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T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Funky Ceramics Are Everywhere. Including in Galleries.

The fine art world has started to embrace works made from clay — a material it once deemed lowly.

Kate Guadagnino | June 14, 2018



Clockwise from top left: Work by Ruby Neri, Julia Haft-Candell, Didi Rojas and Woody De Othello. Credit Clockwise from top left: courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, photo: Lee Thompson; courtesy of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery; courtesy of Didi Rojas; courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery

More than sewing, flower-arranging or zine-making, clay might offer the perfect antidote to modern times. Hyper-tactile, it taps into a primal desire to shape earth — what the potter and writer Edmund de Waal has described as thinking through the hands — and is beloved for its immediacy. “You move and the clay moves with you,” says Aneta Regel, who was a finalist for this year’s Loewe Craft Prize and who, 12 years after graduating from London’s Royal College of Arts, now finds her works — lumpy, funky, cooked until cracked — aligned with a prevailing taste for artfully imperfect handwork, more generally, and for ceramics, in particular. If it is unsurprising to find mounting evidence of the trend on Instagram and at lifestyle-leaning boutiques like Samuji in New York and CristaSeya in Paris, it is notable that clay’s proliferation has, over the past decade, extended to the fine art world, which has long been wary of the material, widely considered to be lowly, functional and inexpensive. One of de Waal’s early teachers liked to say that his pots “had to be cheap enough to drop,” a condition that recalls the train tracks around Kolkata, India, strewn with shards of terracotta as a result of riders’ tossing their empty cups of chai out the window.

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Betty Woodman, "Striped Napkin Holder," 1983.
Credit Courtesy of Charles Woodman/The Estate of Betty Woodman and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; photo: Thomas Müller

That has not been the attitude taken at recent art fairs. At Frieze New York last month, Matthew Marks Gallery showed a speckled and contorted coil by the ceramic artist Ken Price, while Parrasch Heijnen showed craggy forms by Julia Haft-Candell, one of Price's artistic heirs. On the walls of Martos Gallery's booth were paintings by Dan Asher; in the center, several small sculptures of his — modest unglazed stacks of what looked to be clay scraps. A low-slung table at the Blum & Poe booth was set as if for coffee with friends — or, dare I say, a craft fair — with pretty but plain-looking mugs and bowls by J.B. Blunk. In a way, it was among the most provocative displays at an event so focused on remarkably high prices, underscoring how, by placing ceramic works in this context, these artists and gallerists are not merely signaling a stylistic shift, but asking age-old questions about what qualifies as art.

Of course, plenty of modern artists have at least dabbled in ceramics — most of the Fauves took a turn painting on pitchers and platters, and then there are the several thousand ceramic works by Picasso, from plates with faces to vases with tails, some of which were recently on view at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art outside Copenhagen. As Picasso worked in Vallauris, France, an emerging band of California sculptors (Viola Frey, Peter Voulkos, John Mason) made strides in establishing clay as a primary fine art medium. As did Betty Woodman, who started out as a "precocious studio potter," says Stuart Krimko, the research and editorial director at David Kordansky Gallery, which works closely with the artist's estate, and who ended up being the first living woman to have a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art — in 2006. Woodman struggled for most of her career to be taken seriously, in part because she was a woman, in part because she worked in a medium that was relegated to the realm of decorative arts, but her work resisted easy classification. (Krimko mentions her "sort of proto-pillow pitchers that she dubbed erotic burritos.") According to the sculptor Arlene Shechet, a friend of Woodman's and a witness to her ongoing frustration with her lack of acceptance, "She'd ask me, 'Why should we agree to be in any of these ceramic shows?'"

Perhaps thanks to battles already waged, today's contemporary artists seem to be relatively free of hang-ups about turning to clay. In addition to planning a coming retrospective of Woodman's work, David Kordansky recently exhibited a series of large-scale pots by Ruby Neri depicting naively painted female nudes, their breasts in relief and their ponytails doubling as handles. Neri, whose father is the Bay Area sculptor Manuel Neri, trained in painting at U.C.L.A. in the late '90s and transitioned to making fully ceramic works around 2015. "At first, I didn't know if I could overcome ceramics' heavy-handed history," she says. "And I'd sort of pooh-poohed ceramics in grad school, like a teenager rebelling against their parents, but once I crossed over I realized it allowed me to shed all this debris, like fabricating armatures to put other material on top of, and focus on the enjoyable aspects of making work." She considers the move a breakthrough, but says she does not feel inclined to push clay to its technical limits, as a traditional ceramist might.

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From left: Ruby Neri, "Women with Burdens," 2018; detail from Woody De Othello's "At Night I Can't Sleep," 2018.

Credit From left: courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. photo Lee Thompson; courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Shechet, who makes sculpture in clay as well as in a variety of other mediums, believes there is indeed still a line between fine art and crafts, and that good art is imbued with conceptual rigor and chases a higher aim. "More than any one material, what interests me is making works that are about being human," says Shechet, whose partly porcelain sculptures will be installed in New York's Madison Square Park in September. Though one could argue that, especially when compared with, say, bronze, ceramics, these fragile works that can't help but retain traces of their maker, possess an inherently human quality.

This philosophy pertains to work by a new generation of ceramic artists as well. Didi Rojas, a recent Pratt graduate, experiments with sculpting clay shoes — color-blocked Balenciaga sneakers, pearl-studded Gucci boots — expressly not made for walking. (Some of her latest creations are currently up at Andrew Edlin Gallery on the Bowery in downtown Manhattan and are about to go on view at Fisher Parrish in Brooklyn.) "Shoes are self-portraits of their wearers," Rojas says, "and I like the idea of making something attainable through material, one made of the very ground we walk on." Woody De Othello, who graduated from California College of the Arts last year and is set to have a solo show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco this September, also uses clay, with all its associations of functionality, to build nonfunctional versions of everyday objects, such as a warped air vent or a blocky TV remote. He hopes that viewers will see themselves in the pieces, which droop downward as if they've had a long day, and uses a high-gloss, almost reflective glaze to heighten the effect. "A lot of times when people look at my sculptures," De Othello says, "they experience a desire to reach out and touch." Does he allow it? "It's definitely not allowed."