

MAKER OF THE MONTH: TESSA EASTMAN AND NATURE'S AMBIGUITIES

With an indivisible connection to clay
and glaze...

...ceramicist [Tessa Eastman](#) celebrates the strange and often overlooked intricacies of nature. Looking to bones, clouds, crystals and the microscopic structures of seeds, Tessa seeks to 'fix' the transitory in nature with the vigour of her materials.

**Could you tell us about your background
- did early experiences influence your
journey into craft?**

I got into ceramics at an early age and was lucky enough to have a pottery department at school. I had a difficult time at school and found solace working in the pottery studio, where my teacher encouraged me to follow my direction with hand building. The first of many supportive teachers!

My friend would bring in her mum's American ceramic books, which I found extremely inspiring. I wasn't stirred by the British ceramic books in the school library but did get excited seeing Richard Slee's 'Funk Ceramics'

My early pieces were often not glazed as I found glaze would ruin pieces that I had laboured over for many weeks. I feel mastering glaze comes later than mastering making, but then I don't feel one can ever really master either. The magical thing about ceramics is that you can try and be in control, but the materials are always in control of you.



How did your time working with Kate Malone affect your practice?

I wrote to Kate asking if I could visit her studio and was surprised and overjoyed when she said yes. I then worked as her assistant intermittently from 2002 to 2007. I had seen an exhibition of her work in Bristol on a school art trip called 'The Allotment', a touring exhibition supported by the Crafts Council, and was totally amazed at her sensual, brightly glazed fruity forms. My early work was certainly influenced by Kate's style: her work is uplifting and showed me at an early age what is possible from working with clay.

Kate was encouraging and incredibly

supportive, and she taught me a great deal. She said 'remember the four P's – prior preparation prevents poor performance/production'. She also said being a ceramic artist is '1% inspiration and 99% perspiration'. The longer I continue on this road the more relevant her sayings become. Kate's hardworking nature, positive attitude and ability to be a businesswoman and an innovative, skilled artist continues to inspire me.

In your work you explore the concept of nature being both strange and transitory, and 'fixing' it with clay. What are the strangest and most exciting natural phenomena to you and why?

I look towards nature in my work as nature is all powerful and humanity emanates nature in its struggle to survive. Clay and nature suit one another perfectly as clay is malleable and can bend as nature can. The challenge is to maintain the dynamism of raw clay after firing. I observe the often overlooked detail of bone, cloud, crystal and microscopic structures as a starting point before developing pieces which possess a curious ambiguity.

I aim to fix un-graspable states such as fleeing cloud formations which represent both the ideal and the perishable, signifying doom and fantasy. The strange otherworldliness of natural phenomena transports me away from the mundane and I become excited when fixed ceramic form seems alive, evoking awareness of life's impermanence where not all makes sense. I am fascinated by the disruptive dynamism formed when repetitive growth patterns in living systems mutate as this produces tension. Geometry and irregularity, order and chaos, soft and hard evoke awareness of the impermanence of human emotions.

The microscopic photography of Rob Kessler and the drawings of Ernst Haeckel offer a big source of stimulation to me. I often look at Kessler's highly magnified photographs of seeds, revealing their otherworldly structures. A seed offers life and transformation along with death and in this way relates strongly to humanity. The Welcome Collection has a close-up photograph of a Kidney Stone by Kevin Mackenzie, which I also enjoy. The fact that something so life threatening is so beautiful is another metaphor for humanity, reminding me that life is unconventional.

You've identified that you forgo a traditionally beautiful style in order to explore 'strangeness in nature' – has this made it harder (or easier!) to market your work?

It has been really difficult to get exposure and to find a market for my work, especially in the UK where studio pottery has been subject to attractive shapes and muted tones. I am very grateful for galleries who are as brave as artists and take as much risks. These are the galleries I delight in working with and who are good fit for my work and make for a unique presence in the market.

My London gallerist Cynthia Corbett thinks and acts differently to a conventional gallery. As she recently said in Crafts magazine, she is not minimal. For this reason, she is refreshing to work with. I currently have a show called 'Cloudspotting' with Jason Jacques Gallery in New York. He has a unique contemporary vision, combined with acute knowledge of ceramic history.

Could you tell us about your choice of materials and why they suit your work?

I drew, painted and made collages as a child, but nothing grabbed my attention as much as clay. Anyone can work with clay, but to be good takes time and perseverance. There is a lot of risk involved and the challenge of

building a structure and getting it to survive spurs me on.

Colour has also long been a concern of mine. My first memorable encounter with colour was when my Mum took me to a Bridget Riley show. I was totally fascinated and in awe of the optical paintings and it was like entering another world looking at such huge colour expanses that throbbed before my eyes. I realised the power of colour in taking one away from the mundane. David Batchelor has written in 'Chromophobia' about The Wizard Of Oz where Dorothy's 'release from greyness arrives' when she has a 'spectacular descent into brilliant Technicolour'. In the early days I would become frustrated that paint came out bright from the tube and glaze changed colour in unexpected ways – it has taken me many years to achieve glaze colour I am satisfied with.



What piece of advice would you give your younger self?

I would always say to my younger self to have more confidence and self-belief. I didn't realise how hard it would be to get accepted for opportunities. I would say keep doing your best and, most importantly, develop a network of supportive and understanding people who are on similar paths. This way one feels less alone and can voice concerns to like-minded-others. I would say that art college doesn't prepare you for selling and to seek out courses such as the [Hothouse](#) programme and relevant workshops where you can learn about self-promotion and your market.

If money was no object, what craft object would you buy?

I typically eye up Chieko Katsumata's work at Katie Jones Gallery at [Collect](#) but would need a spare £7,000. Her sculptures suggest organic forms such as coral, shellfish, and pumpkins. The artist seeks to create a contrast between the vibrant, gritty colourful surfaces and the dark, mysterious cavities within.

Where from here, what's next?

I have been focusing on cloud expanses and would like to look more at erupting clouds and vertical cloud explosions where the shapes move upwards rather than outwards. I would

like forms to become ever more sculptural and dynamic. I would like to spend time developing new glaze surfaces. I am making new work for [Collect](#) and the London Art Fair with the Cynthia Corbett Gallery, taking place in early 2020.

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