

RICHARD SLEE

Caroline Roux, 'Fired with enthusiasm: how contemporary art embraced ceramics', *Financial Times*, 30 November 2018

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Richard Slee, *Perfect Pie*, 2003

“You know something’s happening when it starts to cost more,” says the fashion designer Jonathan Anderson, on the phone from his studio in Dalston, east London. “I’ve been collecting ceramics for 10 years — I started because I couldn’t afford art.”

But a lot has happened in those 10 years. This March, at a Devon auction house, a work by Hans Coper fetched £381,000. The piece, an exquisite stoneware vessel from the British ceramicist’s 1970s *Cycladic* series, had first been valued at around £6,000 by the Bearnese Hampton and Littlewood auction house, who had pushed the estimate up to £20,000 just before the sale.

The art world and the auction world have been paying attention. In October last year, both Christie’s and Phillips decided to stage ceramic sales in London during Frieze week. Gagosian currently has a ceramic show, *Fire and Clay*, at its gallery in Geneva. New York’s Museum of Arts and Design has devoted a show to the ceramic output of the multimedia artist Sterling Ruby (to March 17). Hauser & Wirth acquired the estate of Fausto Melotti, and staged an exhibition of his work in its New York gallery this autumn, where the clay pieces included poetic groupings of tiny figures in ceramic vitrines. Hauser & Wirth has also opened a gallery called Make in the tiny town of Bruton, near its Somerset campus,

specialising in craft items, from porcelain objets to stately wooden vessels.

It remains to be seen how keenly this new love affair with clay will be reflected in Miami this week, but there are signs that ceramic works will be more present than before. Pascale Revert of London gallery 50 Golborne will show the young Nigerian-British artist Ranti Bam at the Untitled fair. It will include her soft-looking vessels collaged from slabs of clay and decorated with colours and patterns derived from her African heritage and English education, as well as new wall works. “For me ceramics is also a fine art and Ranti uses it to express deep notions about her own life,” says Revert.

At Art Basel Miami Beach other showings include sculptures by Kahlil Robert Irving at Callicoon Fine Arts — whose accretions of slip-cast soda bottles and fast food containers, newspaper clippings and lottery tickets speak of African-American misery in the decaying Rust Belt — and Pia Camil’s refashioned traditional masks at Bogota’s Instituto de Visión.

Meanwhile in Miami’s Design District, at the Loewe store (voided of its fashion stock for the week of Art Basel) the spotlight will be on the newly rediscovered Ian Godfrey, a man marginalised by art history after his death from Aids-related illness in 1992. Loewe’s creative director, Jonathan

Anderson, takes delight in Godfrey's finely wrought, hand-carved clay pieces, which reference everything from architecture to fantastical animals.

So why the art world vogue for ceramic work previously designated as "craft"? A cynical view might be that galleries, in their ever-expanding state, need to throw the net wider in order to fill their inventory: the proliferation of fairs and the super-sized galleries on four continents necessitate a lot of stock.

Fiber art, as Americans call it, or textile works, as the British prefer, has made a significant impact at big events such as the last Venice Biennale, but is a complicated option for private collectors. "Textiles worry collectors, they don't know how to maintain and clean [them]," says Yvonna Demczynska, founder of Flow, a London gallery which has specialised in international high-end craft for 19 years. "But I've never sold so much ceramic work; it seems more and more accessible to people." She mentions Katharine Morling, a London studio ceramicist who for three years has sold out significant amounts of her distinctive unglazed objects, from butterflies to a full-size boom box, at the Royal Academy's *Summer Exhibition*.

"I just think the art world is more open-minded than it used to be," says Mark Francis, a director at Gagosian in London who has worked with Edmund de Waal for nearly 10 years, increasing the value of his work 10 or 20 fold.

The polymathic de Waal is unique. A writer and public cultural figure, as well as a studio potter, his work is defined by groupings of sublime monochrome vessels arranged in architectural space. "Being in the art world means more people see your work, and you have different interlocutors. It doesn't change what I do, but it changes and expands the audience," says de Waal, who last year curated an exhibition on anxiety at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and this year worked on a minimalist ballet with the choreographer Wayne McGregor at London's Royal Opera House. "Increased visibility and funding means you can take on longer term projects, like a museum show which takes two years and has no commercial value. And it funds the experimental studio work."

The two fundamental factors, then, are audience and value. The art-buying public has increased, awareness of contemporary practice is higher than ever and tastes are broadening. Meanwhile, the rapidly rising value of some ceramic work makes it more attractive to galleries: you could call it the Picasso effect. Not until this decade were the Spaniard's ceramic works taken seriously by collectors,

but as one of the few ways left to buy into the artist, that has changed.

In her sale catalogue, Leonie Mir, who ran the Christie's auction, showed the 1956 earthenware Picasso plate "*Portrait de Jacqueline*" next to a small painting of the same subject. "The plate was unique, stunning," she says. "I wanted to compare it to that small mostly grey painting of Jacqueline, also from 1956, which sold for around \$1.5m in 2010. The ceramic was infinitely more beautiful. We sold it for £175,000."

The Picasso prices have certainly helped to heat up the market — and let's not forget the monumental stoneware piece by Peter Voulkos that sold for nearly \$1m at a Phillips evening sale in New York in December 2017. But for some dealers, there is more at stake.

"Galleries are recognising race and gender now; I suppose craft comes into that, too," says Paul Hedge, the London-based owner of Hales Gallery. "The art world is snobbish, and in the UK and Europe ceramics were associated with craftsmen where no brains were needed, while painters did sophisticated stuff for noblemen. Those rules no longer apply."

Indeed the works of Richard Slee, whom Hedge has supported for years, contain complex narratives about the decline in our connections to ourselves and our physical capabilities. Slee, whose work sells for £5,000-£30,000, will have a show at Hales's New York space in the spring.

"I'm not just interested in money, though you need it to run a gallery," says Hedge. "If you believe in something, then how are you ever going to elevate it, culturally and intellectually, unless you work hard for it?" Hedge, who was significantly responsible for the late success of the Caribbean painter Frank Bowling, knows of what he speaks.

Then there is the work itself, and ceramics is a broad field in which increasingly radical ideas are explored. For this, look no further than Lindsey Mendick, a recent graduate of the Royal College of Art, whose work is currently on show in the Jerwood Foundation's exhibition *Survey of 15* outstanding young artists, and at the Hannah Barry gallery in south London with her fellow practitioner Paloma Proudfoot.

Mendick's figurative work is an explosive, furious, in-your-face investigation into female identity and present-day anxiety, as well as a deliberate reconceptualising of clay as a medium. Visceral, truthful and unique, if Mendick represents the current possibilities of the ceramic field, it certainly has a very fine future.