

Masterclass

with

Tessa Eastman

The ceramic artist takes us step-by-step through the techniques behind her *Baby Cloud Bundle* sculptures, which combines slab-building, press-moulding and coiling

Images: Layton Thompson



I graduated from the University of Westminster in 2006 with a BA Honours in Ceramics, and in 2015 gained an MA in Ceramics & Glass from the Royal College of Art. I set up my first studio in 2005 in the Old Gas Works in west London, then when I achieved my MA I joined Manifold, an east London collective founded in 2010 by a group of emerging artists and designers from The Royal College of Art. In 2017, I was lucky enough to be granted space at Cockpit Arts, the UK's only business incubator for craftspeople. I share a studio with three other ceramists, which is a wonderful creative environment to be a part of.

I build my forms by hand, drawing inspiration from organic shapes as seen through a microscope. I like to explore the strangeness of growth of natural phenomena in which systems flow and digress from an intended pattern, subsequently translating my findings into colourful glazed ceramics. I aim for my forms to be beautiful in a bizarre manner so as to aid the appreciation of life's absurdities, where things don't always make sense.

I am committed to the challenge of hand-building in clay, using various techniques to create complex sculptures. The often overlooked detail of bone, cloud, crystal and microscopic structures are observed as a starting point to develop pieces that possess a curious ambiguity. I aim to fix ungraspable states such as fleeting cloud formations. I love the fact that clouds have a duality to them. They can be both quite negative and dark, but also fluffy, soft and

porous. They are never permanent, but always changing and fleeting. I try and capture this metamorphosing shape in my work. The strange otherworldliness of natural phenomena transports me away from the mundane and I become excited when fixed ceramic forms seem alive.

I like to group my work to highlight contrasts and create a dialogue between pieces, whereby negative space is valued as much as positive space. While creating I also look for differences such as soft and hard, order and chaos, geometry and irregularity. I am a modeller at heart and it is through sensitivity to form and glaze that my pieces become animated. Much time is therefore invested in glaze research and testing. Colour is inspiring to me and it can help create distinction between form and shape. Matte and shiny, coarse and smooth, and hot and cool-coloured glazes are used to create depth of character in my work.

What I love about ceramics is that you can make something solid, permanent and tangible from something that is intangible and always changing in nature. To try and fix it, to make it permanent, feels very grounding. ☑

Strangeness in Nature: Ceramics by Tessa Eastman, *Clifford Chance, London, until 14 June; cliffordchance.com*, Solo Show, *Galerie de l'Ancienne Poste, Toucy, France, until 16 May; galerie-ancienne-poste.com*, Cockpit Arts Summer Open Studios, *London, 14–16 June; cockpitarts.com; tessaeastman.com*

1 I begin by rolling out slabs of clay to form the body of the *Cloud* sculpture. I like to stand at a high table when rolling, so that my body weight can lean on the clay. I find this helps as I am more energy efficient when the stress is taken away from my back, arms and wrists. Working with clay is physical and over time this can have damaging effects on the body, so good working practice is essential.



2 I mark and cut around paper templates, which are positioned on top of the rolled slab of clay. I place the template at the edge of the slab rather than in the middle as this allows for less reclaim: left over clay slabs can be joined together and reused. I created the templates previously using press-moulded parts that were removed from the moulds and then drawn around. See my top tips on page 75 for details of the moulds I use.

3 Using templates means that the clay is always the right size to fit in the sections of the mould, although I make them a little larger in order for there to be excess clay to cut down once the slab is positioned. The reason for this is explained further in step 6.



4 I fit the clay into the mould, easing it in gently from the sides and the top, rather than pushing the clay down in the middle. This way the clay is not pushed too thin and remains an even thickness. Problems can occur in the firing if the parts in the mould are of different thicknesses, as any discrepancy means that heating and cooling take place at dissimilar rates, which causes cracking.

5 Once the clay is positioned in the mould, I sponge it with water in order to ensure that all the parts are sitting flush against the mould's surface. It is essential to only use a small amount of water as the parts need to hold their shape when being removed from the mould. The clay will not release well from the mould if it is too wet, and due to the deep recesses of the mould it is essential it releases with ease.



6 Once the clay is fully positioned in the mould, I cut the excess away but leave a few millimetres at the edge as this helps to reinforce the joined areas when the mould is pressed together.

7 When all the parts are pressed into the moulds, I brush a little water on the edges and score them. I then push the moulds together using their notches as guides, as this helps to ensure that the parts are in the right place.



8 I then gently lift off the mould and clean the joins. I use the excess clay that has been pressed out from the mould to blend back into the join to reinforce it. The edge around the mould here shows where I have done this. A wooden tool is helpful at this stage. Fettleing is done once the parts are removed from the mould.

9 When the piece is stiff enough to be completely removed from the mould, I blend in a small sausage of soft clay around the joins to strengthen them. Anything not sufficiently joined will come apart in the firing, so I'm strict about my joins as the pieces go through many high-temperature glaze firings.



10 Once I have multiple bodies, I think about how they might be constructed. I experiment with their positioning while resting them on a large sponge, so as not to squash the shapes when turning and moving them. Once I'm sure how they are to be grouped, I mark on each piece where I will score to join the parts. Consideration goes into how pieces sit and work together as a whole before joining.



11 I score the parts using a tool I discovered from Xiem Tools, which is effective for scoring large surfaces. Previously I used a potter's knife. The protuberances that used to be where I'm scoring are pushed flat by compressing the components together. This allows for a strong surface area to be joined. I use water rather than slurry as it encourages me to score well. To join the parts I then use 'magic water': this is a product developed in the US, which allows for super-strong bonds.

MAGIC WATER RECIPE:

1.3 litres boiling water • 3.2 grams sodium silicate • 1 gram soda ash. Dissolve the sodium silicate and soda ash in the boiling water. Once they have dissolved it is ready to use.

12 I push the *Cloud* body parts firmly together and agitate them to ensure there is no trapped air within the join, which can cause explosions to happen during firing. I pin-prick each hollow part in order to ensure the air can escape. I then add a small coil of soft clay between the parts, blending it half to one side and half to the adjacent side, brushing it with water to smooth over the join to ensure it is seamless. This also allows the two parts to appear as one as they flow better into one another.



13 The pieces have no predefined base and I change the positioning once it has been glazed. I balance pieces in the kiln on props where I feel the parts are least likely to slump down during multiple high-temperature glaze firings.

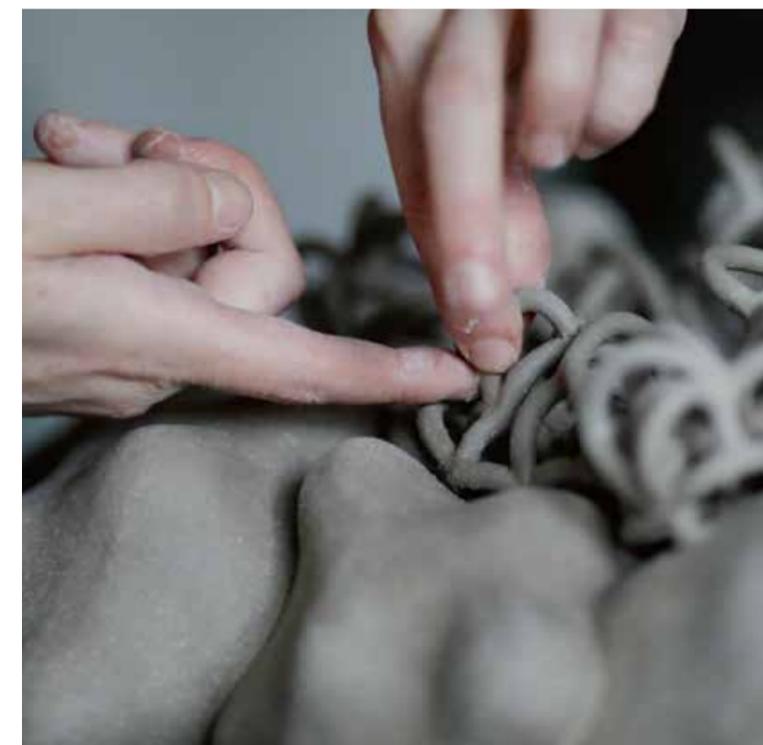


14 The mesh part of the piece is made using coils of clay. I sit to construct the mesh when working on the piece's outside edges, but in order to create mesh on its inner parts, I stand to reach in and move the piece around on a banding wheel to view it from all angles.



15 I like to roll coils by hand as I appreciate the human hand's irregularity and the variation it creates. The coil's bend is crucial, as it acts as a bridge from one part to another and needs to be clearly defined and fresh in appearance. If a coil does not have a precise bend it is discarded. I like to make only a few coils at a time, as they dry out if not kept wrapped in plastic. It has been suggested I should use an extruder, but I worry that extruded coils are not as strong as handmade ones due to the rolling process, which forces the clay particles into a spiral and in this way helps to make them structurally strong.

16 I join curved coils to the inside of the body groupings. Adding just one coil can completely change the piece and I think about the shape I'm intending to create during this stage. Once I'm working on the mesh part, the drying of the piece also needs to be carefully considered, as it dries quickly due to the air circulating through it. In the summer the mesh dries in about a day and I spray the piece frequently to keep it damp. One has to be careful with spraying, however, as if the mesh is over-sprayed it will collapse.



17 Glaze testing also forms a large part of my work and I spend time researching and testing. I select colours and textures for their opposing qualities and look for tension in both form and glaze surface. This may be in terms of texture or colour; I often combine gloss and matte glazes in a piece.



18 This is a popular combination of three glazes I used on *Lollipop Mint Baby Cloud Bundle*. The glazes here give an impression of softness. The green is matte, the pink glossy, and the white textured glaze has ingredients of a small particle size, reducing movement and encouraging shrinkage. It would typically be considered as a glaze that has gone wrong but I admire its bodily presence.

19 This is *Cloud Landscape Purple Ice*, work I completed for exhibition at this year's *Collect* fair with the Cynthia Corbett Gallery. The piece has been through a few glaze firings.



See Tessa at work on our video channel at vimeo.com/ceramicreview

20 The finished piece: *Erupting Purple Midnight Cloud Cluster*, 2019, stoneware with multiple glazes, H21cm

TESSA'S TOP TIPS

- I use clay from a new bag without wedging and wedge when reclaiming. Wedging helps to stiffen the clay if it is too wet. I wrap the clay in damp towels and plastic for a week before wedging if it is too firm.
- Clay firmness is crucial when slab rolling – too soft and the clay will stick to the rolling pin, too hard and it will be inflexible.
- I advise using rolling guides to ensure the thickness of the clay is even.
- Try rolling on old pillow cases or scraps of fabric, so that the clay doesn't stick to the surface and is easy to turn.
- Consider using a professional mould maker such as Helen Johannessen, who made my mould: [helenjohannessen.co.uk](https://www.helenjohannessen.co.uk)
- A plaster mould should last for years if it is well looked after. Be careful not to cut into the mould or chip the plaster. Do not sponge the plaster too much either as this wears it down. Some makers sponge the surface lightly before pressing as this can help the clay stick to the mould. Keeping a mould clean is important, as clay left on moulds will mean breathing in clay dust, which in the long term can cause silicosis.
- Wooden tools are my favourite – I prefer wood to metal or plastic, as its absorbent nature helps to lift off the clay. I see makers modelling with plastic and metal tools and though these do wear down less, they are more suitable for plaster or wax modelling.