

Making It

# Divine Imperfection

Four breakout female ceramists creating beautifully flawed work.

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AT FIRST SIGHT, Alana Wilson's vases, jugs and chalices look about 3,000 years old. Inspired by Neolithic Japanese, Cycladic and African traditions, her ceramics have the pockmarked surface of bleached-out brain coral and the faint hue of artifacts that have been buried in the ground for millennia. The Australian artist, who works in a small studio outside Sydney overlooking Tamarama beach, near the famous swells of Bondi, achieves this distinctive look with a mixture of modern and ancient methods. She eschews an electric potter's wheel for the "coiling" method, an antediluvian technique in which small bands of clay are slowly stacked on top of one another to create a shape. Wilson then coats them, rather unorthodoxly, with an arsenal of naturally toxic chemicals — lithium, barium and silicon carbide — that slowly eat away at the special kind of terracotta clay she employs; and bits of paper embedded in

the material burn during the firing process, creating her work's signature porosity. "I've been experimenting with sea salt recently," says the 28-year-old mischievously. "It melts and practically destroys everything it touches which I quite like."

Wilson is part of a group of female ceramists from all over the globe who are meditating on the beauty of imperfection, age and artlessness, borrowing ideas from the past, including the Zen Buddhist philosophy of wabi-sabi. Such blurring of the lines between functional objects and art first touched Japanese ceramics in the 16th century, when tea ceremony masters, aesthetes of the highest order, shifted their tastes from polished antique Chinese bowls to the rustic, unglazed stoneware vessels made for Korean and Japanese farmers. Romy Northover, an English potter who lives and works in Brooklyn under the label No., experiments with similar inspirations. She

## FORM AND FUNCTION

Clockwise from back left: No. vase with cracked Shino glaze, Dora Good's hand-thrown stoneware vase, a textured glaze cereal bowl by Akiko Hirai and a terracotta tea bowl, jug and ceremonial vessel from Alana Wilson.





categorizes the look of her humble whitewashed pieces as “ancient future”: pinch pot-esque tea bowls and plump ruddy flower vases drizzled in layers of messy milky glaze. To achieve her naïve yet refined aesthetic, she plays tricks on herself: “The Japanese tea bowls I made most recently were looking too straight and perfect, so I spun my wheel in the opposite direction than I’m used to, to throw off the muscle memory in my hands. I had less control which renders these great offbeat shapes.”

The quest for an irregular and authentic touch is something that Dora Alvmora Good, who creates deceptively simple wares on the island of Mallorca in Spain, also strives for. The 31-year-old shares a studio in a former 14th-century monastery with her mother, a painter and potter, in the idyllic village of Deià. Good’s grandmother was herself a ceramist, who crafted sculptural objects but also made every plate, bowl and mug the family used at home. It’s this simple, un-self-conscious style — created for a utilitarian purpose, but with an extremely personal twist — that Good aims to achieve in her own work. “I try to find that balance,” she says. “Creating something humble and beautiful for daily use is just as much of an art as anything else.” Good mixes subtle chalky glazes from recipes passed down from her grandmother, and fires her vessels at prolonged low temperatures, which allows iron particles within the stoneware clay to melt and create dark speckles that resemble Oreo cookie crumble in melted vanilla ice cream — a similar effect to that in the work of London potter Akiko Hirai’s. Hirai often sculpts her bowls and plates from a roughly textured, almost black clay — impure in contrast to lighter versions like porcelain — and coats it with a thick snowy-colored crackled substance that almost obscures the vessel’s shadowy exterior. “You have a visceral reaction when you hold her pieces,” says Catherine Lock, creative director of the New Craftsmen, the artisan-focused Mayfair design shop that carries Hirai’s work. “It’s just the kind of simple, satisfying tableware we’re all craving now.”

There is a timely appeal to the primitive, stripped-down nature of these ceramists’ creations — a refreshing palate cleanser after the flowery, colorful, high-shine European china that has been enjoying a renaissance of late. “In Western culture we’re always striving to see how close the hand can get to the precision of a machine, but once you create something immaculate, where do you go from there?” Northover asks. “Imperfection, on the other hand, has no limits.” ■



#### SHE'S CRAFTY

Clockwise from top: Dora Good, a third-generation ceramic artist, outside her Mallorca studio; a stoneware pitcher by Good; Australian potter Alana Wilson; Romy Northover in her Red Hook design space; a bowl by Northover inspired by *kintsugi*, the Japanese method of artfully repairing broken ceramics; the workspace Good shares with her mother.

