



Figure 1: Clare Twomey: *Consciousness/Conscience*, 2001-2004

Stagnation or Exploration:

How Have Perspectives towards Fine Art within the Context of  
British Ceramics in 2007 Stood the Test of Time?

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*Submitted by Bridget Macklin. I certify that all material in this research project which is not my own work has been identified and that the final word count from introduction through to conclusion is 6434 words.*

## **Abstract**

The starting point for this essay is the claim made by Michael Jones McKean in 2007 that ceramic art had stagnated and the counter claim in the same year by Barnard, Daintry and Twomey. Using examples of artists who are living in and studied in Britain, it sets out to explain why the assertions were made and how attitudes might have changed since they were published.

By considering the place of clay within fine art and craft, the historical associations and haptic qualities of it as a material and the hang-ups, in the minds of ceramicists around the functionality of clay, are discussed. This includes the identity crisis within the field and also traditional and contemporary notions of craft. The ideas of R G Collingwood, Peter Dormer and the Process Movement are explored with a consideration of why these present difficulties for those working with ceramics. The essay considers how different theories of making have impacted on ceramics, looking at the ideas promulgated by Tim Ingold and exploring the work of Clare Twomey, amongst others, within this context.

McKean's credentials, and those of the magazine which published his paper, are examined and found to be academically strong. The suggestion is made that, through a process of skilling and deskilling, those who were inclined to be adventurous had begun to change clay's status from a material for functionality towards that of a medium for innovation and exploration which started in the UK after the Second World War and continued with artists like Gillian Lowndes into the 1970s. At the time of both protagonists' publications, changes in tertiary education might have begun to influence artists. This essay examines the concepts of Post Disciplinary and Sloppy Craft, which were emerging at the time, and discusses whether these changes, plus a reduction in the availability of specific tertiary ceramics courses, have impacted on the nature of work being created around and since 2007.

Finally, by considering recent explorations of surface and form within the vessel and beyond, the essay discusses the imaginative and innovative work which is currently being exhibited and concludes that, despite changes in tertiary courses away from those focussing on skills towards more generalised, concept-based study, developments continue to be made. Rather than being "stuck", the artists that are drawn to the material have continued to work with it in different and imaginative ways: new ideas about what is possible with clay continue to be explored and innovation in ceramics is very clearly not stagnated in 2022.

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## Introduction

In 2007 Michael Jones McKean wrote a paper, *Towards Incongruence*, for the journal *Interpreting Ceramics*. In it he claimed that ‘ceramicists are desperately trying to make art’ but innovation had stagnated and that a ‘self-perpetuating feedback loop’ existed whereby what people make from clay was dictated by our understanding of what we could make from clay (2007).

This essay examines McKean’s paper and attempts to contextualise his opinion and test it against what was happening in British ceramics then and now. His claims are compared to those of Barnard, Daintry and Twomey, each well-regarded artists and academics. Their collective book *Breaking the Mould* was published in the same year (2007). In it, they explored the relationship between contemporary ceramics, fine art and craft. They profiled over sixty established and emerging artists, described in the Foreword as ‘some of the most exciting and edgy artists working today’ (2007:4), and argued that these artists were creating work which was taking ceramics into new territory.

2007 was also the year in which the terms Post Disciplinarity and Sloppy Craft were coined in a conversation between Anne Wilson, Professor at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, and Glenn Adamson, Head of Graduate Studies at the V&A Museum, at a symposium called *Fabrications: Craft in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Both became accepted terms when discussing contemporary craft (Paterson et al 2015). These expressions will be explored and their impact on British ceramics considered along with how changes in education may have affected students’ understanding of clay and how to take risks with it.

The essay focusses on British artists who live, and studied, in the UK, to consider the claims made by McKean and by Barnard, Daintry and Twomey. Chapters 1 and 2 consider craft, as a philosophical and sociological concept, and clay, both as a material for functional work and for spontaneous, experimental, process led work in fine art. The essay examines the place of clay within the world of fine art and craft and its symbolism as a material and considers the impact of history on clay as a material for function reviewing the influence of Bernard Leach during a shift towards contemporary ceramics. By exploring the work of Alison Britton and Gillian Lowndes, it considers where innovation in ceramics was situated prior to 2007. Chapter 3 introduces Post Disciplinarity and Sloppy Craft, exploring the origins of the terms and their relevance to changes in ceramics as a discipline. This leads, in Chapter 4, to a brief

consideration of how education has changed and thence to how students currently experience materials.

The subjects of the essay are material led artists who work, chiefly, with clay and whose knowledge of the material is based on their study of it: its language, its symbolism and its resonance. Finally, in chapter 5, the work of Ashraf Hanna and Tasmin van Essen, who choose to work with the traditional ‘vessel’ but experiment with form and surface, and, in Chapter 6, of Aaron Angell, Jonathan Baldock and Aneta Regal, who are all exploring the possibilities of clay as a medium for sculptural work, are referenced to unpick McKean’s assertions and consider their relevance within British Ceramics in 2022.

## Notions of Craft

While working with clay, a dialogue develops between the maker and the material, an understanding of what might be possible, an appreciation of the limitations (Wilson in Paterson et al). As Wilson suggests, the intention is not to impose form on matter but to work with what is known about what is possible:

‘Where craft is concerned, the hand-made raises questions about authenticity.’

(Cooper: 62).

*A little more height here, less weight at the foot, a more balanced lip, how will the glaze flow on this surface, a little broader in the shoulder— tickle me!*

(Cited in Paterson et al: 195)

R. G. Collingwood (1889 – 1943), a philosopher best known for his book *The Principles of Art* (1933), suggested that craft is the skilful, mindless production of artefacts while art involves creative thought but no skill (Paterson et al 2007). Emanuel Kant described craft as a monetary activity involved in the making of functional objects as part of one’s occupation whilst art is something ‘free’ and more involved with purposeful recreation (cited in Thorpe, 2021). Similarly, Dawn Bibby views craft as ‘*a mindless pastime using ready-made kits sold by her shopping channel, QVC*’ (cited in Craft Magazine Issue 210: 62). In his 1968 book *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, David Pye argued that there was more to

craft than function and mindless activity (cited in Paterson et al: 8). More recently, craft has morphed into a hybrid use of skill, traditional materials and conceptual art. Paterson et al, highlighting the Process Art movement of 1960s, discuss how an '*emphasis on process has preoccupied makers for some time, particularly beyond the confines of the geographical and ideological west*' (2015: 3) and cite the 1965 translation of Yuichiro Kojiro's book *Forms in Japan* which categorises crafts as those that involve forms of union, arrangement, collection and fluidity and lead to considering work in terms of the actions of the makers rather than the resulting forms.

Peter Dormer, seen as one of the most important thinkers on contemporary craft, defined craft in two ways both, coincidentally, he termed '*sloppy*'! On one hand he described it as a term for anyone using a craft material and on the other as a process which developed from knowledge of the material (1997).

Over time, craft has become more about knowledge to be applied: a process which Matthew Crawford considers to be inextricably bound up in a knowledge of the '*ways*' of one's material (Crawford, 2010). This familiarity with one's material and working through process becomes very relevant when considering recent changes in pedagogical practices, away from material-based studies and with potential consequences for shifts in practice (See Ch. 4).

In 2007, the exhibition *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular Craft* at the V&A examined craft in relation to fine art, describing craft as having '*sensitivity to material, process and meticulous making*' (Britton Newell cited in Cooper: 62). It suggested that, by moving away from the idea of traditional craft, artists feel entitled to '*deal with concepts in which the object is not simply visually arresting but, more significantly, the starting point for a series of ideas*' (Cooper: 62). Cooper questioned the omission of ceramics from the exhibition at a time when, he argued, there were so many ceramicists working in experimental ways. The irony of this statement is that the exhibition was in the same year that McKean was claiming that ceramics was largely stagnated.

Clay is steeped in tradition. It is referenced in the Bible, the Koran and the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Vessels, carefully crafted functional objects, have been made from clay for millennia and much of the language of clay can be discussed through the idea of the vessel with its earthly, anthropomorphic, natural, creationist and containment metaphors. Historically, it is a craft material and there is a problem in breaking free of this past. Yet clay has also often been used for making objects other than for their function. Picasso was using clay as a surface for painting shortly after the Second World War. However, particularly in Britain, a powerful lobby favoured clay as a material for function. Bernard Leach, whose



opinion was that clay was for the creation of simple, useful, everyday objects, derided Picasso's clay works calling them Picassiettes (Thorpe: 8).

Hylomorphism theorises that, for anyone to take a material and use it to make something, they need to: hold a thought at the forefront of their mind; that this thought is original; and that making a craft object is not creative and hence not art. Ingold turns this on its head: making through thinking becomes thinking through making (2013a). For Ingold, nothing is an end product. It is a point on the journey: a passing idea in a chain of such thoughts. There is an ongoing link of material flow and neurological perception. Creativity lies in improvisation and not, as described by Alfred Gell, in the concept that creations are projected from an idea formed in the mind of the maker and realised in the object (Ingold, 2013b: 101). The object is a binding together of materials and ideas with the energy of the maker following the alchemical behaviour of the material.

Working with clay is also to perceive haptic sensation which is intimately involved in the question of what it means to make things. Ingold describes this as a '*process of growth*' (2013b: 22) with, he suggests, two sides to materiality. First is the character of the material, its physicality, then there are the social and historical expectations of that material imposed by humans (Ingold, 2013b): tradition holding back creativity. For Ingold, the development of knowledge through observation and engagement, thinking through making, means engaging in the weaving of thoughts with skill: striking the balance between the running forward of ideas and the drag of the material whilst keeping one's eyes on the far horizon. Form arises through movement and the dynamic properties of the material. '*If everything about a form is prefigured in the design, then why bother to make it at all*' (2013b: 22).

At the time of McKean's paper, Clare Twomey was advancing her career exploring the materiality of clay and craft practice. Ingold describes her as a maker with a lifetime of '*intimate and sensory engagement in a particular craft*' (2013b: 29). Her work is situated within a social context and spans exploration of the raw material all the way through to considering the longevity of fired clay. She plays with ideas of repetition using slip casting, a process implying mass production, to create individualistic installations through which she questions the concept of exclusivity. Twomey's work sits between craft and fine art: exploiting a deep understanding of the material and requiring the development of ideas.

*Consciousness/conscience* (2001-4) involved 3,000 slip cast, raw bone china tiles across the gallery floor. When walked on, other work could be accessed but the tiles were destroyed (Image: Title Page).



In *Monument* (2009), she built a heap of ceramic waste highlighting the value and ownership of objects but inviting consideration of the properties of the material. Her work has a strong conceptual base yet, without understanding of the material, it would lose depth.

In her most recent project, Twomey installed a factory within Tate Exchange in which a production line of labourers created ceramic objects. It was as much about concept, the value of labour, as it was about material. Yet it was also a comment on the role of ceramics (Twomey ca. 2009). Without knowledge of the nature and history of clay and its potential, could she have imagined this piece?

**Figure 2. Clare Twomey: *Monument*, 2009**

The notion of craft, the changing interpretation of what 'craft' means and the way in which clay stretched beyond so many perceptions of craft around 2007, presented some very real practical and philosophical challenges for those in the world of ceramics.

## The Problem for Ceramics

Michael Jones McKean has exhibited internationally. He is Professor of Sculpture at the Virginia Commonwealth University and has received many awards and fellowships. He has been interviewed for many Art journals, his credentials are very strong and he is an expert in his field.

**‘Ceramics has mutated and gestated to develop a set of incongruent strategies and standards, an elegantly flat-footed syncopation, and an often beautifully awkward aesthetic.’**

(McKean, 2007)

In his paper, *Towards Incongruence*, McKean does not provide evidence: only opinion. Yet one must recognise the gravitas of the journal within which it was published whose stated aim is *‘to establish and maintain the highest scholarly standards for the content of the articles published’* (Interpreting Ceramics). The journal is owned by the Universities of Wales, the West of England and Bath Spa. Editorial responsibility lies with a well-respected committee from different disciplines with wide ranging expertise (2000). One must assume that McKean’s paper met the rigorous criteria of the journal.

McKean describes himself not as a ceramic artist but as one who often uses clay. He makes this distinction because he believes it frees him from what he considers the difficulty that ceramic artists have in working from a *‘stagnantly dysfunctional critical canon’* (2007). He describes difficulties for ceramics in crossing a divide from ancient history towards an attitude to making beyond traditional models. He suggests that an inbuilt challenge in the specificity of the material makes the discourse around art more complicated. His desire was to provoke debate and re-boot clay, discarding the narratives of its past. The transcript indicates that his opinion sits adjacent to others discussing the reinvention of craft in relation to fine art. But he describes a feedback loop which forces people who work with clay to make objects that they know can be made with clay. He then suggests that the most innovative makers are circumnavigating this critical discourse and making *‘wildly innovative’* work within the gap this creates which is way ahead of its own narrative.

*Ceramic practice at its borders—like most marginal art productions—is usually way ahead or way outside of the critical discourse and the historical narratives we develop that try to contain and package our practices. Inversely, what generally gets*

*made near ceramic's centre seems encrusted and stagnated because of these reductive formulations.*

(2007)

McKean is not alone. Longchamps insists that skill is important even when the artist is 'getting sloppy'. Referencing ceramics, he describes a notion of deskilling and reskilling which happens when an artist distances themselves from the skills and knowledge base of their material and then uses the material in a different way (cited in Paterson et al: 11).

Was Gillian Lowndes demonstrating this deskilling and reskilling, long before McKean's '*wild innovation*', when she dipped objects into clay and fired them? Her work was certainly daring and original. Lowndes, (1936 – 2010) studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts (Later Central St Martins) in the 1950s. She was considered by the Crafts Council to be one of the best British ceramic artists of the twentieth century (Smith 2020). She would have become a skilled maker and would have been introduced to the teachings of Bernard Leach, the commonly acclaimed 'Father of British Studio Pottery'. Her tutors would have included Gilbert Harding Green, a keen, adventurous disciple of Dora Billington who was one of the most important people in British Studio Pottery of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Feilding) and who also taught at this school until the 1950s. Although admiring Leach, she found his teaching limiting (Coleman, 2015).

*While the mass production of pottery tends through its very efficiency to a more and more mechanical result, an entirely new type of 'Studio Potter' has arisen in our time, with aims and ideals that are primarily aesthetic. For many of these, pottery is a medium which gives scope to combine painting and sculpture, form and colour, without necessarily having any utilitarian value whatever, being in fact a species of so-called fine art.*

(Billington cited in Quinn and Sorrell: 7)



**Figure 3: Gillian Lowndes: *Cup on a Base*, 1986**

Lowndes, encouraged by Harding Green, looked beyond function moving focus away from the metaphorical potential of the vessel. She began investigating the potential of clay as a material for collage, exploring its materiality through radical contemporary work, and became one of the most prominent abstract ceramic artists of the 1970s (Feilding). Her criticality lies in her references to history and in challenging convention. She is quoted as saying of Leach, who's powerfully influential teaching did pressure British makers to focus on traditional methods and functionality, (Quinn and Sorrell). '*He never meant anything to me at all*' (Fielding: 13).

The exhibition '*Craftsmanship Alone is Not Enough*', named after a Billington quote and featuring work by Lowndes, at Central St Martins in 2017 described ceramic design not as stuck but as '*In a constant state of purposeful experimentation*' (Quinn and Sorrell: 3).

It seems that the eminence of McKean and the reputation of the journal in which *Towards Incongruence* was published, allied to the forceful opinions of Bernard Leach, the Father of British Studio Pottery, brought to a head an apparent crisis for British ceramics in 2007. Yet, before then, a way out of this

crisis had been indicated by Lowndes which the movements of Post Disciplinarity and Sloppy Craft reinforced.

## Post Disciplinarity and Sloppy Craft

In 2012, Glen Adamson gave an interview in which he questioned whether we still define craft the way we did in 1912. He suggested that craft had been isolated from fine art by the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century which perceived that craft needed protection (Flurry) and which,

No activity has any more right to be called art than another and makers are free to call themselves whatever they like or indeed nothing at all.

(Paterson et al: 9)

by the 1950s, meant craftspeople were conflicted by a duality which persisted for many years and created difficulties in the relationship of craft to design and fine art. *'How do you draw on the strength of a discipline whilst still operating in a way that is broad and creative and expressive?'* (Adamson in Flurry). Yet for Merrill, there is no art without craft: thinking about a painting is not the same as creating one (Merrill cited in Sennett 2008).

By 2012, according to Adamson, Post Disciplinarity was causing boundaries between craft, design and fine art to break down. Makers, hyper aware of divisions, were freed to move between categories and explore different disciplines. Professional identity was blurred: craft was opened up, universally present. The consequence for a particular craft was that skills became diluted: specific crafts became difficult to identify but craft in general was visible within a broad spectrum of activities. Adamson suggested that, whilst craft is still a derogatory term within fine art, if one uses one's hands as information gathering tools then testing an idea, followed by involving the brain in the possibilities in terms of non-linguistic exploration, both manual and intellectual skills are required. If a craftsman is limited to manual activity, that activity becomes trapped: if craft is engaged with ways of being creative, it becomes part of a larger picture. Considered thus, it becomes difficult to view craft pejoratively. *'Craft is great as long as it is not the only thing going on'* (Adamson in Flurry 2012: 6.50). For this to work, deep understanding of both material and techniques is vital.

Barnard claimed that ceramics is still considered inferior by those in the most prestigious positions within fine art and that ceramic artists have a driving ambition to be taken seriously which has motivated practitioners since the end of World War Two when returning veterans suddenly had access to a university education (2007). At that time many new art departments, including ceramics, sprang up and the vision of potters started shifting from making a living throwing on a wheel towards more lucrative opportunities as university lecturers. Yet students found themselves in competition with sculptors and painters in a world where painting was **the** measure of success. Craft courses struggled to gain credibility, marginalised in favour of fine art (Harrod cited in Paterson et al). Despite experiencing a foundation course rich in learning the first principles of form, texture, line and colour (Dormer, 1997), graduates rejected the history of their material and turned to *'a new form of ceramic expression that focussed on appearing rebellious, heroic and outside the mainstream'* (Barnard et al: 18). One might argue that, given the basic learning which underpinned their rebellion, they knew how to be different. Writing in 2015, cultural historian Christopher Frayling commented:

*Craftsmanship is definitely in the ether [but] as an idea ripe to be 'reclaimed', 're-evaluated' and 'redefined'—an idea that should shed its tendency to speak its name with a cringe.*

(Frayling cited in Paterson: 13)

Different approaches emerged: vessels as canvas; the clay employed as three-dimensional paint; the form of the clay used in opposition to the surface. *'Ceramics - exuberant, bold, irreverent – has excited admiration and controversy among craftsmen in every field both here and abroad'* (Slivka: 31). This caused outrage. Warren MacKenzie, student of Bernard Leach, wrote angrily about non-functional pottery:

*Now we find that if you pile it high enough with the written word, or in the visual field, it can pass for art. In the future we will give up any attempt to make functional ceramics an expressive form since apparently containers make almost no demands on our sensibilities, leaving us free – free to concentrate on getting the cow to cooperate for higher and larger works of ART.*

(MacKenzie cited in Barnard et al: 18)

A rift was growing between functionality and fine art: on the one hand impersonal, quality work and on the other the application of ideas such as *'what if'* where *'work is connected to the freedom to experiment'* (Sennett: 27). There was a rapid rise in very experimental work and a break away from loyalty to the Leach School. Simultaneously, universities began to move from teaching techniques

towards conceptual approaches and digital technologies. This move was related to decisions about multi-media teaching and concept-led exploration (Paterson et al.). By the 21<sup>st</sup> century Sloppy Craft, messy and incomplete, had arrived.

Perhaps Sloppy Craft was less a pedagogical impact and more an attempt to resolve technical and conceptual challenges in which success was about knowledge, not skill – or was it simply an excuse for mediocrity (Sennett)? By 2007 it was a term used by Adamson to describe ‘*The unkept product of a post disciplinary craft education*’ (Wilson, A. cited in Paterson et al: foreword). Why this paradox between craft and Sloppy with much contemporary art bound by a lack of skill? Is it, as Adamson suggests, because we have come to want craft to be distinct from commodity products and so value an amateur attempt at a pinch pot because it has character: it is human? Adamson even hints that it was necessary for Grayson Perry’s Turner Prize winning ceramics to appear unskilful since that implied that it was concept based (Adamson cited in Paterson et al).

Post Disciplinarity and Sloppy Craft can both make the case for McKean’s stagnation but also support Barnard, Daintry and Twomey’s claims that contemporary artists were taking ceramics to new territory. To understand where new artists were coming from, we need to understand how education was changing.

## **Changes in Ceramics Education**

In his review of the V&A exhibition *Out of the Ordinary: Spectacular craft*, Emmanuel Cooper distinguished between people who trained as fine artists, coming to a material as a means of expression, and those who knew their material and understood how to explore it (2007). This is interesting when one examines changes in Education and how this influenced makers.

**It is impossible for the student to master every craft in every medium they use.**

(Paterson et al: 181)

Over recent decades, the emphasis on experimentation has shifted: design becoming more important than risk taking (Paterson et al). How has this impacted on what is being created and the level of experimentation? Eliza Au comments:



*I see interdisciplinary studies as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it promotes integration across mediums and fields but, on the other hand, it takes time away from gaining focused knowledge in one particular medium.*

(Au in Paterson et al: 181)

Time prevents undergraduate students learning everything. Au points to Daniel Levitin's assertion that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert (Paterson et al: 181). On contemporary courses, the purpose is to develop basic competence. Values have shifted. Students have forfeited the opportunity to study one material in depth. Sennett suggests that modern education is afraid of boring students and that, in a desperate attempt to provide ever changing stimulation, routine is avoided. Students are no longer able to experiment within the security of a strong skill set (2008).

*Material-specific art education in the UK (and the world), is fluctuating, undergoing massive funding cuts, quite literally swept under the rug by the UK government; "flat-lined."*

(Bryant, 2017)

In contrast, a five-year apprenticeship in ceramics in Japan demands significant commitment (Wilson, P. in Paterson et al).

Simultaneously, ceramics in schools has declined (Champkin) and many ceramics degree courses across Britain have closed: by 2010 the number of undergraduate ceramics courses had dropped from 13 to 4 in England and Wales and from 4 to none in Scotland (Artists Newsletter). It is difficult to imagine this not impacting on the opportunities and scope for Billington's 'purposeful experimentation'. Yet, in 2016, at a panel considering the disappearance of ceramics courses in the UK, the point was made that, whilst it is important to prevent the loss of skills, the changes are not all bad and may enable engagement with material in new, exciting, interdisciplinary ways which would have been difficult previously (Bryant, 2017).

These changes seem to support McKean's hypothesis. Without the underpinning rigour of a deep understanding of the material and development of core skills, how can ceramics avoid stagnation? The answer lies in 'looking beyond' and here we should start with the core ceramic concept of 'the vessel'.

## Beyond 2007: Vessels

Contemporary ceramic artists often choose to work with the shape of a vessel as a means of exploring meaning. Margetts suggests that contemporary ceramic artists make use of metaphors; of containment; the body; the earth; within the shape of the vessel and through surface decoration (Barlow and Margetts, 1998), this even though vessels are considered useful but are not valued as fine art (Daintry in Daintry et al.). It is possible that these artists also find comfort in working within a traditional form for the material.

The Vessel is a pulse-taker, 'where we are, what do we value, what are we thinking'

(Barnard et al: 6)

Ashraf Hanna is an Egyptian born British artist described by Maggie Barnes in 2017 as '*entering the prime years of his creative life*' (Barnes: 14). He is a good example of a material led maker, trained in ceramics, choosing to use the vessel to create sculptural forms which push the boundaries. He won the Crossover Award at Emerge 2016, First Prize British Glass Biennale in 2015, the Major Creative Wales Award in 2013 and was Welsh Artist of the Year in 2010. His work is in permanent collections including Museum Ariana, Fitzwilliam Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, National Museum of Wales and the Contemporary Arts Society of Wales (Hanna).

Hanna's work reflects Ingold's views of form being '*emergent, rather than imposed*' (Ingold, 2013b: 44). Clearly, each experiment is leading to the next.

*Shorter forms emerged, tilted and leaning. Bellies curve, concave and convex, rising up and out from sharply angled feet to finely worked rims. Coloured terra sigillata slips in vivid and various shades of green referencing lush Welsh landscapes were introduced and applied to both interior and exterior surfaces. Livelier contrasts were introduced, inviting closer observation and marking positive progress in both form and surface treatment across his evolving practice.*

(Barnes: 14).

Hanna's vessels are beyond functional. He describes forms as objects of contemplation, his work explores form and material. *'In surpassing functional vessels, I have invited a more poetic and meditative approach to making'* (Hanna). His work is hand built and technically skilled with a contemporary, paired back feel.



**Figure 4: Ashraf Hanna: *Altered Space*, 2022**

Cavaliero and Finn describe Hanna's work as having purity of form with gentle curves and sharp lines and state that his technical skills are second to none (Cavaliero and Finn). His style is continually evolving through a developing relationship with his material. Hanna is not making one vessel and then another: he is exploring the possibilities of 'the vessel'. One might say that he is "vesseling" rather than making vessels.

Contemporary British makers using vessels as a surface for decoration include Mike Byrne, Hannah Townsend and Tamsin van Essen. Between them they demonstrate the possibilities and Van Essen is really pushing boundaries (Gessato). Her work explores beauty, ambiguity and impermanence. Discussing a project with the Museum of Life Sciences at Kings College, London in 2015, she described herself as *'fascinated by the material and conceptual potential of clay and how it might be used to interpret these transformations'* (Van Essen in Ceramic Review: 15).



**Figure 5: Van Essen: *Metamorphosis*. 2021**

Both the works above are about a preoccupation with the transience of things that Froyle describes as part biology, part geology (2015). Van Essen's repertoire includes deeply incised vessels with flaking decoration and eroded surfaces. Skill and understanding of the material are required to explore risk and create her pieces. The work is unique and intriguing. Her work is in many permanent collections including: the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum, the Israel Museum, the University of the Arts and the Wellcome Collection. She has exhibited extensively including at the Sévres Museum, the Saatchi Gallery and the Palais des Beaux-Arts (Van Essen n.d.).

These artists have taken 'the vessel' to new heights of interpretation. Beyond this, what has happened to the gauntlet thrown down by Lowndes?



**Figure 6: Van Essen: *Vanitas, Vanitatum*, 2012**

## After Vessels

Gillian Lowndes legacy has been picked up by many new makers. Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art is a current exhibition (26 Oct 2022 – 8 Jan 2023) featuring a star-studded cast of 23 international artists (Rugoff et al). It includes work by British artists Madelaine Oundo and Grayson Perry, who, were two of the most important ceramic artists in the twentieth century (Smith, 2020), and by Edmund de Waal.

‘If the vessel form speaks of the body, then extending the experience of it to include the surrounding environment engages the viewer’s actual body in space’

(Lauson in Rugoff et al: 12)

It also features new British artists Aaron Angell, Emma Hart and Jonathan Baldock, whose humorous yet mutilated creations give a sense of surreal dystopia which merges ceramics with other media and performance.



**Figure 7: Jonathan Baldock: Facecrime, 2019**

Of these, Angell is particularly interesting. He studied sculpture and graduated from the Slade School in 2007 as McKean was describing ceramics as stagnated. Angell's focus is on ceramics as art and, like Baldock, he is not entirely a ceramic artist. He also works with collage and perspex and has explored Raga classical music. His clay works began as maquettes for larger pieces (Morton).



**Figure 8: Aaron Angell *Pie #2, 2021***

Post Art School, having discovered a love of clay, Angell attended the Leach School, learned to throw on a wheel and explored different firing regimes. His exploration of clay is rooted in tradition and understanding. The irony in his choice of academic institution for his ceramic education is powerful.



**Figure 9: Aaron Angell: *Caterpillar Engine #4, 2018***

Angell's strong skill base enables innovative experimental work. His firing regime, glazes and types of clay are important to him (Angell). Not only is he exploring the potential of clay from a starting point of understanding his material, he is also encouraging this in others. In 2014, recognising a lack of basic ceramics courses in the UK, Angell set up *Troy Town Art Pottery* specifically to teach ceramic sculpture. The studio encourages artists to work in traditional eastern and western methods, to create their own glazes and to explore different clays and firing regimes. Angell is not alone in his thinking about a lack of teaching:

*And so the wheel turns. In 1993 at a conference at the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, I presented a paper that proposed a new curriculum for ceramics that focused on: The Material, as a medium for sculptural expression grounded in fine art practice; Craft, acknowledging its history and reassessing its potential; and Design, recognising its social responsibility to enhance the quality of life as defined by context, function and user. Over twenty years on, it now seems a little simplistic but it has proved a solid foundation for what has become a leading course in ceramic education.*

(Kessler in Quinn and Sorrell: 35)

The choice of artists for Strange Clay seems bewildering. Odundo's work spans four decades and is important but she is 72 and making little new work (Daintry et al). Perry excites public interest but appears to have moved away from directly making with clay (Serpentine Galleries). De Waal is still making but has turned his attention to curation of other work (de Waal). None of these are included in the most recent academic text on contemporary British ceramics (Thorpe). Has the Gallery seized the dichotomy of crowd pulling artists who are no longer pushing the boundaries on the one hand, and on the other, new innovative artists in order to reveal those now at the forefront of experimentation to a wider audience? Arian Searle did not seem to notice this in his review (2022), but the Sunday Times described De Waal's contribution as '*dreary and pretentious*' while waxing lyrical about less well-known artists (Januszczak, 2022). The exhibition is too new to have received critical comment in arts journals.

Had there been space for more contemporary work, might it have been tempting to include work by Patricia Volk, Sarah Radstone and Aneta Regel? Each of these artists is currently exploring ceramics from a position of knowledge of the material and is making waves on the Fine Art stage (Thorpe).

Aneta Regel is an interesting example, she studied for a BA in Ceramics at the University of Westminster and completed a Masters in Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College of Art in 2006. In 2019 she was awarded the Excellence Prize in Ceramics as Expression at the Korean international Competition Ceramic Biennale. Her work demonstrates sound knowledge of her medium and her organic forms explore surface textures, using multiple firings and applying several layers of glazes in such a way that they become more than surface application but seem integral within the piece.



**Figure 10: Aneta Regel: *Landscape 5* (2018)**

Regel's understanding allows her to explore complex surfaces. Her website describes the energy within her work and a desire to acknowledge that her forms are not complete: ideas continue to emerge. Once again, each experiment seems to lead on to the next. Regel undertook a Fine Art degree in her native Poland prior to studying ceramics but this first degree did not, apparently, give her the confidence to work with clay (Regel).

*Regel's pieces embody metamorphic states that emphasize the plasticity of her materials, or more specifically, that which Regel calls their "capacity to be modified," equated not only with "our own ontology but also [...] the way we interact with objects and one another."*

(Stent: 50)



Lloyd-Smith describes 21st-century British ceramic artists as demonstrating that clay has an aptitude for concept and that, beguiled by its versatility and tactility, they are continuing to push it to its limits. 'These are the trail-glazers, the mould-breakers and future-shapers on the cutting edge of ceramic art' (2022). A pity, then, that the Hayward Gallery in the most current portrayal of the nature of innovation in clay has chosen to find space for established artists who are no longer at the forefront of exploration rather than for exciting new British artists who are.

## Conclusions

This essay explores how changes in attitude to craft and fine art have impacted innovation and experimentation in British ceramics over the past fifteen years. It is stimulated by *Towards Incongruence*: Michael Jones McKean (2007) and by *Breaking the Mould*: Barnard, Daintry and Twomey

(2007). McKean suggests that innovation and experimentation in ceramics had become stagnated and that artists were only making work that they knew was possible with the material (2007). Barnard et al. suggest that artists were taking ceramics into new territory.

Clay's changing place within the craft/fine art debate and the notions of craft, including the impact of the Arts and Crafts movement, are explored and Post Disciplinary and Sloppy Craft are examined. The opinions of Bernard Leach, on what might be possible when working with clay, are considered for their impact on innovation. The conclusion is reached that there is a difficulty for some makers in breaking free of early notions of clay as a material for functional objects.

Recognising that ceramics has a particular issue in relation to fine art, the essay has provided examples of artists based in the UK who have shown a different path: clear in its traditions and using them to be innovative. There is experimental work happening, both within the vessel form and beyond, that it is innovative and exciting: the mantle is being passed to emerging makers such as Aaron Angell, Jonathan Baldock and Aneta Regel.

Today's artists are introduced to a broader range of materials during their studies and this does impact on their confidence and ability to engage with clay. However, those who are drawn to the material are choosing to explore it in imaginative and different ways. They seem intent on exploiting the opportunities that it presents and are opting to develop a deep understanding, often by seeking out

**'The world has moved on  
and my thinking would be  
sharper'.**

McKean, private email 2022

additional study, to become truly innovative within the craft/fine art context using the rich, diverse language of clay to push at the boundaries. This essay does not have the scope to consider fully the impact of changes in education: but it does appear that there are artists who are benefitting from exposure to a broader, concept-led education followed by more specific, material-led study to develop work which is different to anything previously seen in British ceramics.

Visiting the current exhibition on contemporary ceramics at The Hayward Gallery gave a sense that they had selected well established artists at the expense of demonstrating innovation. This risks sending a message of a craft that is yesterday's subject and that McKean was, in essence, correct. It is when looking beyond these headline grabbing artists towards emerging makers that one finds the excellent case made for the view of the ceramic world upheld by Barnard, Daintry and Twomey.

It will be interesting to see what these new makers come up with next and whether they seek out skills training in ceramics or whether they chose to explore from a broad field of general art education. In email correspondence for this essay, McKean commented that he believes, if he were to write the same paper now, it would be different. It is possible that, if he was researching for his paper today and referencing British artists, he would find much to encourage him.

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