

Breaking THE MOULD

The artist Michael Eden uses cutting-edge computer technology to reimagine the works of Wedgwood, Sèvres and other great vessel makers of the past

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The former studio potter Michael Eden now makes his artworks from 3D printed nylon. He is shown here in front of a powder printing machine at the art school at Manchester Metropolitan University, where he is a part-time research fellow

Futuristic, beautiful, bewildering, gravity-defying: the art works of Michael Eden stop people in their tracks. Their bright, sometimes neon, hues and perfectly even finishes bring to mind high-tech products. And the forms are so balanced, so perfect, so precise, that they seem beyond the capabilities of a human – like something a more evolved species from another planet might create. Yet for all their other-worldliness, Michael's pieces are also familiar. Nearly all are vessels of some type, and he is clearly inspired by the craftsmen of the past.

Michael works with tools at the cutting edge of technology, so it isn't surprising that his pieces have the power to amaze. In some ways they are alien; they are something we haven't seen before because, until recently, it wasn't possible to make them. But the computer age has changed those boundaries: 3D – or digital – printing is here, and Michael is at the forefront, pushing to see what it can do.

'I design pieces that are aesthetically pleasing and culturally recognisable, but they also have a twist,' says Michael. 'I want to draw people in and surprise them. I want to provoke a debate about what is craft and making, especially in the digital age.' Surprisingly,

given his success (Michael has pieces in public and private collections around the world), his involvement with 3D printing came relatively late in his career. Originally a studio potter, for 25 years he ran a successful business with his wife Vicky, producing slip-decorated earthenware from their studio in Cumbria.

Michael's interest in computers began in 1998 when he took an evening class in website design and learnt to write basic code, in order to set up a website for their business. The experience was a revelation. 'It woke up a

different part of my brain.'

When rapid prototyping (an early stage of 3D printing) emerged in the mid 2000s, it got him thinking. 'I realised if I could draw something on the computer and use rapid prototyping to produce it, I wouldn't be limited by gravity or centrifugal force as I was on a potter's wheel. I

would have freedom to create anything I could dream of.'

The Royal College of Art was interested in his ideas and in 2006 Michael began an MPhil in the ceramics and glass department. Over two years he explored the possibilities of using computers in the various stages of making a vessel, then in 2008 produced his first piece entirely conceived on and ➤

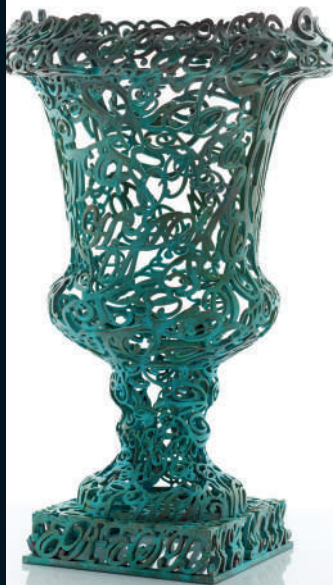
With 3D printing I wouldn't be limited by gravity or centrifugal force as I was on a potter's wheel



ABOVE The gravity-defying *Vortex*, 2015, is one of Michael's most recent pieces. Shown here in dark grey and neon pink, it is made from nylon with a mineral soft coating in an edition of 12 RIGHT A tall, yellow version of *Bloom*, from 2012, this is number three of an edition of 12 BELOW *The Wedgwood's Tureen*, inspired by the 1817 Wedgwood catalogue, was Michael's first design and the piece that launched his career, shown here in blue (2014)



RIGHT Michael's *Flaubert* vessel, 2014, was inspired by antique metal urns, and is made from nylon electroplated with copper
 BELOW Sèvres porcelain was the inspiration for these *A Rebours* bowls. Michael applied the gold leaf later by hand
 BOTTOM A large oval *Bloom* in neon pink from an edition of 12, from 2014



built by computer: the *Wedgwoodn't Tureen*.

'It's based on the 1817 Wedgwood catalogue,' says Michael. 'The new technologies are regarded as a new industrial revolution. I wanted to refer to the first industrial revolution and I chose Josiah Wedgwood because he was at the forefront. The reason it's a *Wedgwoodn't* is that I created it in a way he couldn't have.'

The piece caused a stir at the RCA graduate show, and Michael was snapped up by top art dealer Adrian Sassoon, who soon had him showing at the big art fairs around the world. In 2009 the Museum of Art and Design in New York showed the *Wedgwoodn't Tureen*, placing Michael on the international stage.

In 2010 Michael's second piece, *A Rebours*, received international coverage. This time his inspiration was a piece of Sèvres porcelain from the Wallis collection. Manufactured in nylon, (the first pieces were made of plaster), it took four to five weeks to design on the computer – most pieces take around this time; the computer is no shortcut in the design

process – then 12 to 14 hours to build in the printing bureau.

More pieces followed, including *Imari*, *Maelstrom*, *Bloom* and *Vortex*, usually in runs of 12 to 24, but no two are exactly the same. *Flaubert* is a 45cm-high spun nylon urn, comprised of the words from a Gustave Flaubert quote that reads, 'For a thing to be interesting, one only needs to look at it for a long time.'

'A collector of antique metalwork bought that one,' says Michael, with satisfaction. 'He'd never bought contemporary work before, but he had 18th and 19th-century versions of the piece that inspired my piece. He could see where I was coming from.'

Michael has plenty of projects lined up. As well as working on a new piece for a solo exhibition at the Holburne Museum in Bath later this year, he is experimenting with casting in bronze, silver and – most importantly for him – ceramic. 'The direction I'm going in is the bringing together of my previous world and the new world,' he says. 'If I can print in clay it will bring those two worlds crashing together in quite an exciting way.' ■

* Pieces cost from £3,600, michael-eden.com. See Michael's work at the Holburne Museum, Bath, 21st November to 21st February 2016. Watch Michael at work in Kasia Fizzer's short film on homesandantiques.com

3D PRINTING: How it works

Michael's works are produced by a process called additive layer manufacturing, otherwise known as powder printing. This involves a precision machine, controlled by computer, laying down thousands of layers of powder in a chamber to create a 3D shape. Each layer, no thicker than a fine dusting, is

fused to the next with the use of a binder (either a liquid or, in the case of nylon, a laser) and slowly, over a period of 12 to 14 hours, something solid is created. 'When the build is complete you have an object under all this excess of powder, which you then have to clean off to find,' says Michael.

