

# Contemporary ceramics

In the latest of her series on buying art, *Emily Tobin* gives a round-up of some of the most exciting contemporary ceramicists



## ANDREW WICKS

TOP 'Garniture of Seven Vases', 28 x 75 x 24cm (group dimensions). ABOVE 'Blue Ombré Vase', 26 x 21cm diameter

In recent years, the distinction between craft and fine art has become increasingly blurred. A good example of this is ceramics, an art form that occupies a remarkably broad territory within the twenty-first century, from functional cups and saucers to gallery-worthy collectibles.

In 2003, Grayson Perry, the self-titled creator of 'cosmopolitan folk-art', won the Turner Prize; in 2009 the restored ceramics galleries at the V&A reopened in celebration of their centenary, with an ambitious 425-piece installation by Edmund de Waal, and the following year an eighteenth-century Qianlong vase fetched a record-breaking £53.1 million at auction. This month, we are focusing on four contemporary ceramicists, each of whom reinterprets ceramic traditions and brings them into a modern setting.

**Andrew Wicks** is based in Bath and operates out of an old cowshed. His work consists of

refined, uncomplicated pots, which exude 'sculptural simplicity, elegance of line and perfection of profile'. He treats external surfaces with a water-etching process that subtly evokes patterns found in nature, for example in fossils, coral, and magnified plant forms, an effect that satisfies both the eye and the inquisitive hand.

The majority of Andrew's work is made using thrown porcelain - a material he likens to cream cheese: 'no strength and lots of risk'. Collections of gourd-like vessels are created to stand in clusters, and although he is currently going through a 'white phase', Andrew does occasionally use colour; his blue ombré vases beautifully illustrate this.

'Oriental control is something I respond to,' he explains, citing Japanese textiles, kimonos and origami as key influences. This aesthetic is recognisable in the surfaces and contours of Andrew's pots and their air of restraint; their undulating profiles are so elegantly posed. 'I sometimes think >





**WILLIAM PLUMPTRE**  
 FAR LEFT 'Thrown Vase', 38 x 30cm diameter. BELOW LEFT 'Paddled Vase', 30 x 13cm diameter

**DEREK WILSON**  
 LEFT 'We All Contain Things' series, smallest 8 x 5cm diameter

**EMILIE TAYLOR**  
 BELOW 'Bus Stop Madonnas I & II', each approximately 51 x 23.5cm diameter

they may just walk off,' he says. And you can see why; these papery textured creations look as ephemeral as the seed pods that inspire them.

Similarly, **William Plumptre** works in the distinguished Anglo-Japanese tradition founded in the early twentieth century by potters Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach. Despite the shared Japanese influence, his work is decidedly different to Andrew's. William's pots, plates and urns are sturdy and full-bodied, with an 'aesthetic classicism', yet they retain the elegant proportions and purity of form that are so redolent of Japanese culture.

After leaving Chelsea School of Art, William moved to Japan, where he spent an invaluable 12 months at Tatsuzo Shimaoka's workshop. Here he was schooled in the processes of working with clay, glazes and firing with wood.

William's work is produced using a combination of thrown and press-moulded pieces in stoneware clay, decorated with rope impressions, combing, sgraffito - a form of decoration made by scratching the surface to a lower layer of a contrasting colour - and brushwork. They are then inlaid with coloured slips and glazed in muted tones

that reflect the colours of his Cumbrian surroundings, ranging from tenmoku browns and copper reds to creamy whites and cobalt blues.

A few hours' south of William's Lakeland farmhouse is Chatsworth. The imposing country pile houses one of Britain's largest private art collections, and here, beneath the grand staircase, sits a pot by **Emilie Taylor**, carefully engraved with an image of the post-war, high-rise estates of Sheffield. 'The perfect juxtaposition of "high culture" and "pop culture"; she says.

Emilie, who will shortly be embarking on a residency at Chatsworth, creates pots and plates that explore 'themes of power, social mobility and patriarchy'. They are realised in a subdued palette of browns, creams and greys, with a minimalist, sometimes even brutalist aesthetic. Contrary visual references sit side by side; on one pot a flock-esque wallpaper design hovers above a 'bus-stop madonna' clutching dummy-stoppered babies, while on another a gold halo gleams about the head of a hoodie-sporting teenager.

Emilie makes her own pots and decorates them using slip and sgraffito techniques. Like Andrew, she often creates a series of ceramics, which allows for her drawings to become part of a pictorial narrative over two or three pieces.

Where Emilie's work is playful and political, the work of the Belfast-based ceramicist **Derek Wilson** revels in shape and form, referencing ideas of 'restraint, containment and simplicity'. He focuses on capturing the fluidity and quality of a line, an angle or a plane. This is a concept that resonates with British constructivism, something Derek cites as an influence. 'Often totally different references will come together and coexist in one piece or series,' he explains.

Derek works in celadon-glazed porcelain and stoneware, and his objects tend to be placed in groupings - 'evoking community and sociability'. Much of Derek's work is designed for everyday use: he makes cups, teapots, plates, jars and bowls; but the two aspects of his practice 'strongly relate to one another'. Both his functional and conceptual work are characterised by the same controlled aesthetic □

To see more work by Andrew Wicks, go to [www.adriansassoon.com](http://www.adriansassoon.com); prices start at £1,750. William Plumptre is represented by Browse & Darby ([www.browseanddarby.co.uk](http://www.browseanddarby.co.uk)), where prices start at £90. Contact Emilie Taylor at [www.emilietaylor.co.uk](http://www.emilietaylor.co.uk); prices for large-scale work start at £690. Derek Wilson can be contacted through his website ([www.derekwilsonceramics.com](http://www.derekwilsonceramics.com)); prices start at £90

## OTHER CERAMICISTS

**Natasha Daintry** ([www.natashadaintry.com](http://www.natashadaintry.com)) is one to watch; she makes large groupings of vessels from porcelain and experiments with colour and form. **Tamsin van Essen** ([www.vanessen.com](http://www.vanessen.com)) uses ceramics to explore scientific, medical and socio-historic themes. Her pots and vases are at once beautiful and disturbing, reflecting her interest in decay and disease. **Paul Scott** ([www.scottish-gallery.co.uk](http://www.scottish-gallery.co.uk)) works in traditional blue-and-white ware, but his commentary is politically charged, with images of wind turbines, slag heaps and traffic jams injected into otherwise idyllic rural scenes.



TONY WEST; IAN GRACEY