

4 REBECCA SCOTT IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOLA TASSIE, WILLIAM PLUMPTRE & LAWSON OYEKAN ON THEIR CERAMIC PRACTICES

Rebecca Scott: When did you start to explore ceramics and what made you continue with it as the main focus of your practice?

Nicola Tassie: I took up ceramics soon after leaving art school where I had studied painting. My main interest was in the use of materials; I was putting sand into the paint and using lots of different drawing materials. Subject engagement became secondary. Clay materials did not feel too different, but I found the regulated process quite liberating. Form making and surface are interdependent. I was throwing on the wheel, making tableware objects and this 'crafted' domestic scale of working, in relation to my past experience as an 'artist' painter, soon evolved as a subject.

William Plumptre: My first experience of clay was at senior school. It was not exploratory as such, but I was intrigued and delighted by the results of simple throwing and firing pots. At Chelsea art school, I first explored the many facets and techniques of making pots – we had several disciplines from working with plaster moulds, throwing, and then glazing. I loved throwing from the start, at first, a challenge and later a pleasure of the many shapes I could explore.

However, nothing prepared me for the two years spent in Japan. I was made to start all over again and follow traditions and disciplines laid down over many years. The workshops had an order, at Shimaoka Sensei, the workshop was sheer enticement, the building had a cool earth floor in summer and paper shoji windows so you could not see out. The wheels were all Japanese style kick wheels, and the workshop had a complete sense of purpose. The whole working process was deliberate and beautifully executed, I was hooked.

Lawson Oyekan: Like most inquisitive children drawn to the dynamic nature of water. I was fascinated with the physicality of the flowing river and its clay in my environment: the Ogbere River courses of Ibadan. I explored all rivers that I encountered, including sea voyages. During art school, I was allowed to place clay as my favourite medium, by which I further process through transformed into a form beyond the initial discipline of drawing. I learned the traditional methods of working with clay, but I understand the physical nature of plastic clay as stiffer viscosity than that of water.

Rebecca Scott: Nicola, William, both of you integrate the traditions of studio pottery in your practice. Can you tell me about the relation to the tradition of ceramics and your developed interests in material and form?

NT: There are many clay languages. I've followed the studio ceramics tradition because of the singular involvement in the whole process from hands-on making to firing processes. It traditionally produces domestic-ware and I've become particularly interested in its history. It's ubiquitous; you find ceramic vessels in every home, the traditional domain of women. They reveal themselves to the user through everyday touch, active functionality or as objects on view (a sort of unconscious curated arrangement) often in display cabinets. To me they speak of opposing ideas of aspiration and containment, status, and fragility.

WP: Whilst in Japan, I learnt the basics of Zogan inlay, a technique used by Shimaoka Sensei to inlay slips into the thrown pot. The vehicle for this was rope, an ancient way of decorating used centuries before by Japanese Potters.

On return from Japan, I endeavoured to explore ropes and the making of them. The clay lent itself well to the indentation and I carved out a basic process to inlay my pots. This took me to rope makers and weaving patterns that I could then roll over the surface and inlay with slip. I have used this process ever since and find the technique immensely satisfying albeit a slow one. My ropes and the clay are integral, some work better than others but I love the result of the rope pattern "bleeding" through the wood ash glazes.

Rebecca Scott: Nicola, I see your recent work operating more within a sculptural aesthetic and hybrid form. It steps outside of the domestic into a culmination of shapes.

NT: In my Totem ceramics, I pile up domestic vessels into fragile towers of staked pots – enlarged into sculptural forms, they challenge the expected domestic domain of studio ceramics.

My recent work references the exterior landscape of stone walls and cairns. In these multi piece assemblages, I'm using a wide range of glazes that trace the changing developments and attitudes in domestic ware, colour, and surface – from the ash glazes of Leachean Pottery to the standard and chromatic ranges of commercial production. I feel the work is pushing up against the boundaries of the interior and exterior world. The interior vision and the external view, ideas of containment and aspiration, and the contested definition between craft and art.

Rebecca Scott: Lawson, a recurrent theme within your work is the physical drama of nature's complexity. Can you tell me more about this?

LO: Understanding clay by its viscous property belies the character of the geometromorphic drama of sounds and the plastic motion it evolves. I have sorted extensively to understand the structural importance of the human skeletal muscle – the diaphragm and its mechanical function in the more complex oxygenating breathing processes by which all living beings continue to be electrically alive.

I try to understand the larger purpose of society's negative energies, a repressive force of inhumanity and the organised fraudulent 'Rogue Current of Reality' of its revisionist scholarship, constituting an existential threat to the more incredible aesthetic factors of humanity's inherent potential within nature.

I practice the art of transfiguration by becoming all things I want life to have through my work: mastering the dynamic movements of their life forces: this practice allows me to compose and articulate their physicality in unison with my subject.

After studying the mechanical function of the skeletal muscle, the diaphragm in the human inner reality, its actuation and reciprocating mechanism, I understand that it is central to the oxygenating of the body and keeps it alive. And the contiguous-pressure aspect of interplaying organs functions in unison to maintain life.

And extraordinarily, it turns out to be the most efficient mechanical articulation of releasing the friction of clay shrinking wider diameter of the base structure of the porcelain and a broad variety of clay works fired at a high temperature. The integral diaphragm in the composition, therefore, eliminates the need for sagger-refractory support for clay form, which often is prone to softening/misshaping at temperature close to their melting point.

Rebecca Scott: There is a robust tenderness, a tension, between the delicate manipulation of the materials, and the structure of the vessels.

LO: I wanted a form to have emerged of fires relevant purely on its own material physical property endurance. The physical properties of the stone are central to the ancient African ability to invent the geometry component of the pyramid. And similarly, the perfect geometry of load-bearing arches indicates the structural strength of intelligently assembled clay bricks.

I sometimes combine, the Concepts of Breathing, Electricity and Endurance Strength to compose a standing form such as in the units of the 'Coming Up for Air' series. And the stomachs of humans rushing to freedom in the currents of Perestroika Twin, in the early part of the 'Body Undivided' series composition.

However, I am what it feels like to be alive, related through the capsule of time dynamics registered in the conclusion of the form: I become all things, but first, I am flowing like clay & water with the sensations of their animated reflective surfaces.

Rebecca Scott: Does your creative process start from a certain image in your mind, or do you seek inspiration as you progress?

WP: I start with a small portfolio of work and depending on what new

glazes are being explored I allow my work to evolve over time and during a collection, I rarely draw any shape, I find that the instant result of throwing clay is sufficient, and I enjoy the limited time that I can work on one piece on the wheel.

LO: I am aware of both, and the material speaks to me of how it understands my thoughts. I in turn can hear what it says. Through the relationship with the material, I can wish forms into being. However, these are the dimensions of reality. And this is illustrated in a word in the translation of the Yoruba language "Amo" Clay: "The knower of all things eternally Alive".

Rebecca Scott: Is there a specific dialogue you want the viewer to see in your work?

NT: Ceramics are very desireful and encountering them makes for a visceral, sensual reaction. But they can also transcend their objectiveness and transport the imagination into the wider world. I feel I'm in a constant grapple with the contradistinctions of the materials and its reception.

WP: I hope that it is enjoyed for what it is – the shapes and combinations of natural glaze colour and the compliment of the rope pattern. It is not always a simple combination, but the materials lend themselves well to one another.

LO: A dialogue of positive evolution, uncompromised in the fuller sense and graspe of its meaningfulness. I want to bring the viewer safely out of their cocoon of culture into a realm of widened perceptiveness.