

PHOTOGRAPHY SAM DEARDEN WORDS MADELEINE RINGER

THROUGH CLAY WE KEEP LIVING

Madeleine Ringer explores the interweaving past, present and future of women in the ceramic art sphere and the power struggles built into this, illuminated further by a conversation with six contemporary female ceramists.

The burning of Alexandria and history's erasure of women are one and the same. What has been lost is, at best, being recovered like a whisper on the street - glorious discoveries hardly known or believed by the mass population. The ceramic world offers us something more: women from ancient civilisations live on through brittle bowls, geometrically ringed vases, and fragments of splintered mysteries in colours of burnt orange and dusty beiges.

More than just a utility or art piece, pottery is an evidencing of life; "they are our museum pieces and our archaeological evidence. The material might break, but it won't go away," says Claudia Clare. Power has shifted from hand to hand, each sex pinching and pushing the clay to mould something new into the world - a birth of dust and fire. While art historians may look backwards to understand women's place in the home, in the future they will dissect pieces from the 21st century to interpret the narratives of the female artist's place in education and art market - and the feminist entanglement within these.

Women are steadily rising through the ranks in ceramics, an art practise which, still through using the myriad techniques of its origins, has evolved into a blending exercise of sculptural, playful and functional beauty. Kelly Jessiman wholeheartedly embraces this shift, elaborating how "ceramics can be anything you want. We shouldn't put limits on it. Why can't it be everything? Functional, sculptural, conceptual, spiritual, its beauty is endless." The bleeding of these concepts has allowed for a welcoming of experimentation, and ceramists like Rafaela de Ascanio relish in "travelling jungle glazes, crystals that pop in the kiln and toxic lustres burning into beautiful metals." The physicality and unpredictable nature of clay is one which naturally induces accepting one's errors, so far as to question what is an error in art? Freya Bramble-Carter urges this notion forward: "Making mistakes is the road of success and successful pieces themselves. I enjoy making every piece a unique character; I respect them as individuals."

A few decades ago, choosing to join the student body as a female artist was a radical act; the public sphere of art education was not one which viewed women as worthy inhabitants of its halls. Many young women were creating in universities where they were "judged by an entirely different criteria and standard from that of male students", even to the extent of feeling as though "the female students were mainly selected as prospective lovers for the male tutors," Claudia explains. While the modern day has thankfully allowed for creative education to be significantly more welcoming to female tutors and students alike, it now battles the government's attempts to pour funding down the drain. In a move to increase artistic spaces for women, Venetia Berry co-founded Sol Creative Retreats, a creative workshop and wellness-based retreat intended to reconnect women to art, themselves, and each other; "it's so wonderful to watch how easy it is for women to reconnect to their own specific language of creativity."

Re-connecting to this idea of creation and community has been an increasing theme in public spaces in post-pandemic years. As a response to the isolating and digitally dependent time spent in lockdown, recent years have ushered in a desire for slow creativity: physical crafts which demand all the maker's attention and result in a tangible creation, rather than digital. Taking shop all over London are cafes and studios dedicated to pottery painting and wheel-throwing lessons, whether it be for a boozey afternoon or a string of committed classes. It's an encouraging sight to see against the modern advances of AI and mass consumerism; "There is always a backlash, like how the Arts and Crafts movement against the Industrial Revolution was a rebellion against soulless mass production. I think this is happening again now, since you can get anything cheap and mass produced, people want the handmade, the handcrafted. We're celebrating beauty, craftsmanship, and the integration of art into everyday life," Kelly explains. In agreement, Rafaela continues; "We're experiencing burnout

from the fast tempo of modern life - it's an antidote perhaps until the world slows down."

The world slowing down is a curious thought, and one which brings with it dreams of improved social care, and one would "make the biggest difference to female artists, both at the learning and practising stages," Claudia says. It is a foundation which may take us one step closer to Rafaela's future hope of no longer needing to "emphasise the phrase female artists" and having a "natural balance" between all genders. For now, the work of a 'female artist' is a constant push and pull between creating as an artist - singular - and creating as a woman. "Being an artist is not compatible with the stereotypical expectations and pressures that are put on women. You have to move beyond them if you want to be able to get up every day and make work," says Christabel MacGreevy, an artist who is not afraid of the "grey space"

between binaries of gender, but instead offers a "way out" of societal conventions. Subversion and power play are frequent motifs in her pottery, as she reworks ideas of sexuality and gender into vibrant, illustrative creations. By contrast, Venetia focuses in on reclaiming the female form, a common muse by men of every century, shaping it into an abstract being of pastels and organic lines; "when a woman represents the female form within her own work, it is done with a sensitivity that can only be formed from having lived in the body."

There is no right or wrong - just creation. Women should be allowed to exist as artists just as men do - yet, with ceramics rich history of domestic and defiant female artists, all ceramics in the hands of women have an inherently political power. These six ceramists, like so many women around and before them, have carved out their space in the art world, standing resilient against the fires in their path.





Madeleine Ringer: Your artwork illuminates women's socio-politics in ways which are often otherwise hushed as controversial. How has this affected your creative mindset and how can we continue to progress the Arts' relationship with feminism?

Claudia Clare: I trust no one. I've had my work removed from exhibitions and even women threatened with unemployment and funding removal for being associated with me. I think the art world has always had a deeply uncomfortable relationship with feminism, because feminists critique male power and violence to women. In the end, the Arts are dominated, and largely directed, by the art market - and this is still in the hands of men.

M: Your lines are so organic and colours so vivid, it creates this fusion of feeling both naturalistic and abstract. Which one would you say you're more influenced by?

Venetia Berry: Most often I'm seeing how far I can push the female body into abstraction, but I feel a balance between the two concepts. I love how our minds are predisposed to find faces and forms everywhere we look. I love using colour within my work to create that slightly surreal or ethereal feel. We all know what mountains and sea look like, but when painted using pinks and oranges, an aspect is added to the work which makes this world feel ever so slightly out of reach.

M: How freeing is working in ceramics in embracing mistakes and being able to "let go"?

Freyja Bramble-Carter: You have no choice but to let go. "Clay is a mirror: it shows you crystal-clear how you treat the material, as well as yourself." People find it hard to understand the object you've made has to go into an oven cooked over a thousand degrees. Our human body's bones barely leave ash behind. You must be grateful you have anything withstanding - in all its glory - at the other end.

M: Would you say you create for yourself or for others?

Rafaela de Ascanio: Both, I hope. I'm looking to populate space with images of women, to empower and be honest about our vulnerabilities and hardships - particularly with our bodies. It is my driving force for creating, to surround myself in a world of inspirational women - past, present, and possible future!

M: There seems to be a strong and building community of ceramists in recent years. I'd say this is spurred on by social media - do you find the increase in seeing other's work positive or negative?

Kelly Jessiman: It's amazing that people can share their art on social media. Like everything there are negatives and positives, but personally, I think it's a positive thing. Like how Myspace was for music, it's changed how we discover new things.

M: A motif in your work is this subversion of femininity and reinventing the tools of female power. Do you view this as your responsibility as a creator or is it more innate, a by-product even, of your inherent creativity?

Christabel MacGreecy: I have always had a problem with the way some people view the concept of femininity. I don't think of 'femininity' as a one note song. It has so many gradients and different ways of operating. This is something that is fundamental to the way I view myself and the world around me, so I guess it comes out in my work and my depictions of others.

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