

Ceramic vessel  
by Alana Wilson.

ART

*A growing number of people are finding their Zen in the meditative spin of the pottery wheel.*

By ANNA LAVDARAS

MUDDY THINKING

As the sun rises on another bright new weekend, urban scenesters shake off the dust from Friday night's martini sequence and set off for their respective classes: yoga, meditation, barre, Pilates and, most recently, pottery. That isn't code for anything — I'm talking about the traditional wheel-throwing, pot-pinching, kiln-firing kind. That's right, the dank dwellings of mud-flecked hobbyists have been flooded by an exceptionally well-dressed set of late. Fashion editors, photographers and designers have found sanctuary in this modest ancient art, and it's hardly a local phenomenon. Phoebe Philo of Céline is said to be a pottery convert; Bella Hadid retreats to a New York studio when she is in need of some serenity; *BAZAAR* cover star Emily Ratajkowski has 'grammed herself elbow deep in mud; and, perhaps most famously, Brad Pitt credits clay with helping him heal after his divorce from Angelina Jolie. So how did mud get the A-list's tick of approval?

"In today's digital, 'always on' world, where we are all bombarded with information and consumed by sheer pace, more and more people are finding comfort in the traditional and the slow," explains freelance fashion stylist Viva Vayspap. Author and illustrator Miranda Darling, a regular at East Sydney's Waverley Woollahra Art School (WWAS), agrees: "I believe it's part of a bigger quest for authenticity, for connection to life and the

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tangible ... 'I made this' feels good to be able to say, even to yourself." She seeks out solo time at her studio like a believer yearning for church. The studio has become "a space carved out where I can think and feel and don't have to be anywhere else," she says. "My attention is brought to the physical and my hands." Likewise, Vayspap relates the spiritual nature of wheel work to yoga practice. "It's an ancient practice that holds enormous relevance to a modern lifestyle," she explains. "By completely immersing ourselves in the here and now, we naturally free our minds from thinking about the past or future."

Curious? Ditto. So I sign myself up to a four-part introduction to ceramics at Makerspace & Co. in Sydney's inner west. Maybe this will prove more successful than my many previous attempts at switching off (you name it, I've tried it). The all-white Albus Lumen linen number I bought especially for the occasion is dirty before I've even started (N.B. if you don't get clay on yourself, someone else will). Apron on, phone off, our soft-spoken French teacher leads the class by example, kneading his clay into suitably soft condition ready for the wheel. Those initial 10 minutes of hard-knuckle action create an intense focus in the room. Without meaning to, I am completely present, quietly focused on this all-consuming task. But sheer concentration won't cut it once you get to the wheel. In fact, thinking too much just throws your 'centre' all off. Our teacher repeats a common pottery saying: "You cannot centre your pot until you yourself are centred."

KRISTINA SOLLO STYLED BY CAROLINE TRAN. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ELSA MORGAN AT RELOAD AGENCY. PRICES APPROXIMATE. SEE BUYLINES FOR STOCKISTS

Deep. Clearly my centre is shot, because after two short hours I've produced two wonky bowls hardly deep enough to hold a couple of olives. Normally this would annoy me, big time. But I'm calm. This class — and the subsequent ones I take — offers something I've never achieved during meditation sessions: peace.

While amateurs like me are prioritising the experience over the tangible take-away, there are a bunch of female ceramicists who have built a successful career 'earth-bending' magnificent works of art. Catherine Tate started as a student under Bill Burton at WWAS and is now an accomplished ceramicist, teaching and making vessels inspired by the urban and coastal landscapes of Sydney's east. Much respected in the local community, Tate recently exhibited at Paddington's Saint Cloche gallery, "which used to be predominantly for painters and photographers [and is] now featuring more ceramics," she explains.

Local talents Anna-Karina, aka Anna Karina Elias (also from the Byron hinterland) and Alana Wilson (based at Sydney's Tamarama) are likewise garnering international success. Since completing her honours at the National Art School, Wilson has exhibited her ancient-looking, delicate ceramics across Australia and internationally, and undertaken notable fashion collaborations with designers Lee Mathews and Georgia Alice. "There comes a point when people start to desire reality, physicality, originality and local community, and I think we are at that stage now," Wilson says.

She too was initially drawn to pottery for its therapeutic qualities, but says she has since evolved to "highlighting human connection" through her art. "I'm currently working on a body of work to exhibit in October in New York and London with NYC-based ceramicist Romy Northover. The works will aim to highlight the different perceptual habits within each city, while I'm also constantly looking at ways to push people's perceptions of ceramics outside the norm."

Elias, similarly, had a back-to-basics epiphany of sorts, leaving behind her Sydney life working in fashion and interiors 13 years ago to open a bookshop near Byron Bay and take up a ceramics course at art school. She's since developed her signature style of light, raw tableware. Now she's backed up with orders, and has plans to exhibit in Japan. Her biggest tip for beginners? "Never give up. It can be too frustrating, but the more one experiments, the more questions arise, and then this becomes a process of not just your work, but also a quest to your inner self."

Earth & Baker, ceramichomewares.com.au.

Eike Lucas, eikelucasceramics.com.

Sophie Harle, sophieharle.com.au.

**THREE CERAMICISTS to commission right now**

PLATING UP

*Forget fine bone china, the latest trend in table decor is a set of plates that double as art. "The rise and appreciation of the handmade is unquestionably very 'now'," says interior designer and stylist Natasha Levak. "Clients do want and appreciate something different to what everyone else has, so this has me thinking, seeking, acquiring pieces from talented local potters and ceramicists." If you do plan on commissioning a set of unique plates and bowls, be sure to get surplus quantities in case you have any breakages in the future, and remember: "The handmade is to be appreciated as just that — made by hand and not perfect," Levak says.*

Spin Classes

**SYDNEY:** Waverley Woollahra Art School offers the basics along with the freedom to explore your own unique style of building and decorating. *Price on application, wwvas.org.au.*

**MELBOURNE:** Slow Clay Centre specialises in ergonomically sound Japanese techniques that get you creating with good posture. *Eight-week terms cost \$470, slowclay.com.*

**PERTH:** Perth Studio Potters welcomes both beginners and experienced potters, with a variety of classes and membership options. *\$210 for eight beginner's classes for non-members, perthstudiopotters.org.au.*

**BYRON BAY:** Brooke Clunie's Red Door Studio takes locals and fly-in students for retreat-style workshops at her studio and gallery that's set on a farm. *Price on application, brookeclunie.com.*



Ceramicist Alana Wilson wears Lee Mathews dress, \$350; Eytys shoes, \$210, from mychameleon.com.au; Dinosaur Designs bracelets, from top, \$300 and \$360.