

Masterclass
with

Tanya
Gomez



The ceramicist takes us through the processes she uses to throw, join and glaze one of her signature undulating pieces

Images: Layton Thompson




When I was 17 years old, I was determined to leave the UK and fell upon work that allowed me to travel the world. I became a chef on private yachts (untrained, mind you), sailing the Atlantic Ocean for over five years. When I wasn't at sea, I would travel through the colourful lands of South America, Mexico, Asia and Africa. I knew then, as I do now, that life is rich, full of adventure and experiences. Having grown up on the South Coast of England and, later, sailing the sea, I realised the endless horizon beckoned and it became the foundation of my ceramic practice.

I came to ceramics by following an instinct, an indescribable pull towards the material. I did a BTEC in Art and Design at Camberwell College of Arts and to deepen my practice, attended ceramic evening classes, then went on to study at the University of Brighton. After taking a 3D Craft and Design course, I was keen to set up my own studio. I found myself continuously compelled by ceramics and its vast possibilities.

In those early years, I created functional pieces, bringing together my love for food and the senses with the aesthetics of the coast and horizon. The whole time, I experimented with glazes, finding the hues that resonated with my aspirations for the work.

After five years of exhibiting and teaching, I moved to London to do an MA in Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College of Art (RCA). The rigorous and diverse teaching and making process gave me deeper insight both into the work I was creating and what makes me want to make. I arrived at the RCA with seascape vessels that spun and had layered glazes to emulate the sea. I left with bold vibrant vessels with undulated tops. Through my pieces, I create subtle movement and glazes that have a sense of depth and vitality to them.

I have since continued to teach, have exhibited all over the world and continue to grow and evolve. Throughout, the sea continues to move me, and I have recently explored glaciers and icebergs.

Undulated pieces are my signature works and in this Masterclass, I will describe how they are made, from the initial steps of throwing two forms and joining them together, to when they come out of the kiln glazed. I happily share my love of clay and how it offers lifetimes of learning and growing. 

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1 I work with porcelain and start by pugging the clay, then let it sit. When I am ready to throw, I weigh out the clay I need, wedge it and wrap it up. It is preferable to do this a week before throwing.



3 Once the porcelain is the right consistency, I am ready to throw. I make this piece using two sections that I join together. This is the first, it will be the base and is a larger ball of clay than the second piece, which will be the top.



2 Throughout the week, I cut and re-wedge the porcelain until it becomes the right hardness. I sometimes do this on a plaster batt to help take the water out of the clay.



4 I cone the clay a couple of times and then use both my thumbs to push down.



5 Once the first piece is the correct thickness, I compress the base. I call this the record player. Although the wheel can be spinning fast, the fingers are at the same level, slowly going across the base like a needle on a record player compacting the clay.



6 Next, I start pulling the walls up, always with the outside pressure lower than the inside fingers. If throwing larger pieces, I may use a sponge or my knuckle, but I find I use my fingertips the most.



7 I then use a metal kidney to clean the slurry away and compress the sides. The top is a little narrower than the base. I like my vessels to be tapered slightly so there is a sense of breathing in at the top. I cut off the top edge with a pin to produce a clean flat edge.



8 I wire off the base using a pike wire. This is one of my favourite tools. It is made of stainless steel and is very thin. It means your base can be thin and you don't tear the clay. It is available from fishing shops and as it comes on a reel, you just use the width you need.



9 Using callipers, I measure the outside rim of the first piece, bearing in mind that on the next top section the base will be tapered in while the top will be tapered out.



11 I use a metal rectangle tool to create the straighter sides for the top piece. The top edge should be the equal width of the first piece and the same thickness of clay. If the walls are too thin the width can shrink more and the join can be difficult.



10 The second piece for the top section is thrown in a similar way, but I make a hole in the middle so that when I turn it over I can put my hand through to create the opening on the top.



12 I use the clay slurry that has been produced during the previous day's throwing to join the pieces together. I drain off the excess water and whizz it up with a food blender, this is then sieved through a kitchen sieve and is ready to use.



13 When both pieces are leatherhard they are ready to join. If the base of the top section is still wet, I wire it off and transfer it to another batt with newspaper on, as this helps to harden the clay.



15 I agitate the slurry onto the top edge. Making a gauge with my forefinger and thumb and using the finger of my other hand on top, I apply an equal amount all the way around. This is done on both pieces.



14 I have 18mm birch ply batts that fit back on the wheel with bolts on the wheel head. Using a serrated kidney, I score and cross-hatch the top edge. I then cut an angle off the inside edge to accommodate the excess slurry that will be used to join the pieces together.



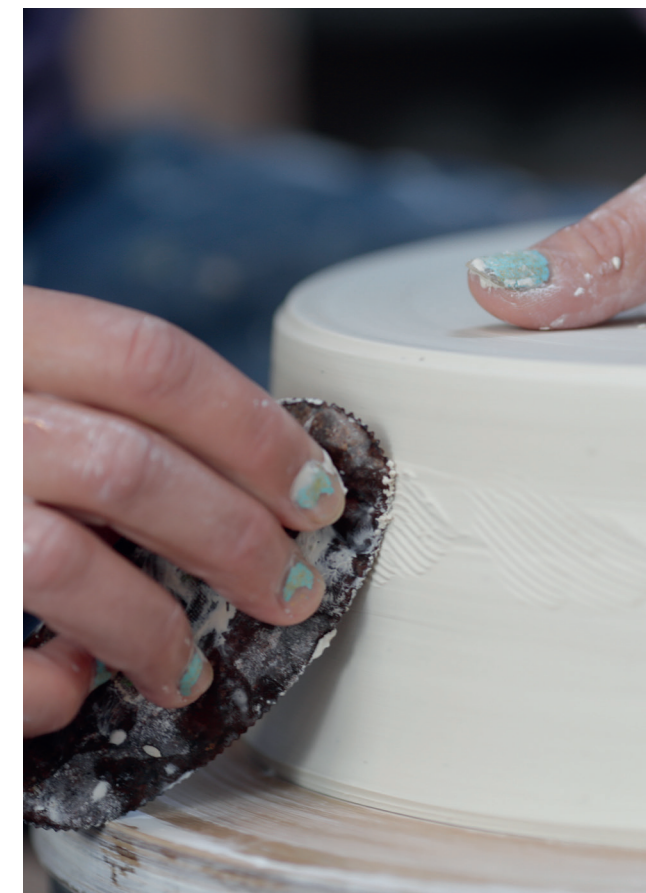
16 Picking up the top piece and turning it over, I place it on top of the base section wiggling it firmly down.



17 Slowly turning the wheel, I carefully incise the top with a pin to enlarge the hole so that it is big enough for my hand to go through.



19 Once the pieces feel complete and firmly joined together, I start to throw the top, lifting it up into a mound shape. I then cut the appropriate size hole.



18 I compress and throw the joins together, running my fingers up and down the join on the inside and using a serrated kidney on the outside, cross-hatching over the join until it is invisible.



20 I push the top sides together to make the aperture into an oval, accentuating the top sides.



21 I always stamp my maker's mark on the right hand side of one of the top undulated sections. The stamp was made out of plaster and then carved with a pin. The whole piece is then covered with plastic.



22 The following day, I wire it off the batt and place it on some newspaper. I scrape the sides and top to refine the form and compress the sides and join. It is then sponged down and covered in plastic again for a several days.



23 Once the plastic is removed, the piece is left to dry. Depending on the size and outside temperature, this can take two weeks, larger pieces can take a minimum of a month. The work is bisque-fired to 1000°C with a 10-minute soak. The piece is then sanded and washed.



24 The following day I sieve my glaze. I use a thinner consistency than normal to coat the inside of the vessel. I pour it inside and rotate the glaze around it twice to ensure an even finish.



25 The next day, I pour off the water from the glaze to create a thicker consistency to spray the outside. I scrape and sponge off the glaze from the edge and inner rim.



26 I leave the piece to dry until the the next day. This mazarine glaze is fired in an electric kiln. For reduction firings I would pack the gas kiln and start the following morning around 7am for a 12-hour firing. Most glazes are fired at 1260°C – 1280°C.



27 I always put a cone in when firing. I feel if I leave this out something is bound to go wrong. You can answer so many questions when you include a cone. Once the piece is safely out of the kiln, all those weeks of planning and making are hopefully rewarded.