specific note when its movement sensor is triggered, meaning a visitor can wander their own path around and through the hanging objects, creating tonal patterns and harmonies of their choosing.

Each vessel's geometry and internal physical volume is a container of soundwaves waiting to be made present, but their material and decoration also make visible untold or forgotten stories. The twenty-eight objects cover a broad spread of British history, each playing their own note. The oldest suspended vessels are a Roman glass and pot, both dating from earlier than the 4th century and discovered in Kent in the 1980s, playing D5 (that is, a D note just over an octave higher than Middle C on a piano) and A#4 respectively. There are functional vessels: a medieval jug, perhaps once used to warm liquids by an open fire, plays A#3 while a ceramic container for storing spirits created in Lambeth at Doulton & Watts hums an A2.

Some are decorative: a 20th century version of the classic Wedgwood blue Jasperware vase with white decoration singing an A#2 hangs close to others from Moorcroft, also an A#2, and a Denby slightly higher at C#3. Some are commemorative: a Royal Doulton loving cup commemorating the 1937 coronation with a D4, and an 18th century creamware pot depicting a 1759 naval battle resonates at A#4. Some are quirkier: a Moorland cow-shaped creamer from Burslem emits a C#5 and a Victorian majolica glazed vase of a mid-croak frog offers an F#4. There are creative ceramics: an Edmund de Waal pot plays G3 and a vase by Freya Bramble-Carter and Cleo Liko replies with a F#2.

Wandering amongst all these objects it is impossible to not only compose harmonies and dissonances between conjured sounds, but also across the histories, stories, and aesthetics each contains within its making and form, offering rich meanings for Beer, an artist playing the space between musical and visual aesthetics: "It's like a cross section of Britishness and lots of different British voices hanging in different ways – if you hear all of those British voices simultaneously, it actually becomes very dissonant, whereas if you hear certain of them together in different combinations, then it creates a pretty beautiful harmony."

The works on the wall also manifest that relationship between sonic and visual. At first, the rich blue patterns read as Rorschach tests as ambient as the sounds filling the air, and certainly the patterns offer themselves up to be poetically interpreted as clouds or watery reflections. They are, however, manifest forms of specific notes, the artist sitting a canvas covered in blue pigment over a speaker playing a pitch perfect note of his choosing. The speaker moves the air into its resonant form, which bursts into and through the stretched canvas, scattering the pigment in its wake, making the invisible ripple visible. When the moment feels just right, Beer turns off the speaker, the pigment stops dancing, and he fixes it into the forms which now adorn the Bloomberg walls.

This practice of using soundwaves to position particles is not new – in the late 18th century the German physicist and musician Ernst Chladni published research into nodal patterns formed by vibrations – and in these pieces Beer takes interest in both the underlying physics and the poetic beauty formed. "It becomes almost like a jazz improvisation," the artist says of his process, in which he is looking, listening, and feeling for the right moment to drop the volume and create a form.

The blue of the canvases and window is not accidental, but reference to the cobalt oxide used throughout history in slips, washes, and glazes of ceramic making. A colour perhaps best known in Britain from Wedgwood's iconic aesthetic – as their vase hanging in the space illustrates – the artist is more interested in the journey of its use not only in British, Dutch, and Portuguese empires, but back through 14th century Japan, Korea, and China, and back to the 8th century Middle East.

Such transformative journeys interest Beer. Whether the turning of sound into visual form, tracing the trajectory of a colour across territory and time, or the personal history of each individual ceramic vessel, *Albion Waves* seeks to bring life to hidden and invisible stories. Many of the vessels as those hanging in the Bloomberg Space are seemingly mundane and everyday, and the vessel as one of human's oldest created forms has within it a functional purpose, but each also carries a resonant counter-history waiting to be discovered, and as Beer concludes, "every single vessel that's ever changed hands in our several-thousand year history has changed hands with a musical note inside it."

Oliver Beer, Albion Waves, is at London Mithraeum Bloomberg SPACE until 15 July