

Q and A: A New Series Where Practising Artists Answer Questions About Their Practice

1.

Judith Glover, ceramic artist (and Secretary of the Friends of York Art Gallery)



Judith Glover, Two Trios, 2017, image by Carol Clarke

Can you describe your artistic practice?

I make tall columnar vessels finished with coloured slip (liquid clay with a stain added) in a restrained pallet of charcoal, grey, spice and cream. I generally use clay that is sourced from Shropshire and Derbyshire. My pieces have a slightly sloped aperture, thus making the colour of the interior more visible. They are constructed and displayed as trios, which I explain below.



My work is fired to 1230 degrees centigrade. The photo shows some in the kiln, prior to firing. It can be a hazardous journey....

Perhaps the dramatic approach of throwing a pot on the wheel is something that many people identify with ceramics. I prefer the rather more serene approach of hand-building.

Increasingly I find that I am connecting the way I think about my ceramics work with painting – and specifically the work of Morandi and Whistler. I say

more about this below.

What started you off as an artist?

Some decades ago I enrolled on evening pottery classes in Guildford, where I lived at the time. This was the golden era of Adult Education when classes were rather cheap and resources were plentiful. I suppose that makes me a self-taught artist, but I prefer to see myself as not conventionally trained.

I learned the basics of pottery in one class and then moved to another more advanced one, led by Surrey-based potter Su Rogers. Her approach was to ask students what they would like to make, and then to suggest appropriate techniques. It was a particularly free approach to teaching and learning – and it suited me well. To begin with I used the slab technique (this means the clay is rolled out to whatever thickness is required and then cut or shaped).

The technique of ‘coiling’ subsequently appealed to me and this remains my principal specialism. It involves what small children might call ‘clay sausages’, where the maker fashions by hand long rolls of clay. It is an age-old technique where the coils are built up to form vessels of a circular shape. The photo shows me placing coils on a ‘pinch pot’ (explained below).



I call my approach ‘slow coiling’, since my pieces take about six weeks to make from their beginnings as a pinch pot to their eventual firing. I work on about six at a time.

I start from a simple pinch pot: I take a ball of clay and put my thumb in the middle. I then work the outsides between thumb and forefinger until a small container is formed. Small children will be familiar with this method!

I then add coils of clay, but only one or two at a time. Then the piece is allowed to settle for a couple of days so that it becomes firm enough for me to control the shape and to smooth, both inside and out.

Why inside and out? Although the interior is largely hidden from the viewer, I feel strongly that it should not be messy and also should have

an interesting contrasting tone. My idea is that if by mischance the pot were to be dropped and broken by the person who has acquired it, there would be the compensation of knowing that there is now the opportunity to view the interior! Before the 'lockdown' I was fascinated to see the inside of one of Gordon Baldwin's pots in York Art Gallery's store; it had been broken whilst on display and was awaiting the attentions of an expert restorer.

Who or what are your influences?

When I moved to York in 2010, a new friend gave me a book about the still life painter Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964, www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-morandi). Subsequently I saw Morandi's work in the Bologna Gallery of Modern Art. His restrained still life paintings, featuring tall bottle-shaped vessels arranged in groups, inspired me to think about how the 'feel' of his work might be reproduced in ceramics.

A second, more current, influence is Whistler (1834-1903). My recent 'Strata' pieces have horizontal layers of different types of clay, with the occasional vertical mark. As I work on these I often find myself thinking about the horizontal and vertical brushstrokes of Whistler's Nocturne paintings of the Thames, particularly 'Blue and Silver: Chelsea' (1871). It can be viewed at www.whistlerpaintings.gla.ac.uk and is in Tate Britain's collection.

My sources of inspiration in current studio ceramics are in particular two artists known for the clean lines of their unglazed work as well as their use of pinching and coiling techniques: Ashraf Hanna (1967-) and Jennifer Lee (1956-, winner of the 2018 Loewe Design Award).

How would you describe your recent work?



I continue to make single colour work, but I have recently developed what I call 'Strata' pieces. These use four different types and tones of clay; they are rather technically challenging as each type of clay shrinks at a different rate when drying and being fired. The photo shows a Strata trio in 'greenware' state, that is prior to firing. After firing, the

pieces develop a more muted appearance – the greenish tones that you may see in the image disappear; they emerge as a spice colour and the dark reds as dark grey.

Why groups? Displaying the work in this way emphasises the relationship between the pieces. Individually they do not say much to me, but in a group (which almost always means for me a trio) it is their relation to one another that counts.

When people acquire work from my home, as opposed to galleries, I encourage them to select their own trio. I have concluded that this is my interpretation of Gombrich's 'beholder's share'. Our homes, perhaps increasingly, may be felt as havens. Being surrounded by objects that connect variously to one another – in configurations and places chosen by different 'beholders' – is calming and life-enhancing; it "invites a response on a number of levels, emotional as well as intellectual" (Ashraf Hanna www.ashrafhanna.net, accessed May 20 2019).

What would you say is the main challenge in your making?

There are quite a few, but I would single out the challenge of judging correctly the state of the clay: too wet and it will not hold its shape, too dry and it will crack.

How has this recent period of lockdown affected your practice?

Just before the lockdown my work was accepted for the ceramics selling exhibition at the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, now postponed to September. This is a major step up for me, and I am currently busy producing more work for the Hepworth show – in an improvised micro-studio in my garden shed.

Do you have a website where our members can find out more about your practice?

Yes. It's www.judithgloverceramics.uk

References:

Gombrich, E (1960) *Art and Illusion*, Phaidon

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