



MUSEUM OF
ROYAL
WORCESTER

meadow arts



THE PRECIOUS CLAY

Porcelain in contemporary art

Museum of Royal Worcester
20 September 2018 to 20 March 2019

www.meadowarts.org

ARTISTS AND PORCELAIN

Welcome to *The Precious Clay*, an exhibition that surveys how a growing number of contemporary artists are attracted to the legendary medium of porcelain, and the manner in which they use it in their practice. With origins in the Far East and a long global history, porcelain eloquently speaks of preciousness, value and its ability to mutate; the works you will see during your visit demonstrate various approaches to these ideas.

Some artists in the exhibition have chosen to fully explore questions of materiality, purpose and process, like Laura White in her new commission *White Mud*. Others, like Jessica Harrison, Livia Marin, Bouke de Vries and Barnaby Barford use found porcelain objects to compose new pieces; they retain some of the subjective qualities of porcelain and spell out new narratives. Further artists such as Annie Attridge, Christine Borland, Matteo Nasini and Mona Hatoum play with the language of porcelain and its codes (gilding, painting, blue and white motifs, pure white etc.) to tell radically new stories.

In the last decade another group of artists comprising Edmund de Waal, Fernando Casasepere, Clare Twomey and Rachel Kneebone have taken up full engagement with porcelain and created new bodies of work that point to a whole new status for the medium.

The museum stands on the site of the former porcelain works, close to the vital canal networks, which marked the economic life of the city for almost two centuries. Artists Neil Brownsword, Emily Speed and Edward Chell allude to the decline of the porcelain industry and show how vital it is to remember its social heritage.

An important engagement programme involving groups of former workers, residents new and old, as well as younger and older people will unfold during the whole period of the exhibition and, in some cases add to the 25 works on display. We hope you enjoy your visit!

Anne de Charmant
Director, Meadow Arts

A MUSEUM IN TIME

Charles Dyson Perrins was an avid collector of Worcester Porcelain and purchased the Royal Worcester Company and its Museum in the 1930s. In 1946 he created the independent Museum Trust, governed by a board of volunteer trustees to unite and care for the two collections.

Having been founded in 1751 the factory was a giant amongst porcelain manufacturers and was a world-class leader of innovation and design in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Museum archives are testament to orders from international royalty, politicians and famed customers. The company exported goods to almost every corner of the world, and when people emigrated they took their most precious belongings with them, resulting in significant collections in the USA and Australia. A world-wide interest in the company and its beautiful products can be seen from the entries in our historic visitor books.

The factory closed in 2008 and the recent £1.7M gallery refurbishment brings these stories to life. It was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, charitable trusts and individual donors to whom we are forever grateful.

As well as caring for the collections, a driving force within the Museum is to make the rich archives and exhibits available to contemporary artists to study and provide inspiration for works that challenge concept and design in the 21st century. The collaboration with Meadow Arts and these renowned exhibitors meets that exciting challenge and the associated engagement programme will introduce families and new audiences to the magical properties of *The Precious Clay*.

Amanda Savidge

Director, Museum of Royal Worcester

www.museumofroyalworcester.org

BOUKE DE VRIES, WORCESTER TEAPOT WITH BUTTERFLIES, 2018

Porcelain and mixed media. COURTESY THE ARTIST



In his former work as a ceramics conservator/restorer, de Vries was often faced with issues around perfection. In this context, a single crack can render a once-valuable object practically worthless, literally not worth the cost of restoring. With the *Explosions* series, de Vries re-claims and celebrates the broken porcelain objects. Instead of being re-constructed, they

are de-constructed and given a new status, with new qualities, which move their stories forward. The spaces between the fragments become essential, the shape now open to reveal new possibilities.

EDMUND DE WAAL, IN TIME II, 2017

Porcelain, alabaster, gilding. COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY.

This recent work testifies to de Waal's obsession with the beautiful and temperamental substance that is porcelain, and also with the colour white. A potter since childhood and an acclaimed writer (*The Hare with Amber Eyes*), his passion for porcelain, or 'white gold' as he calls it, has led to an ever deeper understanding of the nature of the material.



Photo Mike Bruce

Much of his recent work has been concerned with ideas of collecting and collections, and how objects are kept together, lost, stolen and dispersed. Both his written and artistic practice have broken new ground through their critical engagement with the history and potential of porcelain.

EDWARD CHELL, **SPODE: TIP: PALLET**, 2018

Acrylic, lacquer, gesso on 1/8 Euro Pallet. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Chell has composed these works on small versions of the ubiquitous wooded Euro pallet, universally used in trade. By using the language of porcelain he adds value directly onto the surface of the almost worthless pallet. He has introduced a set of images in oval frames that are reminiscent of the Claude Glass, a viewing tool used by 18c landscape lovers. Instead of decorative vistas, they depict vast dumps and waste heaps, as here with the large spoil mountain of porcelain clay near St Austell, Cornwall known as 'Sky Tip' or 'The Cornish Alps'. These dumps speak of surplus and deficit, overproduction and over trading.



FERNANDO CASASEMPERE, **TECTONIC 2 (GRANDE)**, 2018

Porcelain and stoneware. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PARAFIN

Casasempere has worked with porcelain on a huge scale to confront and probe the landscape. Something of this power remains in his smaller works, where he continues to test and reveal the raw energy of porcelain. "The traditional blue and white Chinese ceramics, as well as the later European ceramics, have inspired me to search for new ways to apply colour in my porcelain sculptures and in turn keep the geological aspect of my work. Taking advantage of the natural transparency of porcelain, I thought it interesting to link that quality with a watercolour technique, which also relies on the application of colour under the same effect."



Photo Peter Maller

LIVIA MARIN, **NOMAD PATTERNS**, 2018

Ceramic. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Marin's works seem to be positioned indeterminately between something that is about to collapse or has just been restored; between things that have been invested with the attention of care but also have the appearance of a ruin. Her artworks reflect on the rules dictated by the contemporary marketplace, where standardisation dominates, and its influence over familiar objects. "I mostly use themes such

as serialisation, repetition and estrangement of what is familiar in my artwork. In this respect, I have a particular interest in the everyday life, specifically in the material objects that give shape to it."

CHRISTINE BORLAND, **SET CONVERSATION PIECES, DETAIL, CONVULVULUS**, 1998

Hand painted bone china. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Highly charged both emotionally and politically, these works by Turner Prize nominee Borland are aptly made of bone china and decorated with the early blue and white Oriental patterns so prized in two centuries ago. These precious items were imported to England by ships that were also often implicated in the slave trade, the porcelain cargo exchanged for

boatloads of slaves. Here in place of the delicate cup and saucer, a little skull is placed within a pelvis, in a delivery position. Borland cast pelvises and foetal skulls from obstetric models. Her concerns are plain - birth, fragility, female stereotyping and commodification of goods and humans.

MONA HATOUM, T42, 1999

Gold trimmed fine stoneware in two parts. COURTESY WHITE CUBE

One of the most admired traits of Mona Hatoum's work is how she generates multiple, and always affecting, readings by simple transformative gestures. With *T42*, the conjoining of the cups brings to mind the civility associated with tea drinking along with an image of the forced collaboration involved in sharing a vessel. In political terms, it can be construed as a metaphor of cooperation and egalitarianism, but also its opposite: a possible battle over limited resources, a tug-of-war in which the contents of the vessel go to the victor. Another perception altogether may be that of a couple very much in love and in tune, sharing a warm drink, while locked in an intimate embrace.

Photo: Iain Dickens



BOUKE DE VRIES, SELF PORTRAIT 1, 2009

White bisque figure and mixed media. COURTESY THE ARTIST

"The self-portrait was the very first piece I made. Originally it was a white figure of a Dutch boy in national costume, which my partner had given me. It then got broken in a house move. I hadn't thrown the broken pieces away and, years later, I had the idea of sticking it together using my restoration techniques, but to do it as if it was frozen in the moment of shattering. To me, this piece represents the sensitive and vulnerable, aspects of one's character we often hide – but which are expressed in this piece."



CÉLINE BERGER, MISSION, 2012

Glazed ceramic COURTESY THE ARTIST & DIVISION OF LABOUR.

Mission is a delicate, porcelain-like moebius strip with the mission statement, "We continually exceed our customers' increasing expectations". In the highly competitive world of porcelain production, Royal Worcester faced fluctuating fortunes since 1751, when it was founded in the city by a group of 15 men. The Museum of Royal Worcester's collections tell a story of taste, art and culture but also the story of a

commercial enterprise that needed to constantly renew itself in order to please. Berger's works are deeply rooted in a fascination for management concepts, methods and discourses: she creates objects, videos and installations that adapt and transform them into the field of art.



Photo: Willem Vermaase

EDWARD CHELL, WILLOW PROJECTION, 2018

Acrylic, lacquer on gesso on ¼ size Euro pallet. COURTESY THE ARTIST



These floor-based works are based on the generic and universally used Euro pallet, a ubiquitous sign of global trade; the wooden structure is now so widely used and abused that it has become invisible and almost totally worthless. In reaction to this, Chell has worked directly on the surface, adorning and glazing

it with motifs borrowed from another widely disseminated and common trope, the Willow pattern. While early Willow porcelain was reserved for wealthy European collectors, in the 19c Willow Pattern china was mass produced and appropriated by the rising middle class, thereby downgrading the factor of preciousness.

ROSA NGUYEN, LOST FLOWERS - SUMMER GARDEN, 2017

Botanical material, glazed porcelain. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Motivated by her craving to be present in the vegetal world, Nguyen works directly with both living and dried plant material, which she assembles and manipulates by casting and modelling.

In the final work, the plant material is sacrificed during the firing process but is also given new life; the white porcelain is now a vessel that is imbued with both fragility and permanence; it holds the image and the contours of a secret vanished garden. Nguyen is fascinated by alchemy and its associations with porcelain, but she is also inspired by more discreet arts such as gardening and Japanese flower arranging.

**LIVIA MARIN, BROKEN THINGS, 2018**

Photography, paper, gold thread. COURTESY THE ARTIST

In *Broken Things*, various discarded or obsolete ceramic objects are photographed in a studio-like setting. The printed photographic images are torn then put back together with delicate stitching in gold thread, making reference to the Japanese technique of kintsugi or golden repair; an ancient technique of restoring ceramic objects with lacquer and gold to replace those parts of the object that were missing or broken. It is an approach to restoration and preservation that mends without disguising the history of the object, making a feature of the broken area through its mended golden fractures.



EMILY SPEED, *HOLLOWWARE* 2018

Film and mixed media. MEADOW ARTS COMMISSION WITH CANAL & RIVER TRUST



Photo Stefan Handy

How much time does one vase contain? How far might a piece of Royal Worcester travel during its life span? *Hollowware* takes its title from some of those forms made at Royal Worcester and the porcelain jugs, pots and other items that took pride of place in people's homes. After undertaking research in the Museum's extensive archive and collection, Speed became especially interested in the factory's workers, the link with the nearby canals, and the perception of good taste.

A short film shows scenes from a performance event that took place in August around Diglis Basin, in collaboration with the Canal & River Trust's art programme, The Ring. The performer, wearing a costume and carrying a collection of small objects, followed the route the porcelain used to take on the start of its journey, out of the factory, via the canals. The domestic-scale installation in which the film is being shown merges the 'Roses and Castles' style of canal boat painting and details from Royal Worcester decorations in painted slip.

MATTEO NASINI, SPARKLING MATTER, 2017

Porcelain. COURTESY THE ARTIST, CLIMA GALLERY, MILAN & OPERATIVA, ROME



Each of the unusual pure white objects in *Sparkling Matter* is the 'portrait' of an actual dream. They are the result of a riveting experimental process, aimed at giving dreams a shape and a voice. Nasini, who has been experimenting with sound and music for decades, recorded a group of participants' brain activity through electroencephalography during their sleep, especially during the dream phase. He then used audio conversion software to transform the data into sound, creating a music score and projected graphics for public performances.

The final phase of this process is the porcelain vessels. Nasini transposed the EEG dream recordings through a landscaper's geometric software and, tilting them on an axis, created 3D prints and moulds that eventually became the 'dream shaped' vessels you can see here, which are being shown in the UK for the first time.

The choice of porcelain is not incidental, again the values carried by *The Precious Clay* are fully used: changeability, preciousness, mystery, inherent strength and fragility.

CLAIRE TWOMEY, VASE: SILKEBORG, 2018

Ceramics. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Famous for her large-scale projects Twomey chose ceramics and particularly porcelain early in her career. This project is the result of a performance at the Jorn Museum in Denmark dedicated to the famous Danish artist Asger Jorn (1913-1973) who was a great believer in

spontaneity and self-expression in art. Twomey encouraged visitors to spontaneously draw on the surface of sixty white vases from the popular Kähler Design. Using the language of gilded fine porcelain, the visitors' scribbles were then copied in gold enamel, thereby elevating the status of these humble vases.



Photo courtesy Museum Jorn

JESSICA HARRISON, PAINTED LADY (14,15,16,27,28), 2015 & 2018

Found ceramics, enamel paint. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Harrison's works more often than not represent women, however, the work is less about body politics and more about the formal, conceptual readings of the skin. In this series of *painted ladies*, Harrison scrutinises perceptions of beauty and gender identity; juxtaposing an insipid femininity with the rebellious individuality associated with early tattoo culture.

The mass-produced, homogeneous ladies are offered a distinctive new lease of life. Each tattoo is symbolic to the artist and their designs reference templates used at *The Black Eye Barber Shop*, an early 20c tattoo parlour in the Bowery, New York.



Painted Lady 14, Photo: Chris Park, courtesy University of Edinburgh

LAURA WHITE, *WHITE MUD*, 2018

Porcelain, wood & metal shelves. MEADOW ARTS COMMISSION

White Mud is a collection of porcelain objects that explore their own materiality. Using numerous processes and techniques White explores the capabilities and strength of this extraordinary 'white matter'. Casting, hand-building, glazing and firing lead to collapses, breaks and cracks, which expose the vulnerability and strength of the material, while also offering up new and challenging possibilities.

Using digital technology, a number of key objects from the museum's collection have been copied and combined with familiar, everyday objects, including plastic containers and fashionable household ornaments. These unexpected combinations give rise to a medley of interactions and radically new histories. With lifestyle changes, our needs and habits have mutated; we need, or think we need, different objects.

White Mud also proposes a reflection on how the digital environment and global mass production have impacted porcelain production. White directly raises the question of how we value objects depending on their materiality and the context in which we come across them – from the museum to the domestic, the perfect to the damaged, and what our expectations are of different materials, in particular porcelain.



RACHEL KNEEBONE, *NARCISSUS*, 2016

Porcelain. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND WHITE CUBE

In Kneebone's work, fragments of the human body multiply, merge and cascade down, unfurling around a complex tableau of organic and geometric forms. The eye registers the multitude of twisting and dissolving forms as ever-changing configurations. This creates a sense of constant flux and undoes any notion of a singular narrative or ornament. Inspired by ideas of transformation and renewal, Kneebone's complex porcelain sculptures are born of intense emotions, expressing movement and fluidity in a medium usually associated with stillness and calm. The material properties of her porcelain work convey an awareness of opposing states, appearing to be heavy, solid and strong but also light, fragmentary and soft.



Photo Ben Westoby

NEIL BROWNSWORD, *SALVAGE SERIES* 2011 - 2018

Ceramic and ceramic archaeology. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Adopting the role of both artist and archaeologist, Brownsword unearths discarded by-products from the history of ceramic production in North Staffordshire. Through re-firing and reworking this ceramic landfill known as shraff, together with other remnants of contemporary manufacture,

Brownsword regenerates this material into a powerful work that comments upon the effects of global capitalism on a heritage industry rooted in the region for nearly three centuries. In direct connection to centuries of anonymous labour, these fragments often bear the physical imprints of the hand. *Salvage Series* adopts the arbitrary categories of museum collections, to comment upon the danger of this cultural heritage becoming a relic in post-industrial Britain.

NEIL BROWNSWORD, NATIONAL TREASURE 2015 - 2016

Ceramic, looped film, performance with Anthony Challiner.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

National Treasure is an expression of respect for industrial labour and skill. Turning a video camera on china painter Tony Challiner, a craftsman with over five decades of experience, Brownsword rescues traditional skill from our amnesiac collective mind by proving the timeless value of the hand. The title also refers to the east, to Japan and Korea, where craftspeople are considered national treasures because of their traditional skills. Hiring Challiner himself, Brownsword filmed the craftsman at work in the derelict Josiah Spode factory. The images of ruined industrial sites painted on the reverse side of the plates are poignant but not nostalgic, they are literally snapshots of an economic transition following the disappearance of a traditional industry.



ANNIE ATTRIDGE, THE DIVINE AND THE MORTAL, 2012

Porcelain tine glaze, gold leaf, glaze enamels, wood. COURTESY THE ARTIST



Photo: Matthew Booth

Attridge uses the ornamental and seductive qualities of porcelain to explore the Baroque traditions of figurative decorative sculpture. Her works are infused with desire and longing, containing underlying waves of passion and romantic archetypes; always mediated by a deep sense of humour and using comic symbolism. Exploiting the medium's potential to be modelled, stretched and decorated, Attridge creates entangled and amorphous

scenes that resonate playfully with sensual pleasures. The work itself becomes both an object and a sign of desire.

ROSA NGUYEN, PLANETARY GARDEN: SUNLIGHT, MOONLIGHT, 2018

Mixed media. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Nguyen's signature large-scale displays and tableaux allude to our holistic relationship with a visible and transient natural world. They combine botanical material collected during walks in St Ives and Karnataka, India, with weeds from her garden, ceramic plate forms and Japanese wood block paper prints. She has used all these elements to create an interior garden. "Born of a French mother and Vietnamese father I am naturally drawn to the fusions between the East and the West. My work draws from Animist and Buddhist philosophies and the rituals and processes found in horticultural practice including garden cultivation, plant conservation and Ikebana - the Japanese Zen art of flower arranging."



BARNABY BARFORD, DAMAGED GOODS, 2008

Film 9'49". COURTESY THE ARTIST



Damaged Goods tells a tragi-comic story played out by porcelain figurines exploring notions of forbidden love, material wealth and class divisions against a background of tradition and value within ceramics. It turns the classic rags to riches plot

on its head with an unexpected twist. "The shelves in the film become the entire world for the characters," Barford explains, "they represent different strands of society, not necessarily through breeding, but through material wealth with the top shelves adorned with lavish crystal, silver and gold objects while the floor is only occupied by broken discarded items."

LEONORA LOCKHART, *UNDER STORY*, 2018

Porcelain. COURTESY THE ARTIST

Emerging artist Lockhart has brought together an assortment of discarded pieces of tableware found in charity shops, recreating them in porcelain – a high worth material bringing desirability to the piece- to assemble a cohesive collection. The colourful surface decoration is removed then digitised and enlarged, snippets are reapplied to the new pieces, white-on-white.



Interested in the memories collected within a form, with this piece the artist explores the unheard, and probably unknowable, stories of past owners' discarded wares and the unnoticed histories of the individuals who manufactured them. "They are ghosts of their previous unknown narratives ready to make new histories".

FERNANDO CASASEMPERE, *STACK 2*, 2015

Porcelain and stoneware. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PARAFIN

Defying the expectations of fragility and preciousness often associated with porcelain Casasempere dares to treat it with raw vigour and to stretch its limitations. Artist and medium seem entangled in an intense and intimate collaboration, the energy of the artist meeting that of the clay.

Stack 2 hints to Casasempere's much larger works that can be read topographically, almost as a document of the landscape. They call into question the relationship between art and the environment, between culture and the earth from which the sculptures are made. Working on a large scale for decades has given Casasempere a licence to stretch porcelain to tectonic limits.



STORYMINE, PORTAL

Community engagement programme



Portal is an ambitious community engagement programme that will take place during *The Precious Clay* exhibition and result in a new work to be installed in January outside the Museum.

The door handle can be seen as a kind of portal into people's lives; turning it takes you into spaces that may be public or intimate. Partly inspired by the museum's collection of ceramic door handles, Storymine's *Portal* project

invites different groups of Worcestershire people to cast a porcelain door handle and become part of a collaborative artwork.

Ceramic artist Emma Summers and filmmaker Peter Summers, will collect the participants' stories, asking what home and local communities mean to them, in order to create a film that is a virtual tapestry of reminiscence – a collection of memories. The cast door handles will be displayed as part of a sculptural installation at the museum from January.

Visit the events pages at www.meadowarts.org for public workshop dates.

PUBLIC EVENTS

We hold events for all ages, including hands-on making, artist's talks, curator's tours and lots more. To join in with the Portal project or take part in one of our other public workshops and events, visit www.meadowarts.org.

Exhibition curated by Anne de Charmant and Louisa Mayor.

Project management, marketing and engagement for Meadow Arts by Clare Purcell, Rebecca Farkas, Steve Wilson and Amber Knipe (at Dark Olive). Artwork installation by Oliver Jones and Darren Knipe.

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The participating Artists, their Studios and Galleries

And

Stefan Handy, C'Art, Blackwell Green, Galeria Toni Tàpies, The Mayor Gallery and University of Edinburgh.

Some of the works in this exhibition are for sale.

Please direct enquiries to clare@meadowarts.org



LAURA WHITE THE ESQUE COLLECTION WORCESTER CATHEDRAL

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Front Cover Image: Annie Attridge, *The Divine and the Mortal*. Photo: Matthew Booth.

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THE PRECIOUS CLAY

New commissions by
LAURA WHITE & EMILY SPEED

Works by

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BOUKE DE VRIES / CÉLINE BERGER / CHRISTINE BORLAND
CLARE TWOMEY / EDMUND DE WAAL / EDWARD CHELL
FERNANDO CASASEMPERE / JESSICA HARRISON
LEONORA LOCKHART / LIVIA MARIN / MATTEO NASINI
MONA HATOUM / NEIL BROWNSWORD
RACHEL KNEEBONE / ROSA NGUYEN
and STORYMINE

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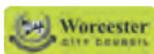
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