

Clay in Covid



The coronavirus pandemic has profoundly affected the art world, including ceramics. *Colin Martin* relates the experiences of ceramicists, RCA ceramic students, gallerists, curators and collectors, and how a broken year might be marked not erased

Until last year, the potter Steve Harrison bisque-fired his distinctive wares in an electric kiln in London, before salt glazing them in his gas-fired kiln in Wales. ‘When my ability to travel was restricted, I installed a second, smaller electric kiln in London, which I use to bisque-fire earthenware and experiment with different ways of glazing,’ he explains. ‘The recent pieces have informed my salt glazing in a new way, as well as existing as unique works.’ This episode also resolved Harrison’s long-standing question: ‘Is my work defined by salt glaze?’ He now describes himself as defined by ‘making and firing.’

Historically, most of Harrison’s sales are in Japan where, recognising that his work would resonate culturally, the Korean entrepreneur Sonya Park established a strong market for it. She told Harrison that during the pandemic daily rituals have become much more important to her Japanese clients and created an even greater demand for his work.

NEW RULES AND CHALLENGES

The pandemic prevented the Dutch ceramicist Henk Wolvers from travelling to China for his only exhibition in 2020. ‘I miss exhibitions because they provide feedback

as well as generate income, but I feel positive about the future,’ he claims. Some years ago, he and Irene van den Hurk converted a former school for disabled children in ‘s-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands, into a mid-century modern pavilion. A wide corridor links Wolvers’ studio and his separate exhibition space. ‘During lockdown visiting clients were able to maintain social distance when viewing works or discussing commissions,’ he said.

Wolvers’ smaller works, including tea bowls, are also available at their shop, close to the city’s art and design museum. Although there are fewer tourists, his loyal clientele, who he keeps in touch with via regular emailed newsletters, can easily obtain information on potential purchases, even when it is shut. ‘We noticed that, in these challenging times, people seem especially pleased to acquire something beautiful to have at home,’ adds van den Hurk.

Ceramicist Felicity Aylieff faced professional challenges during the pandemic. Frustratingly, a week before the first UK lockdown in March 2020, she and Takeshi Yasuda sold their shared studio in Bath, so she lacked studio space. Later, China stopped issuing entry visas, so she could not spend summer in Jingdezhen as usual, working at their shared Red

House studio. Instead, at home in London, she created two-dimensional surface designs for a series of plates, commissioned as giftware by the Palace Museum in Beijing; and researched and developed botanical illustrations for a future exhibition that will include her monumental vases.

TEACHING CERAMICS

As Professor of Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College of Art, Aylieff, along with the other staff headed by Dr Steve Brown, faced a lockdown educational dilemma. Some elements of the two-year MA course were deliverable online, however more problematic was that students could not work in the college's studios. First year is usually devoted to technical experimentation and idea development, but instead the research, lectures and thesis writing was bought forward, being easier to deliver virtually. Second year is about resolving ideas and producing a cohesive body of work for examination and exhibition.

'The current cohort of second year students missed part of their first year and almost all of their second,' explains Aylieff. 'A number found alternative places to work, however they have been disadvantaged by the loss of critical dialogue in the studio with tutors who also provide technical advice and suggest avenues for further exploration. We encouraged students to work in a range of media, with many discovering unexpected talents. Discussion was generated through both individual and small group tutorials exploring both theory and practice.'

Taking the visiting 'guest' lecture programme online also brought unexpected benefits, as with no requirement for speakers to travel, it took less of their time and many agreed more readily. Additionally, speakers were recruited from other countries, providing students with a global perspective on contemporary ceramic practice. The 2020 cohort of MA graduates did not have a physical degree show, so Aylieff has organised for selected final works to be exhibited at the Design Museum in July. It is likely that the 2021 Degree Show will also be postponed and reorganised for when access restrictions have been eased.

A TALE OF TWO GALLERIES

Situated a stone's throw from the British Museum's main entrance, the window displays at Contemporary Ceramics, the Craft Potters Association's (CPA) gallery, are well placed to catch the eye of tourists. 'There is definitely a correlation between the sales of medium-priced works and footfall,' explains CPA Marketing Co-ordinator Katie Lionheart. That footfall disappeared when London locked down last year. Fortunately, the gallery already had well-developed plans in place for establishing an online shop, which quickly became a reality. 'We can list many more works online than can be exhibited in the gallery, with photographs of every work taken from multiple angles and information about the materials and techniques used by the makers,' said Lionheart.

New visitors to the gallery website have risen by 25% since the online shop was launched, and the CPA is

confident that developing and retaining an engaged online customer base, including collectors both in the UK and internationally, particularly those who had previously not considered purchasing ceramics online before, will provide a firm foundation for the future.

Unfortunately, the future of Contemporary Applied Art (CAA), based in Marylebone, is less secure. In early March, Judith Unwin, chair of its board of trustees, announced that given the charity's precarious financial position, its operating costs must be radically reduced. Consequently, its three-strong gallery team had been made redundant. The extent to which lockdown contributed to this decision was unstated, however it most certainly did. The CAA website lists 71 ceramicists among the makers whose work is sold in its gallery. In the short term it will be staffed on a mostly voluntary basis, by trustees and maker members. The CAA has applied for additional funding which, if granted, will enable a new operating model to be developed.

COLLECTING IN LOCKDOWN

'I have to see and feel ceramic sculptures before I buy,' asserts the Dutch collector Rosemarie Willems, a stalwart at London's *Collect* and other fairs, and a generous donor of figurative works to museums. Although Willems has previously looked at ceramics on the internet, she seldom makes purchases online, and then only very modestly priced works. During lockdown, however, she acquired four significant works that she had seen and admired previously. From a Brussels gallery she bought a ceramic skull by Vivian van Blerk, which she had seen in 2019 at the 16th Istanbul Biennale; and from Galerie Terra Delft she purchased figurative sculptures by Peter Beard, Marc Janssens and Michael Flynn.

Certainly, I would agree with Willems that exploring the materiality of ceramics, whether sculpted or thrown, is of paramount importance; handling them to experience their heft, running fingers across them to detect tactile variations in their surfaces or glazes, and observing how light illuminates and interacts with glazed or unglazed areas. My own significant online ceramic purchase during lockdown was a large porcelain moon jar from Adam Frew's solo exhibition at Contemporary Ceramics. I had confidence in this online purchase, having previously admired, handled and purchased works from Frew at several *Ceramic Art London (CAL)* fairs, so I knew exactly what to expect and was not disappointed; however, I miss the buzz of *CAL* and the thrill of discovery.

PREVIOUS PAGE FROM LEFT: Details of: Michael Flynn, *Dancer in the Forest*, ceramic sculpture purchased from Terra Delft by Rosemarie Willems; RCA MA student Jasmine Simpson, *Porcelain Tile Mural*, cobalt oxide painting; Edmund de Waal, *Straight-sided Porcelain Bowl*, showing detail of gold, lead repair; Henk Wolvers, *Five-piece Wall Installation*; Steve Harrison, *Glazed Earthenware Vessel*



LEFT: Steve Harrison, *Grid of Ten Salt-glazed and Ten Glazed Earthenware Beakers*
BELOW: Henk Wolvers, *Tulip Vase*, 2020

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Edmund de Waal's hands holding one of his *Winter Pots*, porcelain bowl with lead repair



PATIENCE IN A PANDEMIC

As well as curtailing people's travel plans, the pandemic also disrupted international air freight, which had a knock-on effect on curating and scheduling exhibitions globally. Given the resulting challenges of staging an exhibition involving international loans and newly commissioned works, Mariam Rosser-Owen, Curator (Middle East) in the Ceramics Department at the V&A Museum, is incredibly patient. We have been exchanging emails about a *Contemporary Middle Eastern Ceramics* exhibition at the V&A since February 2020. Originally scheduled to open in June that year, preparations were suspended when the museum closed in March due to the first London lockdown. In January 2021, a mid-March opening date was mooted, only to be postponed again until mid-May 2021, the earliest museums can reopen. However, unlike in the first lockdown, staff have been able to work, so they were able to install the exhibition in March and develop online content for early release.

There were also problems in shipping clays from Egypt to Ashraf Hanna, which he had planned to use in making new works especially for the show. 'In the end Hanna used Egyptian clay he had brought back previously, mixed with local Pembrokeshire clay, as it was always his intention to use a combination,' said Rosser-Owen. There was also continuing uncertainty about when Sara Ouhaddou's tiled terracotta panel would arrive from Morocco. And although Babak Golkar's interactive *Scream Pot* (2014) will still be exhibited, visitors are not able to bellow into its large vase forms as intended. A video will be shown instead.

'I needed to make vessels to touch and hold, to pass on,' says Edmund de Waal about working alone in his studio last spring and early summer when, for the first time in 16 years, he made individual porcelain bowls, open dishes and lidded jars, which were not destined to be parts of an installation. In December, they were shown in his exhibition *Some Winter Pots*, at Gagolian in Davies Street, London. Marking a year in which the world seemed crushed by the pandemic, their rims were patched with folded lead or gold (or both). Silver was used in a few cases and others had been mended with gold lacquer, using the Japanese art of kintsugi.

MARKING A CRISIS

'Two old Chinese bowls from the Song dynasty I had in the studio, one whose rim was patched with iron and the other with a kintsugi repair, were central to the making of this work,' explains de Waal. 'Kintsugi is not the art of erasure – the invisible mend, the erasing of a mistake – but rather the marking of a loss.' Participating in a *Collect* fair webinar in March, again alone in his echoing studio, he wondered aloud how we make a memorial to the end of the pandemic: 'It has to be something related to social space and the return of touch to everyday life.' 

For details visit steveharrison.co.uk; henkwolvers.com; aylieff.com; rca.ac.uk; contemporaryceramics.uk; caa.org.uk; vam.ac.uk; edmunddewaal.com

Images: Michael Flynn/Terra Delft/Rosemarie Willems; Jasmin Simpson/RCA; © Steve Harrison, photo: Julia Harrison; © Henk Wolvers; © Edmund de Waal, photo Alzbeta Jaresova, courtesy Gagolian