

Ceramic Design, Art and Architecture
TOM MORRIS



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New Wave Clay

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TOM MORRIS

Introduction

To many, any mention of ceramics will conjure up images of dusty, slightly worthy craftsmen toiling over a wheel, digging clay out of the ground and wandering around in aprons. To some, it will be understood as a pleasant garden shed hobby, something their grandparents took up after retirement. To few, though, will it summon the idea of an innovative, vital creative enquiry being embraced by the young.

In the last decade or so, ceramics has been subject to something of a revival – in making and collecting. A highly inventive new generation of ceramicists has developed what is possible with the craft and has been joined by waves of people from other creative fields – architecture, furniture, illustration, interiors, painting – who are realising clay’s unique assets and bringing a fresh perspective to the sector. *New Wave Clay* focuses on this lively crossover between traditional craft, collectible design and domestic-scale sculpture.

REVIVAL AND RECALIBRATION

And while pottery’s renaissance takes place against the backdrop of technology, the digital age, conversely, has had its advantages. The digital revolution has irreversibly changed the world in the last 20 years. We live in an age of instant gratification.

Everything we could ever want or need – ostensibly at least – can be sourced, ordered or called upon through that shiny surface that we touch all day.

So along comes clay: a cruddy, muddy value-less medium. To turn this tricky thing into ceramic is a process that blends all elemental life forces: earth, water, fire and air. It also takes concentration, time and mess. But, out of all this, comes something that can last forever; some of the oldest surviving human artefacts are ceramic. It’s no wonder so many people are discovering the thrill.

The digital age, conversely, has its advantages. Many of today’s successful ceramicists would not be where they are without the support, inspiration and publicity that social media has given them. Small-scale ceramic celebrities have been made with the help of likes. In turn, traditional media has also paid attention: ‘Why does everyone suddenly love ceramics?’, ‘Why handmade ceramics are white hot’, ‘Pottery is the next big mindfulness trend’ scream headlines from publications including *The New York Times*, *The Telegraph* and *Vogue*.

Real life communities have been solidifying too. Many of the people profiled in this book began on courses at open studios such as Turning Earth in London or Sculpture Space in New York, which are run a little bit like pastoral mem-

bers’ clubs. These venues have been responsible for creating worldwide connections and augmenting a sense of community, which has been gradually eroded in the last two decades with a depleting higher education system in many nations.

Additionally, a new network of retailers and gallerists has been instrumental in elevating the worth – literally and socially – of clay work. Dealers such as Patrick Parrish, R & Company, The Future Perfect, Adrian Sassoon, Marsden Woo, Galerie Kreo and Gallery Fumi position their ‘ceramic artists’ somewhere between, and symbolically away from, contemporary art galleries and dedicated craft centres. Values are higher and display is better.

These dealers are feeding a huge appetite for ceramics among consumers. Clay objects offer a warmth, opacity, tactility and depth that counteract the glassy, transparent austerity of a world full of technology. Many of the ceramicists in this book produce work that caters to the desire for something a bit rough, handmade and imperfect. Ugly, even. Ceramics have the power – like indoor plants or textile art, which have both been subject to the surge in popularity in recent years – to bring a bit of analogue life to inert spaces in an overwhelmingly digital world. How else to explain the rise of both ceramic furniture? Ceramics can alter the character of a domestic environment and change the way we feel on a day to day basis. That is nothing new, but it is a fact that is being appreciated afresh.

A WIDER WORLD

All these factors have widened the ceramic world far beyond its ghetto. Today, a ‘clay woke’ generation has emerged (a term that respected critic, dealer and author Garth Clark uses, so I will too) who embrace the unique benefits of clay: its lack of internal structure, its relative cheapness as a raw material and its versatility for modelling.

Fundamentally, the definitions of who uses clay and what can be made out of it has shifted. It’s about time. For decades, western ceramics was caught between two splinters. On the one hand, there was the studio pottery movement. This sector revolved around craftspeople who were utterly dedicated to the material and the mission of pushing the boundaries of technique and method. It was a reaction against the industrialisation of pottery; made up of a team of creators that dug their own clay, mixed their own glazes, fired their own kilns and largely steered clear of making anything too arty. Bernard Leach was the granddaddy: he founded his pottery in the English coastal city of St Ives and wrote extensively on the matter. Leach and his ilk produced pots about pots – on an almost impossibly high moral ground.

On the other hand, there was the highly experimental stream of artists who just happened to use clay in their work. These people included Pablo Picasso and Isamu Noguchi and, in the USA, even-

tually took shape in the mad eccentricities of Ken Price, Peter Voulkos and then Betty Woodman. In Europe, there was a group of radicals in the 1970s and 80s who ditched the wheel all together. More recently, Grayson Perry won the Turner Prize with a set of vases. This trajectory took things made of clay into contemporary art galleries, where they remain today in the work of Rebecca Warren, Jesse Wine and Ai Weiwei and dozens more.

Much of the current generation bounces around between these two sectors, caring to properly sign up to neither. Their work could be described as studio pottery in that it’s unique, technically interesting and adds sculptural qualities to recognisable ‘pot’ shapes. Yet it also has artistic concerns and thinks beyond ceramics. Much of it is ‘about’ things rather than ‘for’ things. It is ‘ceramic design’ simply in the fact that it uses the medium to realise a creative vision, rather than a vision coming about as a result of technical experimentation. It is art, craft, design all at the same time; finally the boundaries and labels of who makes what and what it’s called have disappeared. Clay has finally been democratised and yanked out of its ghetto by creative people – artists, craftsmen, designers – who are embracing its unique qualities and none of its labels.

New Wave Clay focuses on this imaginative mix of people: classically trained potters who create design-led pieces, product designers who use clay as a means of creative expression, in addition to those with backgrounds in interior decoration, architecture and illustration. Their collective output includes decorative objects, murals, vessels, vases, furniture and 3D printed objects. The ambition of the book is to show the diversity of this area of creative production and the way in which history, craft, technology and design are all intersecting in the present time.

Ceramics today are experimental, conceptual, energetic and considered. They speak loudly and are demanding of one’s attention, whether formally or in its principles. They ask why, not just how.

They are meaningful and serious. Charlotte Mary Pack makes porcelain models of animals on the endangered species list. She insists 15 per cent of sales goes to charity. Mia E Göransson makes slip-cast porcelain landscapes that discuss her anxiety about climate change. Phoebe Cummings creates highly intricate floral sculptures – and then ruins them as a comment on time and memory.

They rethink what craft and agency is. Olivier Van Herpt produces his vessels using a 3D printer. He embraces changes in vibration, airflow and the clay body so that imperfections are left on the finished piece, inferring a sense of the handmade. The Haas Brothers ‘design’ their works, which are made by other people’s hands.

Ceramic is changing the landscape of the built environment too. There has been a series of landmark projects in recent years showing the possibilities of clay. In 2017, the renovated Sack-

ler Courtyard at the V&A Museum in London was revealed, where 11,000 porcelain tiles were implemented in the architect Amanda Levete's design. At the time of writing, ground has just broken on the 300-metre-tall Wasl Tower in Dubai, which will be one of the world's tallest ceramic facades when it completes in 2020. In this book, we single out one small-scale project that embraces ceramic's decorative power in architecture.

Fundamentally, ceramics break rules and are highly unorthodox. Furniture cannot be made out of porcelain? Sculpture cannot be printed by machine? Non-ceramic material cannot be considered clay? To the establishment, this frivolity might come across as casual craftsmanship: flippant tourism in an age-old art form. To many – including myself – this is what makes it so exciting. It's not simply a case of breaking rules, it's not knowing what the rules are in the first place.

WHO CARES?

New Wave Clay is by no means encyclopedic. It is a very specific snapshot of a very interesting point in time. I might describe work as post-post-modern, neo-minimal, expressionist, but let's simply agree to describe this new wave as part of a 'liberalised force' (a perfectly appropriate term first coined by Emmanuel Cooper). If these ceramicists, fine artist sculptors, designer-makers – whatever you want to call them – are unified by one thing, it is their strong sense of individualism and verve. And, fundamentally, their interest in clay.

In this book, alongside highly skilled potters, there are people who bake children's clay in a kitchen oven; artists who exhibit the 2D paper they have cut slabs of clay out on as standalone artworks on the wall; people who use 3D printers so they never actually touch the material; there are those who work in the artist-potter tradition, following in the footsteps of Picasso or Roger Fry of the Omega Workshop, in using ready-made pottery as a canvas for decoration.

It is my intention to be equally feckless and not be restricted by the labels and industry limitations that pigeonholed pottery over the 20th century. It broadly covers design, art and architecture in name, but specially focuses on that which is created out of design principles: context, content, purpose and form. This, according to the people in the book, is as interesting as technique. They push the potential of the object, rather than the limitations of the craft. In this way they are all designers.

Whilst design may infer larger-scale manufacturing, every item is unique and handmade. The industrial sector of the ceramics world is an increasingly interesting place: especially with the efforts of Heath Ceramics in San Francisco and 1882 Ltd in Stoke-on-Trent, who have both invested hugely in design talent such as Adam Silverman and Max Lamb to jumpstart local, entrenched industry. They

are worthy of their own book, so I have left them out of this one.

New Wave Clay accidentally but appropriately centres on the 18th and 19th century ceramic heartlands in the USA, UK, northern Europe, Japan and South Korea. The 55 people profiled are arranged in four broad chapters, arranged by the feeling elicited in the viewer by their work instead of the achievements or techniques of the craftsman. Any classification system in such a diverse, makeshift and unruly movement is arbitrary but there are some conspicuous narratives. I am aware that many artists in the book span more than one, sometimes all four. I encourage you to make personal connections and interpretations of the book to connect these dots. We feature work how it is meant to be experienced: photographed in real environments, contextualized at home or in studios. More than anything, ceramics has allowed itself to be decorative again.

A variety of experts in the field have kindly contributed opinions on the state of play today in the form of conversations and essays. British artist Edmund de Waal discusses the context of this craft revival. Interior designer Martin Brudnizki elaborates on how ceramics can change the character of an internal or domestic space. Hella Jongerius, the Dutch product designer who has experimented extensively with ceramics throughout her career, talks about the opposing forces of craft and industry. Sarah Griffin reflects on her ceramics collection and, finally, Grayson Perry has the last word on the split between art and craft.

Joy, the opening chapter, delves into the fun that can be derived from making and looking at contemporary pottery. Simplicity, the second chapter, concerns those who appreciate no-frills austerity in their work. The third chapter, Structure, gathers together hand-built work made by ceramicists who approach clay as a tool for engineering silhouettes. Lastly, we will look at how vernacular pottery techniques and aesthetic tropes from history are being re-appropriated by modern day artists in Nostalgia, the fourth chapter.

Of course, nostalgia runs throughout the whole book. In spite of the avant-garde daring many of the artists show, ceramics is eternally laced with tradition. The ability to turn malleable clay into a durable material was first discovered 25,000 years ago. Making ceramics is a way to convene with this rich past of art, design, craft, decoration, architecture, crockery, technology, building and industry. It is also a way to think about approaching the future. In all its various shapes, sizes, colours and coordinations, clay comes with a vitality not felt in decades.

EDMUND DE WAAL ON A CRAFT REVIVAL

‘There’s a whole generation of people who did not use materials like clay, wood and fibre in primary school. They didn’t make a mess. Now they’re in their twenties and thirties and, boy, are they making a mess’

London-based artist and writer EDMUND DE WAAL is known for his large-scale installations of porcelain vessels, which are informed by his passion for architecture, space and sound. His work appears in the collections of the V&A Museum in London and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. He has written widely on ceramics, most notably his ode to porcelain, The White Road (2015), and his family memoir, The Hare With Amber Eyes (2010).

TOM MORRIS: What do you think has caused this renaissance?

EDMUND DE WAAL: One of the interesting things is that it's cyclical. There was a great moment in the 1970s when everyone was thrilled by ceramics as a discipline. There were new courses opening, lots of galleries around the world and then, in the 1980s and 90s, almost a total collapse of the field. It was retreat into a very defended, inward-looking place.

What's happening now, which is fantastic, is truly a renaissance. It's the plurality of people using clay and other things. It's brought down the skill base, but brought up the enthusiasm. It's a recalibration – it's not a discipline as such, it's a series of overlapping areas of interest and connection.

Is that a good thing?

Yes.

Some people might say that's a bad thing.

Yes. Some people are profoundly threatened by this – the people for whom ceramics are a vocational way of life. Fair enough, but there's still a residual Bernard Leach authenticity shtick within the ceramics world. It says basically: don't live in cities, dig your own clay, sell things really cheaply, all the *modus vivendi* is still there and it's quite punitive. That's fine; those people will always be there. There will always be people who

have a particular attitude and a particular path. But there are other worlds too.

What you're seeing is people who are profoundly serious about skill, who will make their life within ceramics and that's wonderful. And there are people for whom it is something that is part of a whole artistic, design or lifestyle practice.

We live in a digital age. This younger generation has been brought up seeing the world through a shiny flat screen with very little tactility in their life. Do you think this has also caused this interest in clay?

There's a whole generation of people who did not use materials like clay, wood and fibre in primary school. They didn't make a mess. Now they're in their twenties and thirties and, boy, are they making a mess. They're returning to materials with abandon and discovering the visceral pleasures of getting your hands into something.

Of course it's a reconnection with the bodily thing. It's also to do with time. The velocity and pace of things at the moment is so extraordinary, that actually having to slow down and discover that you can't make things quickly is profound. They're very, very excited to find out how long it takes to do something. People go to classes to learn to throw and realise it's going to take forever – and that that's fine.

How might a designer's approach to ceramics be different to a potter's? A designer will use clay to realise a form they have in their head. A potter will have an idea of what they want to make because of a technique they are exploring.

It's not a material that anyone has ever owned, or a discipline has ever owned. That's the reality. Sculptors have used it always, potters have used it always, and people have used it to make architecture. At every point, you find that someone else has used it in a different way. It's kind of crap to then say, 'you shouldn't do that because it doesn't obey the scriptures of what ceramics means.'

And that did happen, especially over the course of the 20th century with the studio pottery movement. It ghettoised clay.

Yes, there were series of different people using ceramics in very different ways. There was Isamu Noguchi making his studio out of clay or Asger Jorn riding his Vespa through a playground full of clay to make a mural. There were brilliant examples of people who just used it viscerally.

And then there was the ghetto: the unbelievably moralised thing about what pots meant. Pots meant function, cheapness, and the most reductive vessel. What's happening now is very interesting because there's so much happening and no one really has tried to map all these different kinds of practices and where they overlap.

A genuinely popular rethinking of where clay might happen in society can only be a good thing.

Installation and display has been hugely important to your work. How do you think ceramics has the power to transform an interior space?

There are many places in which ceramics can work beautifully, interrogatively and architecturally, rather than just having things on a mantelpiece. The places where you can encounter ceramics have always been manifold.

It's to do with touch. It's about moving things around – it's very hard to move paintings around. There's also that sense of play that's fabulous – letting things rest and then moving them all around again.

There's an Ur relationship between people and ceramics, which is so basic. What is a ceramic? It's something that is made out of mud, fire and water. It's the first things that human beings have ever made – why not live with them? Why not have them around you? There is something on that level of immediacy that is remarkable.

The most everyday mug feels the same as an expensive ceramic sculpture. Touch is democratic in that way. It is all the same base material – fired earth – no matter what its value. What about ceramic in architecture? There was a huge precedence of this, but has it become a forgotten art form?

It's coming back. There's so much happening. What is interesting is how few conventional ceramic firms can deal with the demand and interest that there is. The aspiration of architects to work with clay is beating a lot of the gaps in the knowledge of how to do it. You think of the incredible facades in Chicago made out of tiles, or the mark making in Adobe houses. Why wouldn't you want a building made out of clay? It's got everything.

The point of this book is to celebrate the joy of ceramic things and also the joy of making. Why does the act of making beguile you so much? Why do you love it still, forty years on?

It returns me to who I want to be, which is a fully present human being. It's using clay not as an escape but as a return. It's a return to being a human being that breathes. The breathing affects the clay and every movement affects the outcome. It slows me down. It brings me back to a place which is quite a good place to be – someone who is more present, more alive, more in the moment. It is a delight, to meet this beautiful contingent material every day.

Ceramicists who excel in their use of colour,
glaze and sense of humour to create
vibrant, trumpeting work that excite the eye

J
O
Y

JOHN BOOTH

This London designer's background in fashion and illustration is conveyed in the pattern-cut production and sunny cartoonishness of his vessels





The worlds of fashion and ceramics are not a million miles away, according to JOHN BOOTH. The Central Saint Martins fashion graduate-turned-illustrator-turned-ceramicist hand builds his pieces according to the same principles – and even the same paper – as he once applied to pattern cutting.

Booth started working with clay to produce the faces he illustrates in 2D form. Over time they 'stood up' into single head-shaped vases, then doubled up into twins and then he turned his Cocteau-esque style to vessels. An assistant helps build the forms and then Booth steps in to add appendages and paint with underglaze. 'If you're more

excited about decorating something but have to spend weeks trying to throw it first, what's the point? Just get someone to do it for you,' he says, admitting it actually takes longer to paint the pieces than it does to build them.

Booth, who has worked with brands such as Fendi and Globetrotter, would like to explore making wood, glass and ceramic furniture next. He cites his time at Central Saint Martins as having a huge effect on this multidisciplinary approach. 'If someone asks me to make something in a material I don't know, I generally say yes,' he says. 'I think you can always figure it out if you have the inclination.'

← The heads are made in limited runs and are clearly influenced by the ceramicist's bright, optimistic illustrative style.

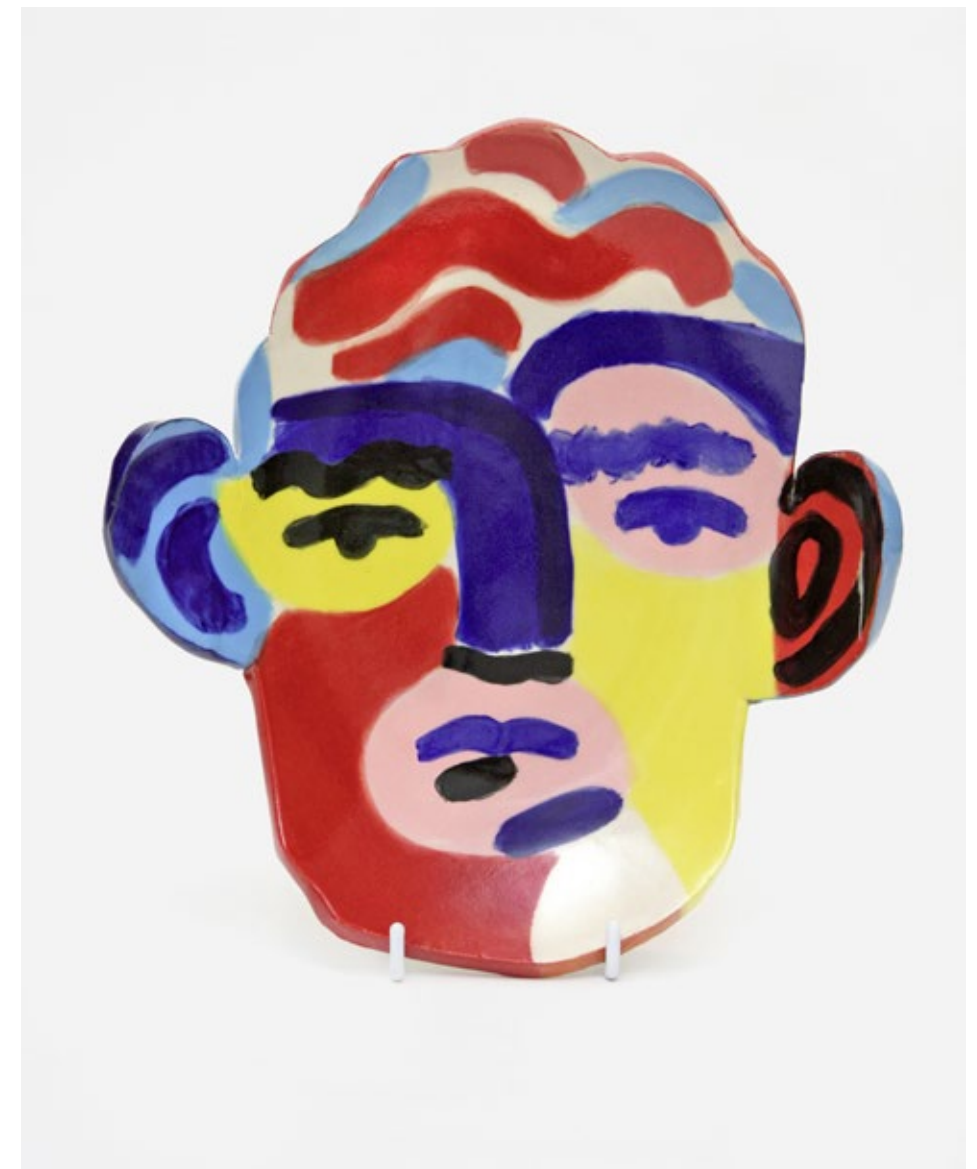
→ Booth's first experiments were making 2D face 'plates' similar to his drawings. He then progressed into standalone vessels.

PRIME CLAY BODY
Stoneware

PRIME TECHNIQUE
Hand building

PRIME GLAZES
Stained slips,
coloured
underglazes and
clear glaze

PREDOMINANT FORM
Sculpture, vessels
and figurines





AHRYUN LEE

Inspired by sweets, candy and fizzy drinks, Korean-born Ahryun Lee's porcelain pieces appeal to the senses in full technicolour glory

Colour has the intense power to summon up visceral thoughts. Korean-born AHRYUN LEE's work examines this subject, questioning our sensorial memory and how these take shape in sculptural form.

Lee's series *Imaginary Drinks* blends childhood, colour, candy and recollection in single vessels. The bottles are inspired by her memory of eating and drinking certain things as a young girl: a yellow shape was inspired by honey; she was thinking about candy when creating a pink flagon covered in mint-coloured dots; another has the red and black palette of Coca Cola. 'I discovered the world eating

and drinking, I wanted to translate these sensations in 3D form,' says Lee.

These works try to mimic that sense of sensory discovery in colour and form. Lee laces ribbons of clay around one bottle shape, and syringes spurts of slip onto the surface of another. She then adds dots on top of each other to slowly build spiky tentacles. All this renders them unusable: they allow you to only experience food and drink visually. Thankfully, they are a feast for the eyes. 'It takes me time to choose the colour and decoration. Although I'm a maximalist, I'm encouraged to control myself,' Lee says.



Lee's ceramic soda bottles are subversively manipulated to be unusable and difficult to hold. She recalls the sensory experience of eating candy or drinking soda and imagines what those tastes and smells would look like.



PRIME CLAY BODY

Porcelain mixed with
high-fired colour stain

PRIME TECHNIQUE

Throwing, hand
building, slip casting

PRIME GLAZES

Silica, alumina and
flux glaze with sodium
silicate and colourants

PREDOMINANT FORM

Sculpture, vessel, fine art

← All manner of techniques are
implemented to create the surfaces
of the *Imaginary Drinks*, which range
from spiky to bubbly and are covered
in either ceramic sticks or ribbons.

