



## The Female Ceramists Turning Craft into Art

Ceramics, both as art form and craft, has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, as people yearn for an antidote to the digital age. T Australia meets four women who create the most sublime art out of the most fundamental of materials.

*Article by Lee Tulloch*



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*Glazed ceramic pieces, completed by Draper over the past year. Photography by Tony Amos.*

Ceramics, both as art form and craft, has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years, as people yearn for an antidote to the digital age. After all, there's no medium more down-to-earth than mud. When the pandemic struck, ceramics soared in popularity as people enduring lockdowns turned to the craft, seeking out the grounding properties of clay. Slow, repetitive and mindful, ceramics is a perfect practice for troubled times.

While both women and men made pottery vessels in ancient cultures, the British Depression-era ceramist Clarice Cliff was the first woman to produce and market a line of crockery under her own name. In the following decades, the domestic and utilitarian nature of cups, plates and vases meant handmade ceramics were generally filed under "hobby" and "women's work" and, as with embroidery and knitting, relegated to the shelves of knick-knack shops rather than shown in galleries.

The genteel notion of female ceramists as “lady potters”, working at the wheel to fashion conventional crockery, has been shaken up as more women artists find self-expression in ceramics and push the boundaries between art and craft. Using clay as their chosen medium, they pull and pummel and stretch the limits of convention, producing objects that challenge traditional forms and concepts, and are sometimes intentionally imperfect.

Here, T Australia meets four women who create the most sublime art out of the most fundamental of materials.



*Donna Green in her New York studio with unfinished stoneware pieces. The mounted oil stick and India ink drawing (“Untitled”, 2022) started as a sketch for a clay work. Photography by Tony Amos.*

## **Donna Green**

With large, torso-like vessels and small towers that evoke squished breasts and genitalia, Donna Green explores the beauty and strangeness of the human body with all its flaws and deformities. She began working with clay 35 years ago, learning to make perfect plates and cups on the wheel, but these days she’s more interested in imperfection.

It's partly a response to getting older and being intrigued by the folds of bodies as they age. "What some might say is ugly I find beautiful," says Green. And it's partly due to spending much of the pandemic in semirural Water Mill, New York, where she has a home and studio, watching the decay of nature. "It just seems very profound to me and it comes out in the work. It's not intentional, it's just this meandering of ideas," she says. There's also the sheer joy of experimentation that clay offers. "I'm just reacting to the material, really," she says. "I'm seeing where the material can take me in space and where *I* can take the material in space, too, pushing it and pulling to its extremes before it collapses."

Green's recent work "Bacchanalia", which formed the basis of her first Australian solo exhibition, at Utopia Art Sydney earlier this year, comes from a happy accident. "I was initially making these perfect spheres and carefully joining them to another sphere, and they just looked so contrived," she says. "So, one day, feeling frustrated, I just threw one of the spheres on top of another. They just kind of squished into a weird shape, a very breastlike shape, and then I threw another one on top and another one on top. I thought it was fantastic. It was very spontaneous. Some of them would explode just with the impact and so this wild, crazy thing started to emerge. It was incredibly sexual and I didn't know where that was coming from."

Born in Sydney, Green grew up surrounded by art and conversations about art. Her grandmother, who escaped Poland on the eve of World War II and immigrated with her mother, was an art collector, as is her mother. Despite her family background, it wasn't inevitable that Green would become an artist. "When I left high school, I didn't think about pursuing art as a career," she says. "I studied industrial design, where I learned about working in three dimensions. I was fabricating models out of wood and plaster, which was a new experience."

In 1984, Green moved to New York, where she now has two sons and a granddaughter. She took a job at Industrial Design magazine, but also started taking night classes in ceramics at Greenwich House, a pioneering cultural centre in Greenwich Village that has been holding pottery classes since the beginning of the 20th century. "I totally fell in love with the material and it became kind of an addiction," she says. "One of the teachers talked about scale and I started to make bigger and bigger things. It became an obsession to make these things that were human scale and about the body."

Green's favourite part of the process is getting her hands into the clay. "The touch of the clay — it's really a visceral, distinctive activity," she says. The artist builds her large pieces by coiling strands of clay and pushing, pulling and pinching them into shape. "It's gravity as well and it kind of grows into these forms," she says. There's a lot of trial and error. "You think it's just mud, it's primeval and it has existed forever, but actually there are a lot of technical aspects to working the clay," she says. "It's also the type of firing you do. Whether it's reduction firing or oxidation, or you put ash or salt or other elements into the firing, it all reacts in different ways. It's been years and years of trying and experimenting."

Recently, Green has exhibited large-scale brush-and-oil-stick drawings and collages alongside her sculptural pieces. They began as the sketches she often makes to work out the form of the ceramics. "The collages became something else — an exploration of the two-dimensional surface," she says. "I'd start with just a line and I sort of love just to meander, just expand onto that rectangular surface of the page, kind of what I do with the ceramics and the rectangular space of the kiln. I'm trying to reach out to all the corners of the space that I can. Drawing helps me realise that. It just helps me to remember to go further than I think I can."

Because the clay needs to dry gradually, Green works on two or three pieces at a time, "so the first one is getting to a state where the bottom part is strong enough, dry enough, but not *too* dry — it still has to be a little bit malleable so it can hold the weight of the next section".

And calamity is never far away. “Clay cracks if you dry it at a certain pace, so it can get too heavy and it completely collapses. It has a mind of its own,” she says. These days, Green is sanguine about accidents. “If it collapses, that’s good. I just kind of work on from there. I’ve got to an age now where it doesn’t matter anymore. In fact, it becomes more interesting when the work is failing.”

Despite her acclaim, people still complement Green on her “nice craft” and “nice pottery”. “But it’s a very serious thing,” she says, “and it gives meaning to my life.” And there are still those who ask her if they can put flowers in her creations. To them, Green says: “If you want to, I guess.”

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