

Space in the centre

After 40 years of working with clay I am growing ever closer to allowing my body, my mind and the material to work together, in tandem, without one area dominating another. I have benefited over the years from the practice of yoga and realised that the skin on my body is a connected sheet and that a manipulation in one part of the body affects the whole, that the skin is the membrane that contains us and is in contact with the outside world. In my current clay sculptures, I am exploring a similar energy between internal and external spaces, and the movement created by their central dynamic.

"The feeling of a spatial centre enables a fluidity of perception and spirit" John Stirk, *Deeper Still*, 2021

In 2021 I created an installation for the Grange Dimiere, Paladru (38) which I called Flux d'Argiles (flow of clays). I contrast the movement of liquid clay flowing vertically under gravity, captured on six large suspended cloths, with 27 more sedentary fired sculptures, lying horizontally on the floor. Les Passeuses, as I named them, were created from clay slabs folded in on themselves to become large rings, open in their middle. For me the space in the centre was not empty but an invitation to passage, to the unknown, to allow us to pass through to the other side. The forms were open to the ground below, and sat on the ground, but lifted up from it and in some cases appeared to rise up to meet the flows on the cloths.

At this time, I carried with me the image of the algal burrs, of the fossil forest in Purbeck, Dorset, GB, formed 145 million years ago. Here the central holes carry the memory of the tree trunks that they once contained - a potent reminder that space is not empty. My memory of their disposition on the rocks helped me to conceive the arrangement of the Passeuses in the Grange, about which was written:

"These elemental, magma-like forms, heavy from time immemorial, carry within them the memory of alluvial mixtures, inspiring the sudden petrification of a movement in progress."

Increasingly, Jane Norbury adds to these viscera of earth, a second ring of different clay, whose more or less grogged texture and colour, after firing, will contrast with the first. Together, these two associated clays must react in the same way to the firing and have the same degree of shrinkage. The clays merge, as if causing the phenomena of subduction over a long geological period. Despite an extremely strong physical commitment, Jane Norbury seeks to extricate herself from this process which she wishes to be without force. She arranges and leaves the task of activating the space to the clay elements, not without the complicity of the spectator-actor."

Stéphanie Le Follic Hadida, PHD in art history, speciality contemporary ceramics
Extract from *Avec la Terre*, catalogue for Flux d'Argiles,

This led to the work *Trois Passeuses* shown in the exhibition *Migration(s)*, Musée Ariana, Geneva, 2022, composed of three pairs of abstract sculptures, in each pair, the first ring supported the second. I wrote;

Each element is made from different stoneware clays, which themselves have migrated from diverse locations. With their surface colours of dense blacks derived from mixed metal oxides, rich browns

created by reduction firing of iron laden clays, and white kaolin sigillata washes, they evoke a variety of geological and racial origins.

Catalogue Migration(s), Ariana Museum, Geneva.

At the same time, during the covid lockdowns, and to be able to fire these big pieces, I realised a long-term ambition to build myself a large gas kiln. It was built using light refractory bricks around a trolley that I had been given 20 years before by the potter Nils Decote Genon when dismantling his own kiln.

Following on from this work, I started to develop sculptures where the folds around the central space became more ample and more important, breathing in and breathing out, and conferring a greater energy into the internal volume. This is the current series that I call Walking Skins.

Working on a bigger scale amplifies the movements provoked by the manipulations of the malleable sheets of clay, and provides the opportunity for the wave of the motion to develop. By hand building onto the emerging forms and following the initial momentums, I allow the undulations to develop into larger and more unexpected shapes. I work the pieces upside down within a constraining form and do not see the finished piece until I turn it over at the end of the process; this way the clay offers me surprises I could not have imagined. I set them on the ground, where they touch lightly, and are ready to walk away. It requires the removal of water by drying and a passage through fire, to contain them in their fluid action.

With Walking Skins, Centre Céramique Contemporaine La Borne, I have used a range of different coloured stoneware clays and developed a palette of subtle surface colours achieved by experimentation with firing techniques, oxides and matt glazes. I have installed a body of sculptures sitting directly on the floor with space around them so that it is possible to walk amongst them. I wish to encourage the viewer to perceive them from several angles and to explore the relationships between them - I hope that the physicality and energy of my work with the clay will engage formally and viscerally.

"Born in the 1930s, at the crossroads of surrealism and abstract art, "biomorphism" is a way of suggesting the living through non-figurative forms, both familiar and enigmatic. Even today many contemporary artists find in ceramics an ideal material to visually evoke dynamics or organic processes. Transformed by the artist's imagination, a naturalist-inspired motif can then give birth to a sculpture a priori far removed from its original model. Matter appears autonomous, developing in hitherto unexplored directions. The hand of the artist, however very present, disappears and gives way to forms that seem to be self-organized."

Exhibition Formes Vivants, Musée de Sèvres, Paris, 2023. Commissar Judith Cernogora

Jane Norbury 2023