



# Modern decadence

Ceramicist Amy Jayne Hughes uses handbuilding techniques to bridge gaps between past and present ceramic traditions. *CR's Annie Le Santo* spoke to her to learn more



When viewing a pristine vase behind the glass of an elegant museum display, it is easy to forget that the object in front of you was born from mud. How clay can be dug from the earth and transformed into a new object so far from its original state is a captivating concept. Unfolding and interrogating the moments along this process is what drives Amy Jayne Hughes' creative practice. Fuelled by a fascination with the re-interpretation of historical collections and a romance with clay as a material, her success of combining the two has earned her recognition from some of the most respected ceramics authorities in the country. While discussing her fast-paced career – which is punctuated with prestigious residencies and shows – her steadfast loyalty to honouring the qualities of her medium shines through. 'I like to work with a truth to my material and with the clay's natural behaviour,' she says. 'Sometimes I will leave fingerprints and traces of the process, embracing the playful incidentals that only clay would give you.'

## DISCOVERING CLAY

Hughes was born and grew up in West Yorkshire where her father worked in a factory and her mother in computing. 'I'm not from a particularly creative family but I was taught to pursue what I was interested in and that's how I have ended up where I am,' she says. An enthusiasm for arts and crafts led her to the Foundation course at Dewsbury College. Her tutors placed her in the ceramics department and, like so many successful ceramicists, she was hooked from the moment the clay met her hands.

She describes Warren Dunn, her first tutor, as the 'driving force' behind her growing interest and ultimate career choice. A BA Ceramics degree at Loughborough University and MA Ceramics at the Royal College of Art (RCA) followed suit. With an extensive ceramics education behind her, the list of those who taught her is impressive: Alison Britton, Felicity Aylieff, Martin Smith and Jim Gladwin. Now an educator herself, Hughes reminisces of her time at Loughborough – where ceramics is no longer taught – somewhat bittersweetly: 'It is a shame the course doesn't exist anymore. It was a great place to try a whole breadth of different techniques and processes,' she explains. At the RCA she applied these technical skills to produce work with a new level of theoretical weight.



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During a collaboration with Waddesdon Manor she became enchanted by their Sèvres collection: spotless 18th-century porcelain that is most certainly fingerprint free. ‘It was something I had never seen before. I loved their grandeur and their opulence but to me they were also slightly ridiculous,’ she admits. ‘I could admire the craftsmanship but the materials were so tightly controlled that they almost had no material identity at all.’

Hughes set out on a mission to strip them of their grandiose facade in the hope of reconfiguring them into something more accessible to a modern audience. ‘My practice is centred around an exploration of form and decoration and the dialogue between the two,’ she explains. ‘These pieces were so richly decorated that I didn’t know where to look. I love a high-fired clay body and for me that can often be enough decoration without any glaze.’

A particular set of vases from the collection captured her attention and as a well-practiced illustrator, she began by sketching them from life. Using a technique of looking only at the subject and not the paper, the results were free-form and characterful observational drawings. Back in the studio she worked from these drawings, coiling them into three-dimensional forms that honoured the originals’ aesthetic but allowed the clay to be wholly present. For Hughes, this was a significant moment that has shaped her work for the last decade.

#### RE-CONFIGURING COLLECTIONS

‘My intention is to bridge a gap between the past and the present,’ she says. ‘I am trying to find old pieces a new home in contemporary culture.’ And what better place to find this home than an inconspicuous studio hidden under a railway arch in East London? Studio Manifold, where Hughes is currently based, was set up by herself and eight classmates after leaving the RCA. From here she has created the brief-led projects that have followed and there have been many.

In 2015, just five years after graduating, Hughes was selected by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) to be their Ceramics and Industry artist-in-residence. The project titled *Tryst* was a collaboration between Hughes,



**ABOVE FAR LEFT:** Mechanical  
Method of Forming, BCB, 2015

**ABOVE LEFT:** Omaggio in grey, 2020

**ABOVE:** Brushwork, Leach 100, 2020



**ABOVE:** Forget Me Not, pair of vases, 2017 **RIGHT:** Tryst, 2015

the museum and 1882 Ltd, a ceramics brand based in Stoke-on-Trent. Hughes used elements of her own practice to connect with traditional hand decorating techniques and the expertise of Stoke-on-Trent’s ceramics industry.

The resulting vase (which was put into production and acquired by the V&A) was inspired by 18th-century porcelain wares and elevated into the present day with the use of intelligent interventions. An indigo-coloured glaze drips over areas of sprig-moulded embellishments that were cast from historic originals. The rebellious brushwork nods blithely to an idea of colouring outside of the lines, while remaining respectful of the heritage it draws from.


**NEW OPPORTUNITIES**

More recently Hughes has been exploring the Leach ‘brushwork’ aesthetic as one of the selected commissioned artists to celebrate the Pottery’s centenary in 2020. The *Leach 100* project provided the opportunity to reflect on the past, on what has been achieved in studio pottery, and to imagine the future: what could the role for pottery and studio practice be in the next century? With a brief that sounds as though it was tailor-made for Hughes, her approach has been practical, resourceful and innovative.

On site visits to St Ives, she foraged found materials from the local area: feathers; rubber bands; seaweed; rope; wooden chip forks and more. With these unconventional materials she fashioned an array of ‘brushes’ to apply wax resist patterns onto the surfaces of a series of vessels. ‘Leach used brushwork as a decoration on top of the surface of his pots,’ she says, ‘whereas I’m exploring

inverting this process to create a relief on the clay body. It has been so much fun and I’ve felt honoured to work with such a significant institution.’

Other highlights for Hughes include a nomination for the *British Ceramics Biennial’s (BCB) AWARD*; frequent appearances at *Collect*; consistent support from galleries and collectors, and *Garniture*, a solo exhibition at Croome Court that was funded by Arts Council England (ACE). However, the low points that we don’t always see are as relatable as ever to any artist working with clay. ‘You can spend six weeks working on something and then drop it on the way to the kiln,’ she says. ‘For every 20 funding applications I write, only one might be successful. It’s the support of my friends at the studio, my family and my love of making that keeps me trying.’

Recent time away from her studio during maternity leave has allowed Hughes to reflect further on her practice with a sense of gratitude. ‘I always aim to take ceramics to new audiences and demonstrate its relevance today,’ she says. ‘But my main goal is to enjoy it.’ Unforgotten in-progress projects await, to be picked up where she left off and she is itching to get back to them. ‘Clay has a memory,’ she says. ‘It is one of the only materials you can touch and it leaves an immediate trace of that moment. It is this part of the making process that really gets me excited.’ Her practice may be shaped by the passing of time, connected through thoughts of the past and the present, but one thing is clear: her passion for it is timeless. 

For more information visit [amyjaynehughes.com](http://amyjaynehughes.com)

Images: courtesy of 1882 Ltd; Sylvain Deleu; Ester Segarra; Cristina Schek



## HUGHE'S HIGHLIGHTS

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- **2003–2004:** Foundation Art and Design, Dewsbury and Batley School of Art
- **2004–2007:** BA Ceramics, Loughborough University
- **2008–2010:** MA Ceramics & Glass, Royal College of Art
- **2010:** designs selected for the Waddesdon Manor RCA Gift Shop Collection
- **2011:** Collect, with Flow Gallery; FRESH exhibitor, part of the British Ceramics Biennial
- **2012:** London Design Festival
- **2013:** Ceramics Illustrated, Ruthin Crafts Centre
- **2014:** producing Egyptian replicas from collections as part of Festival of Pots, Petrie Museum UCL, London; New Talent European Ceramics Context, selected to represent the UK in Denmark; shortlisted for the Young Masters Maylis Grand Ceramics Prize
- **2015:** AWARD & ENCOUNTERS, part of the British Ceramics Biennial; Ceramics & Industries artist-in-residence, V&A, followed by Tryst at the London Design Festival with the V&A
- **2016:** nominated for the Perrier-Jouët Arts Salon Prize
- **2019:** Garniture, solo exhibition at National Trust England's Croome Court, funded by ACE

