

## HEIRLOOMS OF THE FUTURE

# EBONY RUSSELL

*Australian ceramic artist Ebony Russell talks to **Dominique Corlett** about birthday cakes, childhood mementos, and piping clay*

A symmetric, teetering, and entirely composed of candy-coloured piping, the urns, vases and columns of Australian ceramic artist Ebony Russell are a startling and unexpected feast for the eyes. While the shapes largely resemble traditional vessels – with some made in the familiar forms and colours of Wedgwood pottery – the woozy layers of piped porcelain, which perfectly mimic buttercream icing, create a more surreal impression. You can't help but wonder if they might be the creation of a slightly crazed wedding cake decorator who didn't know when to stop.

In reality, Ebony is nothing like this. Her cake baking is confined to the occasional child's birthday cake, and she has never actually piped icing. The Sydney-based artist is rather a rising star on the international ceramics stage. Her confections this year won her the Brookfield Properties Craft Award – the UK's leading contemporary craft prize – making her the first international winner, and leading to the V&A acquiring one of her pieces. These were the crowning achievements of a successful few years, including showing at the Crafts Council's Collect Art Fair, exhibiting at Homo Faber in Venice, and being highly commended for the Maylis Grand Ceramics prize at the Young Masters awards.

Not bad for an artist who only graduated from her MA in 2019. But Ebony's journey to making her pieces starts longer ago. Much of her inspiration comes from her childhood fascination with the kitsch ▶



Ebony's work is entirely composed of layers of hand-piped porcelain. 'If there was a hidden structure holding it up, that would destroy the magic in it for me,' she says.



**RIGHT** Ebony with some of her polychrome urns. She uses a piping bag to very carefully build up the layers of porcelain.

**BELOW, FROM LEFT** The *Indecorum*: in *Confidence* vases are inspired by Wedgwood porcelain and are depicted in signature Wedgwood blue; Ebony also creates pedestals and columns on which to display her vessels.

**FACING PAGE** Ebony's polychrome vessels are made from candy-coloured rosettes and swirls.



coming through in the early 2000s, and by reading Margaret Atwood's book, *The Edible Woman*, which she describes as 'life-changing' and credits with 'making me ask questions about the choices I was making, instead of just being a passive bystander'.

For a number of reasons, including the need to earn a living, Ebony dropped out of the MA and switched to a teaching degree, then became an art teacher. But she had always hoped to get back to it, and 15 years later, having relocated to Sydney for her husband's job ▶

ceramics that pervaded her Roman Catholic upbringing, from the religious statues in church, to the miniature angels and Madonnas given as party favours at weddings, christenings and holy communions. She loved, too, the girlish ephemera – from hair clips to China dolls – that filled her

bedroom shelves growing up in small-town Australia in the 1980s, against a backdrop of firmly established gender stereotypes.

And then there were the cakes. 'Cakes were a big thing,' says Ebony. 'Everyone had the *Woman's Weekly* cookbook and each year you'd get to choose your birthday cake. I remember looking at them often, and labouring over my choice. And my mother still has the top tier of her wedding cake, which is now 50 years old. It's still under a plastic cloche in the crystal cabinet, and I've watched it slowly crumble over the years.' From these inspirations, Ebony has built a body of work that may look frothy and frivolous, but explores deeper themes of women's creativity, gender-restricted choices, and how disenchantment can lead the way to self-discovery and freedom.

Ebony always knew she wanted to be an artist. She studied Applied Arts at university, majoring in ceramics. After graduating in 2003, she started a masters and explored making ceramic versions of the plastic figurines found on the top of celebration cakes. She was influenced, too, by feminist artists



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## Heirlooms of the Future



and with their two children settled in primary school and daycare, the opportunity arose. In 2018, she left her teaching job and embarked on an MA in Fine Art at the National Art School, picking up where she'd left off and discovering she still wanted to explore the themes of 'princesses, wedding cakes, happily ever after and disenchantment'.

It was at this point that Ebony first started working in porcelain. On the first MA, she had tried making iced cakes from clay, but porcelain turned out to be a game-changer. 'The icing with the piping bag and the porcelain was the perfect combination,' she says. 'Porcelain does everything that sugar does, with the added benefit that you can fire it into a permanent form. I realised I didn't want to make the figurines anymore. The icing had taken over.'

Working in this way made even more sense to Ebony when she discovered that, prior to porcelain being discovered in Europe, sugar was used as a sculptural medium. It was sugar artists who created the decorative sculptures that graced the banqueting tables of royalty and the landed gentry. Sugar, with

its connotations of temptation and sweetness, also played into the themes she wanted to explore around gender stereotypes and femininity.

Ebony developed a technique of piping layers of porcelain, one on top of the other, to build up her sculptures, likening the process to '3D printing in an analogue way'. To start with she made tiaras and crowns, 'looking at things to do with my childhood: what you're sold, how gender is placed upon you, and the reality'. While initially reluctant to make vessels, as she was uncomfortable with biblical ideas of 'women as vessels', she slowly changed her mind, discovering that making them with her techniques, 'actually felt right, like I was doing it in my language and talking about what I wanted to say'.

Soon she was loving it, discovering that rather than being bound by those old associations, she was able to subvert them. Her vessels might be full of holes, or without a bottom; they might be spiky with no practical purpose and unable to hold water; they might also be loud, messy, vibrant,

The *Suspiciously Beautiful* collection will be on show at the Brookfield Properties Craft Award exhibition, in collaboration with the Crafts Council and Cynthia Corbett Gallery, until September.

fierce, strong and beautiful. These vessels allowed her to tell women's stories and explore women's lives. 'I still think there's so much to do with women's stories that we've not been given the space to communicate or share,' she says. 'Things have moved on, but we're still fighting. And the vessels are a place where I can exercise these thoughts.' [ebonyrussell.com](https://www.ebonyrussell.com)

### WHERE TO BUY

- Ebony's vessels are available in the UK from [thecynthiacorbettgallery.com](https://www.thecynthiacorbettgallery.com); and from [martinbrownecontemporary.com](https://www.martinbrownecontemporary.com) in Australia, priced from around £2,000.
- Small pieces are available from [pipeddreamstudio.com](https://www.pipeddreamstudio.com) for under £100.
- 'Decorated: The Sculptural Ceramics of Ebony Russell' is at 99 Bishopsgate, London EC2M 3XD until 26th September. [thecynthiacorbettgallery.com](https://www.thecynthiacorbettgallery.com)

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