

The power of pots: Jack Doherty on ceramics as fine art ahead of Ceramic Art London

By Jack Doherty | 15 April 2015

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Ceramicist Jack Doherty makes the case for the fine art of pots ahead of this weekend's Ceramic Art London at the Royal College of Art



Clockwise from top left: Delfina Emmanuel; Kyra Cane; Jin Eui Kim; Iosbel Egan; Annie Turrer and Jack Doherty

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Within the wider contemporary art scene, contemporary ceramics is ever evolving and expanding. For a significant number of UK makers educated and trained in ceramics through Art College systems, the traditional terms 'potter' and 'pottery' no longer describe their work or ambitions. They navigate their way in the wider visual arts sector, which has traditionally been deeply suspicious of work made from clay.

The "high unseriousness" for which critics such as Hilton Kramer attacked those working in clay consigned such works to the status of non-art or "craft". However, the art world has largely outgrown this attitude reflected by the growing number of galleries and museums focused entirely on ceramics.

Globally renowned UK museums pay great attention to their ceramics collections. The V&A has a ceramicist-in-residence and the Ashmolean boasts the finest collection worldwide.

A number of London galleries such as Contemporary Ceramics Centre and Flow Gallery specialise in craft, whilst international art fairs devoted to makers such as Ceramic Art London at the Royal College of Art and Collect at the Saatchi Gallery also have popular appeal.

Ceramic Art London welcomes new makers, with approximately a quarter of exhibitors being first-timers. So the fair is able to see first-hand how many ceramicists are starting out on their careers, despite some closure of specialised ceramics programmes.

There is constant innovation and expertise demonstrated in the hundreds of applicants to surprise the selection committee. Some exciting up-and-coming ceramicists include Christopher Taylor, the winner of last year's 'Best Newcomer' award at Ceramic Art London and Jin Eui Kim.

Taylor makes vessel forms that appear familiar at first, even commonplace. His use of rich colour and texture, combining traditional and contemporary techniques, challenges our understanding of domestic objects.

In contrast, Jin Eui Kim explores how the perception of ceramic forms can be manipulated by arrangements of formal bands on their surfaces. His lidded vessels create illusionary spatial phenomena which influence the actual three-dimensional nature of the form.

Critics and the public alike are always keen to find the next best thing and this enthusiasm for emerging artists is not limited to fine art, it crosses all genres.

Pioneering exhibitions such as *The Raw and the Cooked* and *The Secret History of Clay*, at Tate Liverpool in 2004, have revealed a rich seam of contemporary art in clay produced by established artists such as Anthony Gormley, Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy to name just a few. Ceramic artists Edmund De Waal, Julian Stair and Clare Twomey among others, are makers whose education and training come from within the 'craft' arena.

De Waal's work is currently on display at the Barbican alongside high-profile artists such as Sir Peter Blake, Andy Warhol and Damien Hirst. Twomey's recent major solo exhibition at the prestigious Gardiner Museum is another example of the increasingly elevated status preeminent ceramicists can achieve.



Christopher Taylor, Blue and Yellow Bellied Vessel with Black Floral Pattern, thrown brick clay decorated with colour slips, under glaze print and lead glaze, 21cm

© Courtesy of Ceramic Art London

They have been pushing against what used to be an impenetrable fine art canon and have found significant places within the art world, which embrace and value their work.

If the concepts and context of these artists resonate with the public, then there can be movement across boundaries regardless of genre.

Jack Doherty is a ceramicist, founder member and chair of the organising committee of Ceramic Art London, which takes places April 17-19 2015 at the Royal College of Art. Visit www.ceramics.org.uk for more details.

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