



## Interesting Ways

*by Eva Masterman*

Asked in a 2019 *Guardian* article, 'do you think the art world takes ceramics seriously?', the indomitable Kenyan-British ceramicist Magdalene Odundo said:

I think it's beginning to do so. A lot of people from other mediums are now working in clay. This is not surprising, because of all making mediums, clay is the most versatile and pliable and naturally earthy, sympathetic, and human. More than any other art, it has crossed the boundaries of disciplines in very interesting ways.<sup>i</sup>

It's certainly true that ceramics continues to enjoy renewed status in galleries and art fairs, and the variety of work represented in these contexts is getting broader and more nuanced. Cross Lane Gallery is one of several contemporary galleries showcasing an exciting mix of clay work at the moment, positioning what perhaps previously would have been seen as 'pottery' in dialogue with more conceptual art works. It's an exciting time to be working with clay; the age-old argument between the hierarchy of craft and art feels less relevant, with work increasingly being exhibited in relation to each other, rather than in competition.

The resurgence of ceramics in Western contemporary fine art could probably be tracked from around the late 2000s. A material previously largely ignored by the art world and closely guarded by those within the discipline itself, the rise of neoliberalism and the introduction of fees across UK universities sparked an unlikely change. Ceramic courses were quickly deemed too expensive to run, serving too few students, and most were closed or subsumed into wider creative courses and workshops. In response, a whole generation of fine artists (as well as product designers, illustrators, fashion students and architects) 'discovered' clay and with it, the incredible versatility of hand building, the transformative qualities of glaze, the meditation of the wheel. Who could blame them for getting hooked? This is what, I would suggest, triggered the first wave of contemporary art ceramics, full of excited naivety, cracks galore, crawling glazes, and chunky rims. There was an energy to this, of course, and whilst many who dedicated their life to the subtleties of form and craft found the lack of apparent 'skill' problematic, with hindsight, it's fair to say this opening up of ceramics has ultimately invigorated the discipline and created new and eager audiences for it.

Over a decade on, things have started to get a bit more sophisticated. Enough artists and - possibly even more pertinent to this essay - curators, have been around clay long enough to start to dig a little deeper, to understand what clay can really do. A recent show at the Thomas Dane Gallery in Naples<sup>ii</sup> places experienced ceramicists, such as Lawson Oyekan (also exhibiting in '4'), in the same context as the most abstract of artists, such as Lucio Fontana, with contemporary ceramic artists like Phoebe Cummings adjacent to fine art converts such as Serena Korda. Another recent show at Two Temple Place<sup>iii</sup> highlights the seminal Black female potter Ladi Kwali, who was a pioneer in developing studio pottery in the UK and America alongside the better-known Michael Cardew. We are in a thriving time for ceramics and ceramic curation, where we can start to uncover deeper stories and stronger connections to this ancient material and through it, deeper connections between ourselves and each other.

The feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi said that ‘creativity is to unite, to link’<sup>iv</sup> and this is at the heart of the curation of ‘4’. Cross Lane director Rebecca Scott met Nicola Tassie as art students at UAL in the 1980s; Lawson Oyekan and Gavin Turk through co-director Mark Woods via their studies at the RCA; and William Plumptre as a local artist in Kendal in the Lake District where Cross Lane is based. Art, creativity, *clay*, has brought these people together, across disciplines, across decades and the resulting show is as diverse and unique as the artists included in it.

Nicola Tassie began her career as a painter but turned to ceramics in the 1980s, setting up one of the first ceramic studios in London. Her work expands across two main themes: exquisitely thrown functional ware that distils her sense of design and form and composed sculptural assemblages that play with and stretch our understandings of the ceramic object. The work made for Cross Lane sees her methodology take on new narratives: vessel-like or pebbled forms stacked and clustered together in stone circles and walls that cut through the architecture of the gallery. Set against the backdrop of the Cumbrian countryside, there’s a direct conversation between the contemporary design that informs these arrangements and the ancient mountains, stone circles, and dry-stone walls of the landscape outside.

Where Tassie’s work was chosen to represent a design approach that is deeply informed by her painterly origins, William Plumptre is much more of a traditionalist. He spent two years honing his skills in Mashiko, Japan with many different potters, including a National Treasure, before returning to the Lake District to set up his own farmhouse studio. His work is a subtle and deep exploration of craft and the domestic, embodying the studio pottery philosophy that function, form, and beauty should work hand in hand and be lived with, appreciated in the home and through use. Combining ancient Japanese techniques with local materials, Plumptre suggests a unique connection between his vessels, the land in which they’re made, and the Japanese traditions that inspired them.

The inclusion of Gavin Turk’s *En Face*, 72 clay busts of his own head that resulted from an interactive performance, *The Bust Party*, which took place in his studio in April 2010, provides a counterbalance to the sincerity that we find in the other artists in ‘4’. Turk is renowned for his irreverent commentary on the art world and art, and *En Face* is no different, questioning the ceramic traditions that value handwork epitomised in Soetsu Yanagi’s influential text ‘The Unknown Craftsman’<sup>v</sup>. The sculptures form an exquisite corpse completed by many untrained hands, questioning authorship whilst simultaneously commentating on the ego of the artist-maker and challenging the value of art – or craft – itself.

Finally, Lawson Oyekan’s sculptures, like Turk’s, are also described as self-portraits but offer a completely different proposition. Seeking to offer a message of reassurance, of connection to light in the dark, the humped forms speak of human endurance and ability to heal. Often grouped in threes, they reference spirituality, with clay as the substance of creation and the many creation myths which have clay as a central theme (even Western science backs up the notion that the biochemicals that made life on Earth originated in clay<sup>vi</sup>). Their larger-than-life scale forces the viewer to confront them, their perforated surfaces scratched with philosophical musings and poetry in Yoruba and English; through this confrontation, this questioning, Oyekan hopes that healing can begin.

Chosen to represent contrasting attitudes to design, the domestic, sculpture and spirituality, these four completely different artists are brought together through a single material that explores the uniqueness of human existence. Through it, they connect not only with each other, but also to a global history of material culture. This show is part of what I see as the second wave of ceramic curation, one that understands what it’s looking at, what clay can offer, and holds high craft next to fine art conceptualism at equal standing. ‘4’ is positioned within a network of thinking, rethinking and curating ceramics as something that stretches beyond the walls of the gallery, that connects to a material that crosses continents, time, race, gender and speaks in its own language, outside verbal

and textual communications. To echo the words of Odundo, '4' absolutely takes ceramics seriously, crossing boundaries sympathetically and naturally, and certainly in very interesting ways.

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<sup>i</sup> Odundo, M. interviewed by Khanchandani, P. (2019) Guardian Online

<sup>ii</sup> A Matter of Life and Death: An exhibition of works in clay (2022) curated by Lomax, J. Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples

<sup>iii</sup> Body Vessel Clay, Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art (2022) curated by Dr Das, J. Two Temple Place, London

<sup>iv</sup> Saadawi, N.E interviewed by Guru-Murthy, K. (2018) Ways to Change the World, Channel 4 podcast, Series 1, Episode 13,

<sup>v</sup> Yanagi, S (1972) The Unknown Craftsman

<sup>vi</sup> Cornell University. (2013, November 5). Clay may have been birthplace of life on Earth, new study suggests. ScienceDaily. Retrieved April 17, 2022 from [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/11/131105132027.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/11/131105132027.htm)