

ART

Jon Middlemiss has turned the Hotbath Gallery into a 'temple' for his most ambitious installation to date.

SHRINE OF THE TIMES

EMMA MAIDEN WORSHIPS AT THE ALTAR

For an artist best known for his finely honed and finished ceramic vessels, Jon Middlemiss's latest project is a brave move. 'Temple' is a massive site-specific installation that fills the Hotbath Gallery completely. It's a rich, emotive pageant of vessels, dancing figures and raw natural materials that reads as a journey; an intensely personal journey that encompasses issues of memory; discovery and identity.

So what inspired this dramatic change of direction? "Some people might call it a mid-life crisis," says Jon, "but a mid-life rite of passage is perhaps more accurate."

The installation traces the development over three years of ideas and symbolism relating to memory and meaning. It comes "from the belly rather than the intellect", and in it the artist's soul is laid bare for public scrutiny. Very brave. Especially in an age where artistic integrity is often measured by the playing down or denial of meaning.

At the temple 'doorway' is a group of three tall, monolithic vessels. This is the family. It marks the beginning of the journey and leads down a passageway flanked on each side by a row of plinths that are surrounded by broken lumps of chalk (fresh from Lyme Regis that very morning) or coal (more of a problem, this; Jon had left a load back in Cornwall thinking he would get some more in Bath - only to discover it's not readily available in this 'smokeless zone' city.) The passage

is about memory and the chalk and coal are seen as "materials with memory", formed as they are by layer compounded upon layer. These plinths are surmounted by vessels that are strongly figurative in their allusion to head and body, some of whose smooth, burnished curves suggest femaleness and fecundity; but all are static in pose, very quiet and passive. Below them are books in which Jon has recorded trance-like memories. Some are disturbing and some beautifully lyrical, and they intensify the potent stillness of the figures that watch over them, as if they themselves were dreaming, remembering.

The passage opens out into a space that Jon has called 'The Spiral of Descent'. This is the part of the installation that records the releasing of the memories and the beginning of the next stage of the journey; As we enter this area, Jon talks energetically about the ritual fire he made back home in Cornwall, in which he rid himself of destructive childhood memories, and from which we see the charred spars of wood, placed in the centre of the gallery in the shape of a pyre. It seems a terribly intimate, yet-to me, the viewer-strangely distant experience. I find myself wishing I could get rid of the ticking cynicism that is forming a smile in my mind; I don't quite know how to respond. Jon, though, is keen not to sound "too New Age or cultish. "We cushion ourselves with our identities," he says, simply; "and this whole experience was about transformation, from being locked into a way of being to suddenly feeling I was allowed to be who I wanted." The tickle dissipates as I start to see this whole journey metaphor as something much more universal. Who can't relate to that desire to escape others' expectations of how and who we should be?

The transformation in the final section is stunning. It's as if all the constraints have been removed, from the material as well as the person. All past models and expectations of what the clay should do have been jettisoned, and here instead is a group of dancing, dynamic figures that couldn't be further from the still, memory-laden vessels of the beginning. This is the best bit of the installation. It's as if the effort and pain of remembering and learning to forget again have broken through to a new; airy sense of self. And it's thoroughly convincing. You can't help but FEEL the sense of freedom and confidence. One of the figures is walking across a broken bridge of wooden struts, not looking at the next step but sure in the knowledge that he'll get there. It's called Beyond Fear. It's that moment when you feel deliciously off-balance," Jon says with relish, "close to the edge. 'That's when you're really alive.'"

Temple' is at the Hotbath Gallery. Bath, until 29 Sept.