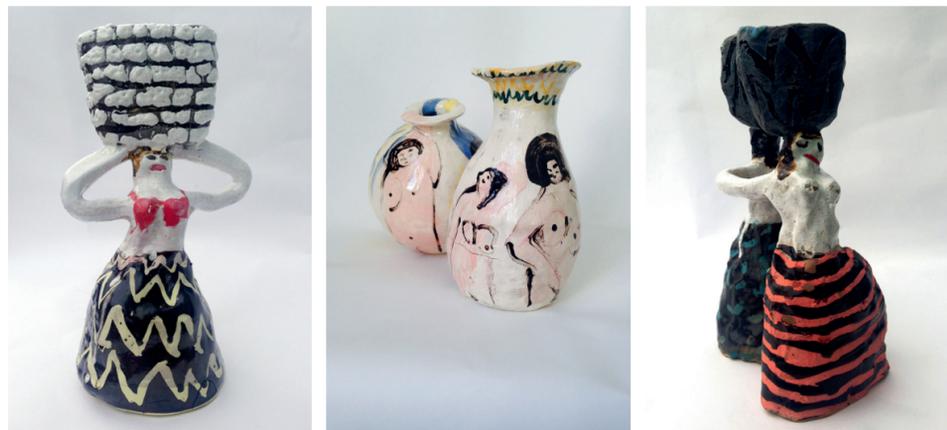


21st Century Ceramics

Four artists make contemporary work in an ancient medium.

WORDS KATE NEAVE



Emily Jane McCartan, *Womanly Feelings*, 2014

Emily Jane McCartan

Emily Jane McCartan's starting point is her fascination with ritual objects and the superstitious beliefs we attach to them. She is inspired by vessels which are thought by some to bring increased fertility to women, and sculptures believed to have the power to heal when they're touched by the ill and frail. Taking their forms as a point of departure, McCartan wilfully misinterprets them, bending their shape to fit contemporary western ideals with a knowing hint of irony. "I like the way Taylor Swift can make a song that's a slightly humorous, silly way of portraying her feelings as a little narrative," she says. "I want to do the same with the sculptures I make."

Even McCartan's materials are a mischievous blend of past and present. "I often mix toothpaste or hair gel into the clay," she says. "It's a way of including the things that build up my identity into the

objects I make. I like the idea of combining ancient processes with accessible modern materials."

McCartan enjoys the unpredictable nature of these contemporary additions to her work. She lets the clay's physical properties play into the final form, treating her fabrication process like a ritual in itself. "I love that clay is a vastly expressive material that absorbs every interaction with it, deliberate or accidental. You can't touch it without leaving some trace. My absolute favourite thing is when someone sees something I've made and instinctively puts their fingers in the exact prints I made when building the object."

emilyjanemccartan.co



Guðmundur Thoroddsen, *American Pint Trophy*, 2014.
Guðmundur Thoroddsen, *Sundae Trophy*, 2014.
Guðmundur Thoroddsen, *Trophy for Longest Pee*, 2013.
Guðmundur Thoroddsen, *The Snifter Trophy for Best Imperial IPA*, 2013.
All courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery.

Gudmundur Thoroddsen

Icelandic history and legend seep into artist Guðmundur Thoroddsen's ceramics. Although he doesn't study the Icelandic past directly, the folklore and culture of his home country definitely colour his work. Another important influence for him is Icelandic landscapes. "Though I don't work with it as subject matter, it definitely impacts my work. Rock formations, the rugged texture of lava and the muted, earthy colours all find their way into my sculptures."

In his recent series, Thoroddsen satirises manly aspiration, referring to the macho trait of constant and meaningless one-upmanship, in a series of roughly made trophies adorned with grimacing faces. Masculine themes tend to dominate his work and Thoroddsen approaches them with what he considers a male hand. "I can imagine

those pieces being done by a heavy-handed burly man, who somehow snuck into the ceramic workshop when no one was looking," he notes, as though he's trying to accumulate manliness through his sculptural output, while aware of his own shortcomings.

Thoroddsen plays imaginatively with the traditions of ceramics. With deliberately crude handling he only follows the rules as far as necessary to ensure that the work doesn't explode in the kiln. He feels that "contemporary art ceramics might be moving away from the skilful craft into the direction of a more open and experimental medium, where ideas can be represented freely as in any other medium."

asyageisberggallery.com



Lucy Whitford, *Sit apart and set adrift*, 2014.
 Lucy Whitford, *Sunwall*, 2014.
 Lucy Whitford, *Palmette (the night sky will eat you up)*, 2013.

Lucy Whitford

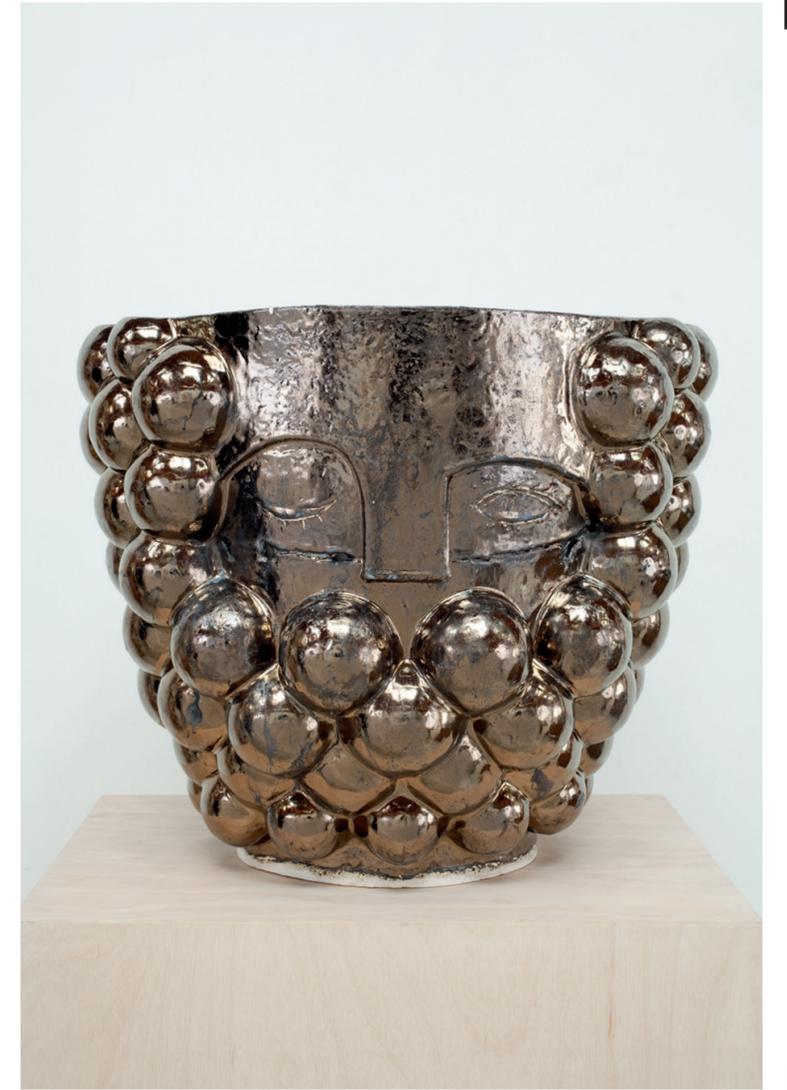
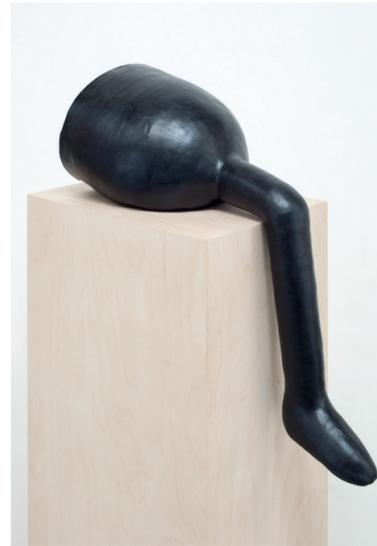
Creating sculpture intuitively, Lucy Whitford weaves together the histories and cultural identities of materials with her own mythologies. Her installations combine clay with familiar items from domestic interiors like cane webbing, cork tiles and curtain lining, as well as more industrial substances such as steel, wood and cement. “For me the process of making is as much a way of working through ideas and connecting with meaning, as it is a way of creating a final material form,” she says.

Raw clay appears to grow from the spaces between beams, cracks and joints of metal—fragile, organic forms emerge tinged with a sense of defiance and dread, both beautiful and grotesque. “The unprotected, unsealed clay is vulnerable but has the power of a material that is in constant flux—a connectedness to everything else—a dead/alive

quality, but still full of potential. It is caught, suspended for a time, between stillness and motion, between permanence and erasure,” the artist explains.

Whitford’s sculptures hint at the profound subject matter of loss and longing. She touches on human experience rooted in personal narrative. Materials perch precariously on structures too exposed to afford safety, encouraging an instinctive exploration that draws the viewer cautiously in. “Clay really has the potential to be an extremely powerful material. I think it has fundamental strength. It is universal. It doesn’t have a time or a place. Clay is earth. We all come from it and will return to it.”

lucywhitford.com



Renee So, *Wine Leg*, 2013.
 Renee So, *Bellarmino XII*, 2013.
 Renee So, *Boot*, 2013.
 All courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

Renee So

With a uniquely cartoonish style, Renee So sculpts portraits and accoutrements—pipes and walking sticks, beards and boots, rendering them down to satisfying shapes. There’s an element of humour in her simplification, a subtle play on tropes of masculinity that pushes her work towards the absurd. She parodies our stereotypes and efforts to aggrandise through artistic monuments.

So works from drawings, sketching everything in two dimensions as she sculpts her work. Describing her inspiration, she lists “Museums, period dramas, kid’s television shows, ancient civilisations, Chinese paintings and ethnographic costume and dress.” It’s an eclectic collection of sources drawn from the world around her, betraying her playful approach and historical interests.

The faces So sculpts, with their luscious bulbous beards, refer back to Bellarmine beer jugs—stoneware vessels imported from Germany

from the 1500s to the 1700s, which she discovered in the Victoria & Albert museum in London. Initially well executed, the faces on the jugs represented a ‘wild man’ from European folk traditions, which became increasingly stylised as the vessels were mass-produced for the English market. The process caught her imagination.

So enjoys playing with the tradition of ceramics. “I love its long history in relation to human civilisation. It was part of so many early cultures: Greek, Chinese, African, Middle Eastern,” she says. But So is not held back by this wealth of history, enjoying the medium’s transformation throughout the ages. “Clay affords the ability to create almost anything imaginable,” she says. “There are endless possibilities.”

katemacgarry.com