

This talk was given by the 2021/22 Friends Research Scholar, Rhyann Arthur, on a selection of works by potter Carol McNicoll, from the collection of Pat Barnes.

Artwork of the month: Carol McNicoll and the ‘New Ceramics’

This talk will revolve around a range of ceramics works by Carol McNicoll, as well as paying attention to the collector of said pieces. I will be speaking about the selection of ceramics that were acquired in 2020 from the private collection of Patricia Barnes. The assortment donated to the gallery, which in total includes the works of thirteen artists, is largely constituted of women-made pottery produced from the 1970’s through to the 2000’s. These are artists that formed what has been termed ‘The New Ceramics,’ from Barnes’ collection, names such as Alison Britton, Carol McNicoll and Janice Tchalenko, with the movement also including the likes of Elizabeth Fritsch, Jacqueline Poncelet and Glenys Barton. It is this range I am going to be focusing on below, with an emphasis on McNicoll, whose work, until now, has not been represented at the gallery.

I originally come from an artist-maker background, with my bachelors degree being in Ceramics from Cardiff School of Art and Design, where I developed my artistic practice and went on to be a part of multiple exhibitions and events including the British Ceramics Biennial. But the reason I ventured into academia is because, during my unplanned hiatus of 2020, I had the time and space away from clay to truly appreciate the role ceramic has in our everyday lives. My days were defined by the ritualistic practice of morning coffees and afternoon teas, I got obsessive, having specific mugs for different drinks and different times of day. As a now-isolated ceramic artist I came to see how the materiality of clay interacts in shaping our lives, and how this fogs our perception of seeing ceramic objects as works of art. As an artist, I wanted to begin exploring the archaeological properties of clay and its part in human history; as an art historian I want to look at how ceramic artists established *ceramics* as artworks and broke away from functionality.

Part of pottery’s low status in art’s hierarchy of materials is due to the object’s anonymity in most instances. We are conditioned to consider the artist when we see a painting, but that is not the case for most ceramic items in history. We associate named artists with esteem. The wall behind me provides perfect examples of times we *do* consider the artist, but on average most ceramic items will remain anonymous. There is very little scholarship that places ceramics *as an artform* in itself, or on specific artists’ work, and little attention is given to ceramics within the realm of

decorative arts, let alone the fine arts. In texts from Mediaeval Islamic pottery to Italian Renaissance ceramics, the Arts and Crafts movements through to Bauhaus, pottery is forever among the bottom of the pile; practitioners namelessly sitting somewhere between design history and archaeological studies. Usage has historically reduced the craft object to its function and not the experience it enables. But what is art if not an experience? Taking new forms, Studio ceramics continued this trend in some respects. Bernard Leach encouraged the idea that the object's beauty and functionality should be held in higher regard than that of the maker, stemming from craft traditions he inherited from Japanese potters. In circles such as the Bloomsbury Group and their Omega workshop, they believed that each individual should be able to produce art and earn money, but that the works should remain anonymous to ensure that they were being bought for their quality and not their maker.

Potters such as Lucie Rie and Hans Coper acted as the antithesis to Leach's 'ethical pot,' by asserting the *expressive* or *fine art pot*. These two potters were particularly influential to the 'New Ceramics' artists, as they were both teaching at Camberwell School of Art in the 1960s-70s, where the likes of Alison Britton studied. As Tanya Harrod states, these art students of the 60s and 70s were inspired by Marcel Duchamp's proclamation that anything can be art - and we can choose to determine this includes craft! In response to poor representation in the visual arts of anything that *wasn't* painting, Duchamp called for a reordering of categories and a more equitable environment for potential art (Harrod, 2000).

These ideas, raised by the dadaists and further questioned by surrealists, often led to satirical observations of human nature. With an eye that sought out historical sensibilities and aimed to critique via poking fun, this was a facet of avant-garde movements taken on board by British artists, as well as in popular culture e.g. *Monty Python*. Harrod claims that Britain's obsession with its industrial history and art and design education 'explains why British visual culture tends to the literary, the mannered and the subtly parodic' (Harrod, 2000).



Figure 1. Carol McNicoll, giraffe bowl stand, 2000

Carol McNicoll often plays with the idea of ornamental objects and their seemingly insignificant status, playing with tropes of mass-production in the style of British design. McNicoll employs a Pop-art like observation of these products of industrialisation: neither celebratory nor polemic. We can see this evidenced in her *giraffe bowl stand* (fig. 1), where she has slip-cast familiar objects and recontextualised them in clay. Combining the form of a commonplace teak giraffe sculpture with the essence of mass-produced pottery using decals and the white earthenware surface, McNicoll successfully translates the epitome of all charity shop knick-knacks into a work of art.

In these pots (fig. 2) we can see how McNicoll creates composite vessels through mould-making with existing ceramic wares, reinventing them in a 3D collage that highlights contrasts between the surfaces. She again proves how art movements can be translated into clay. Despite probably the most famous Dada ready-made artwork being made of ceramic, Duchamp's *Fountain*, the artworks created in such movements very rarely venture into clay, because ceramic is understood as static, both in time and aesthetic. Yet, in McNicoll's work we see how the principles of avant-garde movements can indeed flourish in clay, utilising 'ready-mades' and collage to turn domestic wares into original artworks, and act to destabilise the historical perception of ceramics.



Figure 2. Carol McNicoll, *Composite coffee pot and milk jug*, 2005

These works, to me, highlight a turning point in ceramic art, where integration with fine art is demonstrated through their shared concepts and approaches to material culture. I propose that these 'New Ceramics' artists point to the advent of ceramic's own avant-garde era. If Leach and his followers are the clay Romanticists with their *sublime* or *picturesque* pottery, then the New Ceramics group can be envisaged as clay's avant-garde. What sets ceramics apart is that this transition was coinciding with the rise of feminist art, in an artform that was slowly being equalled, if not dominated by women artists, but not yet in representation.

In their reaction against traditional pottery as well as partly against the ethos put forward by Leach, the New Ceramic artists *did choose* to stick to the vessel, consciously reinventing the pot over and over again, but decidedly *without* the wheel. Like Dali used paint to re-establish what could be achieved through the canvas, these artists were taking their claim on the pot, and that claim was largely asserted through handbuilding techniques as opposed to throwing on the potter's wheel. Handbuilding is perceived to have a much less formal approach than throwing and the techniques are more difficult to replicate, which has diverted the process from the realm of mass-production as well as the idea of mastery present in traditional studios.

Something I find fascinating about this reinvention of the pot is the focus with which, particularly women artists, appear to consider the interior of the pot to a much greater extent than the majority of male artists. Starting with Lucie Rie, who would turn (trim a pot on the wheel) the insides of her

bowls when trimming was typically done solely on the outside of a form, we see a similar level of care taken by the New Ceramicists in decorating the interior of a pot. Of course Bernard Leach and his fellow throwers likewise consider the inside of a pot, but largely just for the sake of functionality, with a finish that may compliment or continue from the outside of the pot, but never to make a statement in itself. A beautiful example of this from the Pat Barnes collection is a large thrown bowl by Janice Tchalenko (fig. 3), which is glazed with expressive flashes of red, green and gold on a blue base, the colour inside of the bowl almost emanates up and out from the base.



Figure 3. Janice Tchalenko, deep bowl, unknown date

The quality of *interiority* is something readily present in women artists' self portraiture, from Gentileschi to Frida Kahlo to Tracey Emin, the representation of the *self* that female artists put forward tends to border on the private, psychological, or domestic (Borzello, 2018). This is partially down to the history of *being* a female artist - from a time where women could not attend art schools their working environment was inherently domestic by default, and their existence remained isolated if not repressed (Nochlin, 2021). McNicoll said of her own experience at RCA, that women were 'marginalised' and 'attention went to the men who were interested in industrial ceramics' (Vincentelli, 2000).

Therefore, for ceramic artists to spend time decorating the interior of the vessel resonates with the kind of voyeuristic perspective the viewer takes with the women's self portraiture mentioned. Yet, with pottery this

perception takes on a categorically physical experience: we look inside the vessel because having an interior is what makes pottery functional, and it is that function with which we are most familiar.

To exemplify the ideas I have so far outlined, I'm going to turn to McNicoll's *Soft Coffee Set* (fig. 4) where, inside, we see blooming flowers in much more detail than we do in the decoration on the outside of the pots, acting as an invitation to look within. This also provokes the desire to hold the item itself, connecting with our instinctive familiarity with ceramic as something to interact with. This harks to the domestic and tactile nature of the ceramic medium, and how objects can meld to the function projected onto them by the viewer or its wider context, this can be seen in the coffee set in how the vessel forms take their shape depending on the environment constructed around them. The industrial-looking rods that form handles, pulling and squeezing the pots, forcing the walls of each piece in the set to stand at odd angles in order to balance upright. This also portrays the duality of the material, representing clay's stubbornness as well as its fluidity.



Figure 4. Carol McNicoll, *Soft Coffee Set*, 1990s

I do not necessarily propose that the New Ceramics artist produced with the intention of their gender being of any significance, let alone to make a feminist statement with their artworks or to be considered *feminist art*. I

simply believe that there is plenty of room for more scholarship within pottery and that it deserves to be read and analysed in an equal manner to the perceived 'fine arts.' However, I do think that, as with reading paintings, the socio-political infrastructure of the period in which these artists were establishing themselves, should be taken into consideration. The context of the 1970's brought with it various forms in which women artists and ceramicists were remodelling the craft.

As outlined by Jenni Sorkin in her book *Live Form*, a trend largely present in the United States at a similar time to the emergence of the New Ceramics potters over here in the UK, was for women ceramic artists to lead in forming collectives where they approached clay as a material with a strong history of women-led craftsmanship, they did so when the collectives contained men too. This movement was specifically in reaction to male curators who 'capitalised on the momentary trendiness of ceramics' (Sorkin, 2016). Pottery was being reduced to its basic property: *formlessness*, convention and tradition both having been stripped away. This paved the way for amateur explorations into what became known as 'sloppy craft,' as well as getting appropriated by mainstream feminist artists like Judy Chicago in her famous work *The Dinner Party*, using ceramic as a canvas but overlooking the women pioneers of the medium and their role in its pedagogy (Sorkin, 2016).

Therefore, these collectives were aiming to re-establish traditions of pottery that matched its status as a socially-engaged art form as opposed to settling for pottery's relegation to the applied arts, a distinction that was definitively masculine by being recognised as skilled labour. Post-war, the association between *women* and craft was inherently domestic, rooted in gender values that suggested craft was a service discipline, a standard 'life skill' that women should possess (Sorkin, 2016). Through their collective, conceptual, performative practice, these artists were reclaiming the haptic and feminine properties of clay, resisting the distinctly masculine prioritisation of scale and surface. Personally, I think these distinctions can risk fulfilling an ideology of biological determinism, thus undermining the therapeutic potentials of ceramic art and the artists own goals. This interferes with gaining an understanding of how the art form progresses into the contemporary era, embracing an identity that is simultaneously determined by clay's fluidity and the objecthood of ceramics.

The history of clay communities appears less relevant to the New Ceramicists, who were largely acting independently unless collaborating for exhibitions. Their approach was not one of complete upheaval of clay

culture, but by unveiling new perspectives on what could constitute the ceramic vessel, these artists were making room for their own integration within the British studio ceramics scene.

Having looked at the approach taken by women ceramicists based in the States to connect their practice to heritage; how do the New Ceramic artists consider ceramics' history and the women that came before them? I would argue that this idea is somewhat integral to the movement these artists were paving in British studio pottery. While respecting and skilfully utilising traditional pottery techniques such as slip decoration, the New Ceramics' potters were establishing their agency over these techniques, through using them to create visually expressive works. This is most evident in Alison Britton's work where she paints with similar expressive gestures to the more minimalist pottery that came before, but taking on an appearance closer resembling abstract expressionist painting. Her hand-built forms, acting almost just as a representation of a pot at the foundation of her painting, not as a canvas, but as yet another part of the whole picture, another series of lines.

As much as these artists' works are indeed considered *ceramic art*, the practitioners themselves have not departed from the title of 'potter,' further rooting them in their material's history, and not distinguishing their work as estranged from craft. As I stated before, Britain *does* possess a cultural hangover to its industrial past, and within pottery and ceramic art, this heritage, specifically of Stoke-on-Trent, is held on to by all who use and appreciate clay. In pottery factories women were employed in high quantities, where, as outlined in a study by Elizabeth Hart, there was a significant social hierarchy dependent on the role an individual played in the production line. This distinction was not necessarily dependent on one's class, as there are examples of family members in different jobs. But those who decorated the wares - the Paintresses - were considered 'posh' to those who worked in the clay stages of production. In some instances, such as the Beswick potbank, the 'decorating end' of production consisted entirely of women (Hart, 2005).

This tradition of women-as-decorators, as opposed to working at the 'clay end' of production, in British pottery comes from a gendered distinction between manual labour and decorative craft. Ornamentation in itself has historically been considered innately feminine, in the domestic and public sphere, private interiors and architecture. Ornament was seen as leisurely and excessive, yet those designing and making ornament had always been men. Even in the early stages of industrialisation, men were always the primary designers of decoration, for the process of ornamenting and

having agency over decoration came from a privileged position. This association, as well as being a physically less messy job, is what led to the view of Paintresses as the upper-class citizens of the potbanks.

The potters of the New Ceramics era produced works that appear to take a balanced consideration over building and decorating, producing colourful and intricately designed objects that transcend their form and function through visual spectacle. These practices culminated in an interpretation of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' in ceramic form, embodying a total harmony between objecthood, experience and a material understanding that surpassed clay, and encompassed expressionistic painting, geometrical design, textiles and architecture. In McNicoll's work, she not only uses ceramic to understand production and consumption of crafted ornamental objects, but she also ventures into the realm of other mediums, often implementing her experience in fashion and textiles into clay. Sticking to the properties of tactility and domesticity, McNicoll references another craft material with its own complicated gendered history, while simply emulating the aesthetic qualities of fabric, its textures and patterns, into the fixed state of ceramic.



Figure 5. Carol McNicoll, *Corrugated tea-pot*, 1992



Figure 6. Carol McNicoll, *Fruit bowl with twisted handles*, unknown date

McNicoll manipulates clay in a way that feels familiar yet is totally alien from the materiality and surface of ceramic. For example, we can see twisted and scrunched fabric in the handles of this teapot and this fruit bowl (figs. 5 and 6). These pieces have such striking patterns, in vivid colours that were not really seen in British ceramics before this era. The woven fruit bowl (fig. 7) combines elements of weaving with printing, while being raised on a pedestal made from other materials altogether. Some, such as the lid of the teapot or this large pot (fig. 8), resemble corrugated or sheet metal, exemplifying the mimicking power of clay and the diverse range of material properties it can represent.



Figure 7. Carol McNicoll, *Woven fruit bowl*, 1996 Figure 8. Carol McNicoll, *Large vessel with corrugated corners*, 1980s

Artists using clay to produce objects, as opposed to performance art, obviously means that the fired form can lead its own life after production and can now sit amongst myriad other pots. Part of the performative nature of ceramics is taking consideration for the life the works can lead after completion, whether they be for day-to-day use, or become family heirlooms, or end up in a museum or the hands of collectors.

As we can see here in the gallery, with Ismay and Shaw, or with the in-situ modern art and sculpture of Jim and Helen Ede at Kettle's Yard, among many other examples, is that to the collector of art objects, the art of *collecting* itself tends to favour the arts' integration to the domestic environment, whether through function, material, or aesthetic.

The collector of this selection of works, Patricia Nichol Barnes was born in Miami, Florida. She attended college in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania and eventually settled in Chicago, Illinois. After having four children, she pursued a PhD in English Literature at Northwestern University and helped her husband run an antiquarian bookstore while starting her career in real estate. Barnes bought her first flat in London in the 80's and then a house in Islington where much of her growing collection of British ceramics and art was located. Over the years she spent considerable time in London, inspired by the bohemian lifestyle of Vanessa Bell and the Bloomsbury Group. Her estate also made a considerable gift of British ceramics by these artists to the Art Institute of Chicago where they will be the centrepiece of their growing collection.

The nature of ceramics means it has countless modes of display that would be unimaginable for a work on paper or canvas. Only with ceramics,

could you be served tea out of something you would later go on to acquire for a city gallery. The organic way sculptures are typically tucked into the corner of rooms, paintings above the mantelpiece, and vessels, scattered across shelves and tables, show a sincere lack of pretence in the collection of art objects. The artworks are not a performative display, but a part of the lifestyle of the collector. By possessing objects that have associated functions, the collector has more options, more agency with how they choose to exhibit work (or whether they ever wish to put it to use), affecting the course of the artworks existence beyond its listed provenance.

Historically, the collection of ceramics is a practice that could slowly transcend social class. Collecting art has always found its association with the upper echelons of society, but from the Renaissance era in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, purchasing ceramics slowly became something that the women of mercantile households could partake in. This is because of ceramics' low status as an artform, its affordability and its replaceability. One of the most prominent patrons of this era was Isabella d'Este of Mantua, though of course not from the lower classes, the fact she was a prolific patron and collector of ceramics is significant in pottery's own status; being seen as a work of art, or at least something with the potential to enhance the experience of a meal through its artistry. Of course, the Renaissance era prompted an increase in arts production through the fact there were such prolific patrons supporting the artists and craftsmen. Through the example of d'Este we can see that ceramics were included as part of the patronage process despite being low on the hierarchy of the arts. Women art collectors have always been present and significant within arts' history.

The landscape of 20th century art and art institutions would be unrecognisable if it weren't for women collectors, specifically the art scene of the US and its representation of European artists and movements. MoMA, the Whitney, and the Frick all only exist because of female collectors and the keen senses of their patronage in seeking out revolutionary movements within the art world.

It is wonderful that the gallery has gained this significant display of artworks from a female collector, and that the collection possesses works from some very pertinent and revolutionary female figures from the British ceramics scene, a great example of the path forged by women in this humble medium. It is with thanks to Pat Barnes' children and the Contemporary Arts Society that this collection now belongs at York Art

Gallery and will go on to take a central role in what will soon become CoCA's Wall of Women.

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