

EARTH

& FIRE



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Thames
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Modern potters, their tools,
techniques and practices

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Earth and fire: A partnership

Jane Sawyer

Clay is a wonderfully engaging material for humans. In our hands, it responds as if it were alive. Every clay feels different and behaves differently. They each have an individual personality, a character that demands the maker learn to work with it. This is a relationship, a partnership, that has allowed many aspects of human culture to be recorded throughout history. Today, archaeologists, ethnologists and historians around the world continue to learn from discoveries recorded in clay. From the oldest ochre cave paintings to the latest 3D-printed ceramics, our human journey is deeply connected to this unique material. And, like any good partnership, its future depends on respect.

Clay is made by and of the earth through thousands, even millions, of years of geological forces at work. Phenomena such as abrupt and violent volcanic eruptions, continental movement and earthquakes and glaciers in combination with acids, gases and water

pressure are part of a complex weathering process that, over extended geological time, acts on rocks and breaks them down into fine particles of silica and alumina. These particles are often moved far away from their original source and become layered in deposits that result in clay as we know it: a pliable and responsive material that can be dug straight from the earth.

Humans are the lucky recipients of this remarkable natural material. In its plastic state, clay is responsive to all the delicate nuances our sense of touch can offer and it can be used as a paint, a powder or a solid. When fired in a kiln, it becomes ceramic. It turns the clay from mud into a durable material that can last thousands of years.

The invention of the kiln transformed many cultures through developments such as the written word (cuneiform tablets), weatherproof buildings (bricks and roof tiles), sanitation and water reticulation (pipes)



Above: Carrying a ware board into the kiln room. Ware boards are used to carefully transport pottery from the wheel, minimising direct handling of the ceramics after they have been completed.

Opposite: Ceramics that are ready to be unloaded after a bisque firing – the first firing before any glaze is added.





Hayley A. West



CLAY BODIES: ironstone; buff raku; red terracotta; stoneware; white powdered porcelain

SURFACE FINISHES: mixes own glazes, oxides and stains

KILN TYPE: electric

FIRING TEMPERATURE/CONE: 1100°C/2012°F for earthenware, 1300°C/2372°F for stoneware and porcelain

To calm and distract her active inner critic, Hayley A. West often listens to podcasts while making. The listening helps her escape and lets her instinct and muscle memory take over. She is a sensitive soul who is fascinated by how humans interact; her mind is filled with abstract thoughts of making forms. This means her works are not always practical, but often rather sculptural, telling stories in shape and form. Though functional work does interest her, it doesn't fit into her exhibition work and daily practice, so she only occasionally makes runs of plates and cups if commissioned.



Above, top right: Painting using underglazes.

Above, middle right: An underglaze colour wheel test plate used to show what the underglazes will look like once glazed and fired.

A large part of her working life was spent as a graphic designer in publishing. She grew up with a love of books and wanted to work with typography, paper and design and was successful in this for a long time in Singapore. When she moved to Melbourne, she continued in the same field but the work had become less rewarding, so she decided to leave design work. She had not touched clay since her early teens but took a class at the local community art centre and instantly loved the feel of clay again.

When she tried handbuilding and made her first plate, she heard an actual click in her brain. She knew that this is what she was meant to be doing because it felt so right. The teacher let her find her own way, teaching her just enough to get on with her making but allowing her to explore the medium herself. She still likes to think she has control over the clay, but she knows she doesn't really, that sometimes it doesn't work the way she wants it to. That challenge is part of the fun.

For the first few years, she built in the pinch style but it led to a lot of hand pain. After bringing the pain under control, she began looking for other ways of making that would suit her and found a process of working with slabs and templates. Some pieces start as a cylinder, which is then cut into wedge or leaf shapes (a process called darting) that are then joined, altering the form. Other pieces start out as two identical flat shapes, which are then curved at the edges and joined at the seams to create a whole.

These seams may reflect a memory from her childhood, of a blue claypot in which her mother simmered soups, sometimes for hours, in preparation for dinner. When a crack appeared at the bottom of the pot, her mother repaired it with layers of rice paste. It was a nightly after-dinner ritual to seal the cracks with mashed cooked rice and set the pot on the stove over a gentle flame. 'Whenever I ran my fingers over the bottom of the pot, I could feel the scar from the layers of rice adhesive built up over the years.'

Not only does this process suit her physically by reducing her pain, it suits her work space, which is confined to the table and shelf in her dining room, with the kiln outside in a shed. Her workspace is so small that when she needs to wedge clay, she takes it out to the backyard.

Yen's work starts with a sketch of the 'body'. She might sketch it over and over again, playing with possibilities and decorations before the making. Once the sketch feels right, she templates the design using paper cutouts and keeps refining until the proportions look right. Only then does she cut the pieces and seam them together to create their sculptural shapes. She sometimes burnishes the clay with a spoon to help compact and strengthen it and uses very 'low tech' tools to carve and texture designs into the clay. Her most precious tool is a small wooden spoon her sister gave her, which she can hold comfortably and uses as an extension of her own thumb to help her close the seams. She then uses whatever instrument suits her surface decoration technique to make the mark she wants – a knitting needle to make holes, or the end of a paintbrush.

After that, the pieces 'hibernate' in plastic containers on shelves to prevent them from drying out too quickly. They are marked on the outside so she can easily identify them. She may pull a piece out of hibernation, basing her choice on what mood she is in (snarly teeth probably mean she's been a bit cranky that day!).



Her patterns and decorative elements mostly reference Chinese folk art patterns of flowers and leaves from embroideries, and she looks to Chinese bronzes for shapes. Harking back to her time in book design, she uses a spot glaze in the design that reminds her of a spot varnish that book covers often have.

Yen loves the solitude and creativity of her practice. Seeing her ideas come to life as three-dimensional objects excites her, but she's let down by other people's lack of understanding that this is a career choice. When these thoughts get to her, the creatures can start to show the frustration she feels through their snarling teeth and ridiculously big eyes. These are the feelings that Yen channels into her work. Even though her designs are stylised, simple, inanimate objects, she hopes that viewers can connect with them emotionally.

From her restless mind comes characters of incredible beauty and calmness that are made with great skill. Although it takes time before she's even happy to start the clay work – drawing, redrawing, templating, researching – her work is worth the wait.



Opposite, middle and bottom: Carving and hand forming the sculpture.



Opposite: *and the tide rises, the tide falls*, 2022, porcelain, stoneware, enamel bathtub, 94 x 152 x 76 cm.

Above: *Fade*, 2021, porcelain, gold lustre, wall installation of 63 objects, 75 x 75 x 3 cm.



FIRE



Ray Cavill



CLAY BODIES: porcelain mixed with recycled clays; iron stones; silica pebbles; assorted other textural materials

SURFACE FINISHES: Shino carbon-trap glazes; low- and high-iron glazes; ash glaze; natural ash glaze

KILN TYPE: anagama woodfire

FIRING TEMPERATURE/CONE: cone 13 at the front, cone 11 at the back

Ray Cavill has reached a point in his career when he now only makes work if 'it's got somewhere to go', be it an exhibition or collector. Yet his decades-long career, which has spanned teaching and exhibiting, is in some ways just getting started.



Niharika Hukku



CLAY BODIES: porcelain

SURFACE FINISHES: underglaze colours; transparent glaze

KILN TYPE: electric

FIRING TEMPERATURE/CONE: 1180°C/2156°F

Niharika Hukku works every day. Not all day, but every day. She doesn't have a favourite part of the ceramic making process – to her they are all enjoyable, but each is different enough for her to know when it is the right time to work on what. For her, throwing pots is like meditation; it gives her a quiet mind.



Stephen Bird



CLAY BODIES: white earthenware; terracotta

SURFACE FINISHES: mixes own maiolica glaze and a low-solubility lead borosilicate clear glaze; a range of metal oxides and stains on glaze enamels

KILN TYPE: electric

FIRING TEMPERATURE/CONE: cone 10

Stephen Bird was born in Stoke-on-Trent, England's centre of pottery. His father worked in the coal mines that provided the fuel for the kilns and, as a child, Stephen played on piles of discarded moulds at a factory that backed onto his grandmother's cottage. You could say he was familiar with ceramics from birth.

Dai Li works from her home studio overlooking the Glasshouse Mountains in the hinterland of Queensland. She starts her day in the studio after her sons go off to school and her partner and fellow artist, Joseph Dawes, heads to his painting studio in another corner of the property. Joseph and Dai Li did once share a studio but their differing musical tastes and need for solitude in the making process was the catalyst for her moving into a closed-in verandah of the house. She makes the most of the time the children are at school and also sometimes works later in the evening, when the house is quiet.

Throughout her schooling in China, and encouraged by her parents, Dai Li learned drawing. This set her up to understand human gestures and form. Later, she discovered clay was her medium of choice. She found working with clay to be soothing, and her happy place. 'When I was very young, every household in my hometown in Sichuan had a pickle jar, which was made of terracotta with a natural ash glaze. The shape was similar to the moon jar. I always loved the look of them.' Dai Li moved to Australia in 2009 and set up her practice, which still includes drawing. She says drawing allows her show more 'space' than a sculpture can.

Her beautiful and sometimes enigmatic female sculptures are handbuilt from a sandy or smooth white stoneware clay and she works on as many as nine at a time over a month. She starts with a rough body shape, then adds the head, often adding the hands at the same time. The gestures, whether touching the face or crossed arms, are part of the story and need to be formed at the same time. She fills the sculptures with newspaper to give the form strength while she moves onto carving the details. The newspaper burns out during the firing.

Dai Li works with wooden tools she brought from China. She also carves her own bamboo tools from branches found on her property. These tools are her mainstay for carving the moods in the faces, and the clothes and accessories of each sculpture.

Her work, including functional wares of cups, jugs and vases, are fired in a gas kiln in her studio and Joseph makes her glazes. She decants and mixes pigments into some of the glazes but also paints with pigments over clear glazes when she wants clearer and more vibrant colours or patterns and decorations to cover the work.

The sad, quirky, dry and sometimes hilarious characters of the women Dai Li portrays in her work come from keen observations. She says they are 'just snippets' of characters she's found solace in and observed in books, films and real life. The characters aren't just born of emotions, they can simply portray physical aspects, such as the way the wind blows on someone's hair, the sunglasses or mask they wear, the raincoat that covers them, a drooping cigarette that hangs from their mouth. The physical plays into the emotional attitude.

Dai Li makes beautiful and thought-provoking women who sit in crystallised glass-glazed bath tubs, hold hands on their hearts or wistfully look somewhere far away. She explains that the Chinese concept of beauty is that it needs to have something melancholic about it to make it more beautiful. Somehow this portrayal of melancholy in her work sits perfectly with the mischievous and light-hearted expressions in her other pieces.

There is no one reason that people find her work so appealing, but she often receives letters from collectors saying that her work has helped them reflect on themselves. Some even say that her work brings them joy. This exchange between maker and observer, be it cheeky or melancholy, is Dai Li's ceramic magic.



Opposite, top left to right: Dai Li's favourite tools; handbuilding body parts for her sculptures.

