

Clay



Contemporary
Ceramic Artisans



Amber Creswell Bell



Thames & Hudson

Introduction

Why ceramics? Why now? Not since the mid-century has there been such an apparent and popular appreciation for pottery and ceramics. Studio pottery in particular – which denotes professional and amateur artists working alone, making one-off or short-run pieces – is enjoying a marked renaissance. It could be said that this current fervent public interest is part of a broader movement – a craft revival of sorts.

To the Modernists, who rather dominated the art and design scene in the 20th century, ‘craft’ – including pottery – was anachronistic and quaint. The other camp, the craft enthusiasts, rejected the soullessness of Modernism’s perfunctory nature and shiny clean lines, clutching ever tightly to the artisanal traditions of craftsmanship, qualities of decorative art and deference to their predecessors’ techniques. After years in which studio pottery has seemingly been ignored outside a dwindling community of devotees and less often pursued as a serious profession – not least smothered by a tide of cheaply mass-produced ceramic imports – the field has recently gained a new legion of fans, collectors and makers alike traversing age, geography and demographics.

In the 21st century landscape, where things move fast and we increasingly live in a virtual world, where everyday items are mass-produced and often disposable, there has been a perceptible movement in retaliation to this life of ‘haste and waste’. The ubiquity of technology has moved us to seek something other, something more ‘human’. In a similar vein to the Arts and Craft movement emerging as a response to the negative social and aesthetic consequences of the Industrial Revolution in the 1860s, we are now answering to the current ‘Digital Revolution’ with a hunger for the authentic.

‘Slow living’ is being embraced in all its facets, encompassing a life of simplicity and less-is-more, with a shifting focus on quality of life as opposed to quantity of possessions. We are espousing ‘tree changes’, organic subsistence permaculture, unprocessed and homegrown food, and slow cooking.

This new mindfulness extends to an appreciation of things that are made by hand, not in a factory, and with this comes a desire for the imperfect, the original and the unique. We are drawn to items that represent this slowness, that reflect the marks of the maker, and embody the individuality that comes from objects created by human hands.



The vehicle that so aptly and tangibly captures this notion is ceramics. Nothing so strikingly connotes this unity of human hands and earthly materials as pottery. It is almost impossible to look at an object fashioned from clay and not imagine the hands of the maker contorting around the material and giving rise to its form.

Ironically, the same medium that has contributed to speeding up our lives has also, in many ways, facilitated this immense interest in the handmade: social media. Image-sharing social networks with an inherent 'aesthetic' or 'lifestyle' bent, such as Instagram and Pinterest, have doubled their users since 2012, and many trends and tastes have been expedited through the use of hashtags and the viral nature of online voyeurism. At a glance, search-friendly tags such as 'ceramics', 'pottery', 'clay' and

'handmade' have well over one million posts each – and counting.

Ceramicists now have access to these platforms to promote their work and gather fans. Simultaneously, pottery schools, workshops and courses are springing up everywhere as novices learn to throw and hand build their own dinnerware – and share their accomplishments online. Pottery schools have also indicated anecdotally an increase in demand since 2012 – with many now reporting long waiting lists, and moves to larger premises and the purchase of additional kilns to satisfy demand. The emergence of boutiques and retail stores selling ceramics alongside fashion and on-trend homewares indicates that demand has far exceeded that which off-track galleries and artisanal markets can supply. Ceramics have even made it into the mainstream realm of



It is a somewhat subjective curation aiming to shine light on a diverse cross-section of styles, experiences, geography and personality of the artists who have elected to work with this medium.

Through exploring the personal stories of the 53 artists interviewed in this book, it became apparent that, for all the diversity, several universal truths were emerging, running like a thread linking one story to another. It can safely be said that two influential mid-20th century British studio potters, Austrian-born Dame Lucie Rie and German-born Hans Coper, are enduring muses. It is also clear that in ceramics, disasters are inevitable – and detachment is part of the maturity and evolution of a ceramics practice. Those working with clay tend to describe a mystical, meditative quality in working with this material, and also say that the opening of a kiln post-firing is

most certainly one of the greatest joys to be had. Clay is very much recognised as a material steeped in history and tradition, and to work with such a material comes with an inherent sense of honour. To an artisan creating functional pieces out of clay, the feedback from others who love and use those pieces is immensely important. It can also be said that clay has a language of its own that cannot be expressed verbally, and terms of addiction – such as being ‘hooked’ – are very common. I hope that this book captures the spirit of the current clay renaissance, and all the creativity, consideration, skill, experience and talent that it represents.



reality television, with programs such as the BBC's *The Great British Pottery Throw Down* having become popular viewing.

Stemming from the ancient use of clay to create functional objects like bowls and jugs, ceramics has, over time, evolved to provide people with decorative pieces and, eventually, fine art. Today, ceramics covers a wide range of styles, from traditional pottery-based objects to avant-garde non-functional creations. The combinations of inspiration, materials, and methodology are infinite. It is this rich eclecticism that makes studio pottery so appealing, allowing makers to uniquely express their character through their work.

Clay seeks to explore this uniqueness in a contemporary global context. It is a showcase of the new clay artisans. A snapshot, not necessarily of what

is happening at a national gallery level, but rather what is happening in studios around the world. *Clay* aims to illustrate the diverse styles and output of the creatives currently moving in the space today – why they've chosen this path, what their work represents, how they describe their style, what has influenced them, what they love about working with the medium, the joys and challenges, and the signatures of their work. Some have been tertiary trained in ceramic arts while others have decades of studio experience – and others have changed careers entirely to follow their creative passion. Some are new to the game, but clearly have great intuition and talent that they are keenly exploring with great success.

This book does not intend to be an academic 'best of', documenting all the key ceramicists of our time, nor a technical exploration of ceramic methodology.

Alana Wilson

Australia

According to Alana Wilson, practising ceramics allows her to create pieces that interact with people's everyday lives. She means this not necessarily functionally, but that the utilitarian aspects of ceramics helps to solidify its relation to physicality, reality and humanity in ways that she feels some mediums of contemporary art cannot. 'Some of what we know of the oldest cultures of this Earth are communicated through vessels and utilitarian objects that have withstood time. There is an extremely rich history of ceramics – different in so many cultures – that contributes to anthropology and cultural documentation as much as fine art,' she says.

Choosing not to adhere to a specific 'style', Alana aims instead to embed or communicate concepts in her work, constructing the experiential process. Her light, serene and textural signatures of referential, contemporary, experimental and archaeological elements are marked by aesthetic and technical components. Her hallmarks appear as forms and glazes that she repeats and develops consistently.

The bodies of her vessels are created using porcelain paper clay and terracotta paper clay. Alana finds the structure of clay works perfectly for her hand-building and coiling methods and, once fired,

is much lighter – allowing her to make large pieces that take several days to construct. With her glazing process, layers of washes, slips and glaze are built up and react in the 1260°C heat of the firing. The results include textural build-up, flashing, vaporisation of air-borne ingredients and a multitude of chemical changes that contribute to the final surface.

Alana's work is informed by an accumulation of many people and experiences. 'One major influence, which is not just integral to my work but forever integral to my lifestyle, is water, and subsequently, space. I grew up between Australia and New Zealand, in a family of swimmers, with my parents running a swim school. I swam competitively, so most mornings, evenings and weekends were spent in and around the pool or at the beach. These vast natural environments have been immensely influential.'

Growing up, Alana was always quite creative, predominantly in a spatial sense, with surfaces and objects in an environment, as opposed to images. This eventually led her to completing a degree in fine arts at the National Art School in Sydney, 'I did ceramics on my first day and was in love from the beginning. I finished my postgraduate studies in 2012 and have been practising since.'



Left: Alana favours paper clay for the bodies of her vessels as the structure of the clay suits her hand-building and coiling methods perfectly.

Now, as a full-time artist, Alana describes the primary challenge as communicating her ideas and work in the most succinct and 'truest' way, at the right time and in the right place. 'Finding the right people to build working relationships with that share your vision is an important aspect. In Australia, the geographical isolation can be a challenge in building an international audience and network,' she notes.

She concedes that the challenges – once you overcome them – ultimately lead to the positive. 'Everything else is joy! I particularly love it when I see my work has connected strongly with someone,' says Alana. 'I believe human connection is the most important thing in life, as well as the most rewarding, and for this to be achieved through my work is a great joy. Being able to do what I love everyday is the biggest thrill.'

What she loves most are the surprises inherent in her craft. 'I put something in the kiln, hope for the best and then am often pleasantly surprised by the results,' says Alana. 'There's a degree of control that you have but you can never make exactly the same thing twice, there is always variation and I like that, it means you can't be too precious or hold things too close.'



Above and opposite: Alana's work is recognised for the light, calm and serene mood that it evokes. Visually, her signatures are identified by their raw, textural, archaeological aesthetic, communicated via particular forms and glazes that she repeats and develops consistently.

‘The aspect of chance within a firing and the surrender to an elemental process is another joy of working in ceramic.’



There is something deeply pleasing about the form and feel of handmade objects. Never has this been more evident than in the recent renaissance of pottery and ceramics. In our increasingly digital and intangible culture, there is a desire for unique pieces and a respect for the imperfections associated with the marks of the maker. Clay is the medium that so aptly communicates this authenticity.

From the functional to decorative and sculptural works pushing the boundaries of the craft, *Clay* offers a glimpse into the lives and practises of over 50 studio potters from around the world. This is a celebration of the new pottery artisans; a snapshot of a moment of resurgence; and a behind-the-scenes look at the unique and eclectic offerings from independent studios around the world.

