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Figuring Out: Paul Smith

Smith playfully explores the conventions of fairy tales and fables – “a rich source of ideas because most people are familiar with many of the stories. I then twist it and mess with their heads.”

By **Tim Saunders**

50

Making it up: Alison Britton's Solo Exhibition at Marsden Woo Gallery, London. Nov 8 – Dec 22, 2018

These gestures of slow making, loose approach to glazing, repeated painting, try-out and response, contain my hope for unexpected sparks in pots still to be made.

By **Alison Britton**



110

2018 CAP Writing Prize | Winner

Bridging the Divide: The Poised Sculpture of Tessa Eastman

Being from a culture where death and sentimentality are usually kept under wraps, she bridges the gap between these oppositions. Her work, like Derrida's analysis of linguistics, exposes our attempts to mask the incoherence.

By **Ashley Thorpe**



Cover image:
Extinction,
Brian Rochefort, 2018,
ceramic, glaze, glass fragments,
14 1/2 x 16 x 20 inches
(58.4 x 45.7 x 38.1 cm).
Image courtesy of the artist
and Van Doren Waxter.

8

Breaking Ground: First Indian Ceramics Triennale

The attempt to be inclusive – to do away with hierarchical distinctions – was fairly successful, as were efforts to create a space for new dialogues centered around contemporary art practices using clay.

By **Anjani Khanna, Vineet Kacker** with **Bernadette Mansfield**



74

The Contingent

In the studio, a sort of tension is needed to create a body of work – a set of mental and physical conflicts that give the work an atmosphere of urgency.

By **Kerry Jameson**

92

Tip Toland: Fragile Embodiments

Seattle based artist Tip Toland has investigated the realist figure in ways that other artists have not.

By **Matthew Kangas**



- 16 No Green Without Blue: A Journey Into The Sea With Artist Jordan Danger** by **Jordan Danger**
- 20 The Echo of the Ancient: Xiong Kaibo's Potteries** by **Xia Cuncao**
- 24 Collaborating With Uncertainty: Towards Visual Complexity** by **Sandy Lockwood**
- 32 A Cultural Narrative at Lacoste/Keane Gallery: Artists' Statements** by **Natalia Arbelaez, April D Felipe and Beth Lo**
- 36 Together / Apart: An NCECA Concurrent Exhibition, Pittsburgh Cultural Trust** by **Vlad Basarab**
- 40 Nina Gaby: Ways to Tell a Story** by **Shirley Dawson**
- 46 Brian Rochefort 2030 at Van Doren Waxter Gallery, New York City, Jan 9 – Feb 16, 2019** by **Janet Koplos**
- 60 Caroline Schultz Vieira** by **Querardien van Vliet**
- 66 Ladi Kwali at Skoto Gallery, New York City** by **Janet Koplos**
- 70 City of Hobart Art Prize: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery** by **David L Hume**
- 82 Kathryn Hearn: Yesterday, Tomorrow and Beyond** by **Paul Bailey**
- 86 A Journey to Inner Fire** by **Babak Daleki**
- 88 Marta Donaghey: Centre of Success** by **Paul Bailey**
- 98 Consumed While Consuming** by **Lale Demir Oransay**
- 102 The Social Role of Ecological Artistic Expression** by **Wookjae Maeng**
- 118 Gleanings: A Potter in China. Flood-time, Jingdezhen** by **Jack Troy**
- 120 Low Expectations** by **Sebastian Blackie**

128



Bridging the Divide: The Poised Sculpture of Tessa Eastman

Written by **Ashley Thorpe**

The concept of centered structure – although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the epistēmē as philosophy or science – is contradictorily coherent. And as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of desire.¹

- *Jacques Derrida*

The work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has pulled apart the notion of structural certainty. The centre, or nucleus, of a structure is always considered its focal point, where the rules are enforced, and where configuration is fixed. Yet Derrida proposes that the centre is, in fact, totally separate from the rest of a structure because of its inflexibility. The centre is where structure is most inflexibly *structural*, where it sticks to the rules, and its observance of the rules is why it is called the *centre*. In contrast, all other parts of the structure permit flexibility, can play with the rules, and this is why those parts are *not* the centre. Derrida proposes that whilst the centre *seems* to be part of the wider structure (it appears to regulate it), it is in fact so systemically different, has such distinct genetic make-up, and is so inflexible, that it is its own organism. He thus observes that coherent structures are, in fact, structurally incoherent.²

Tessa Eastman uses structure (as it pertains to sculptural expression) to highlight the incoherence of the binary oppositions we use to construct our perceptions. She keenly deconstructs notions that are regarded as incompatible opposites: life and death, the sentimental and the brutal, fantasy and reality.

Being a British ceramic sculptor, and from a culture where death and sentimentality are usually kept under wraps, this is not at all usual. By bridging the gap between these oppositions, her work, like Derrida's analysis of linguistics, exposes our attempts to mask the incoherence that lies beneath the veneer of human rationality.

Eastman's deconstructive approach first surfaced in her early works. Almost everywhere these days in our globalised world, birthday cakes are a liminal symbol of change. Either a family member or friend painstakingly bakes them with affection, or perhaps they are less painstakingly selected from a supermarket shelf or catering catalogue, but cakes are always consumed as part of a series of rites to mark this special day. At first glance, Eastman's slices of cake in *Burning Slices of Death* (2012) seem excessively saccharine. They are overloaded with colourful iced decorations and sweets that risk pushing sugar levels to breaking point. Yet, a closer look reveals how the icing consists of pig heads, animal skulls, carcasses, and dead insects. They are a reminder that birthdays are also markers of advancing maturity, of one step further away from the day of birth, and one step closer towards the moment of death. Dualities of life and death, and youthfulness and adulthood, are here synthesised in porcelain.

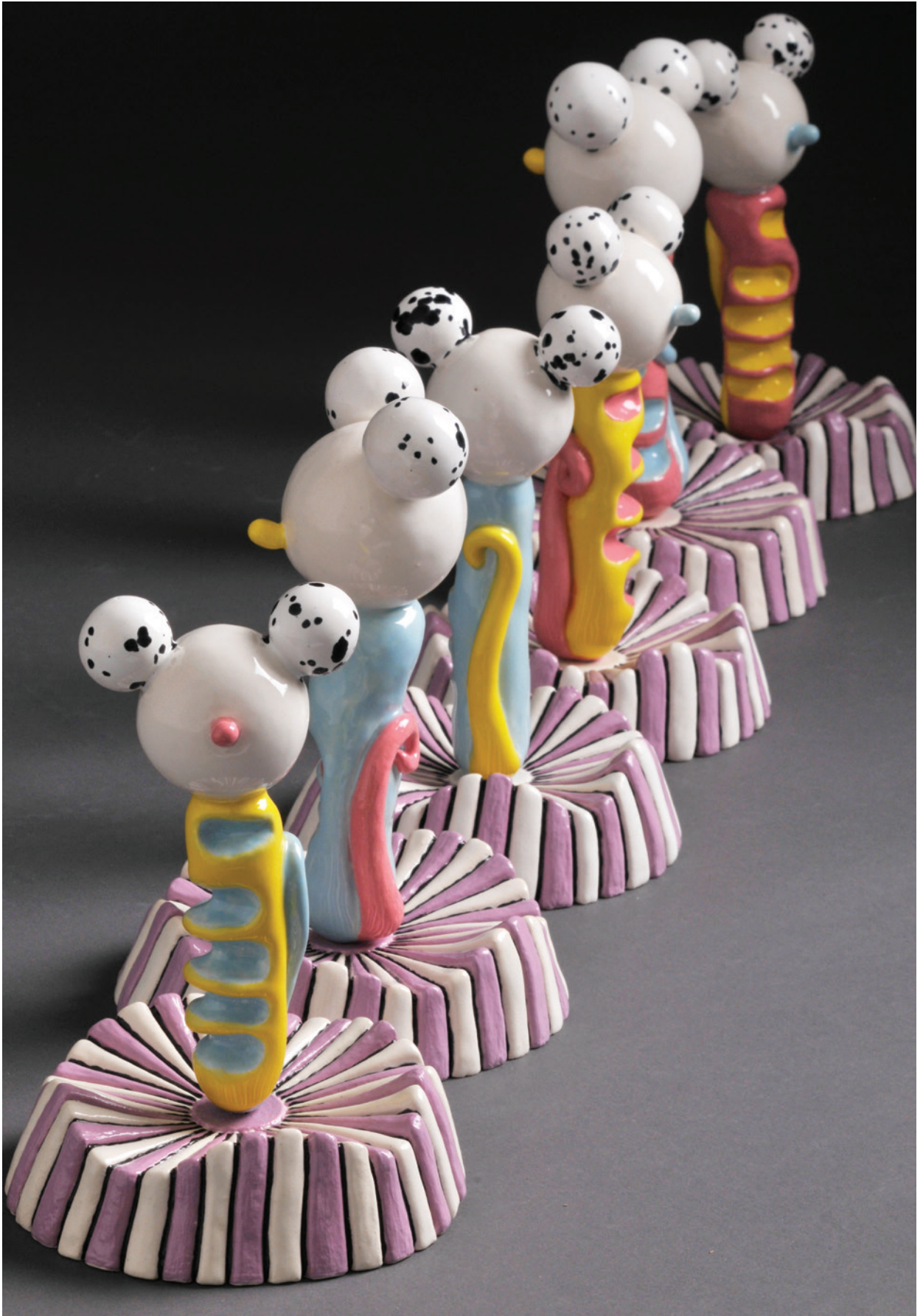
Burning Slices of Death
(plus detail), 2012, glazed
ceramic and birthday
candles, 15 x 6 x 16 cm.

2018 CAP Writing Prize | Winning Entry Ashley Thorpe

If such analysis seems gloomily morbid, *Burning Slices of Death* retains an anarchic sense of humour. A cake smothered in the imagery of dead animals is hardly the celebratory cake of choice, yet the inclusion of a real candle on each piece draws attention to the brief luminosity of life before its inevitable extinction. In fact, *Burning Slices of Death* is already dead. It was complete as a sixteen-slice work only when it left the artist's studio. The slices have since been sold individually and have made their way to new homes, almost in the manner of cake remnants given away in a goody bag at the end of a party. Despite the death of the work as a whole, it is

nevertheless preserved in its component pieces. As a series of moulded porcelain objects, each individually decorated slice has the potential to outlive both the artist and the buyer, and will either be passed down through generations, or resold on the open market. This work, therefore, exists in-between a number of dichotomies: of the lovingly handmade and the capitalist mass-produced moulded product, of emotional investment in artistry and the pragmatic need to make a living, of sentimentality and brutality, and of continuity and change. Yet, above all else, the *Burning Slices of Death* are enduring monuments to the fragility and transience of life.





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In other early works, toys, objects from which we derive the sincerest forms of pleasure as children, are rendered uncanny. For her *Mother and Child* series, Eastman made a number of rattle-like mouse figures, each impaled on a purple, white, and black base. Entitled *Mama Maraca Mice* (2011), the head of each mouse contains handmade ceramic balls, so that the piece can be used as a maraca-like toy rattle. The limbless bodies of each figure are brightly glazed in combinations of blue, pink and yellow, and feature the imprint of four fingers and a thumb, further implying the utilitarian nature of the object. Yet, this toy is definitely not a toy: it is a kind of meta-ornament that has implied utility. The *Mama Maraca Mice* offer a critique on the glibness of toys; especially those that equate true childhood with perpetual carefree play. The

A desire to experiment, and a period at the Royal College of Art from 2013 to 2015, meant a move away from prepared glazes, and the opportunity to approach work with even greater conceptual clarity and technical mastery. Three subsequent series of works, entitled *Crystal Formations*, *Crater Explorations*, and *New Arrivals* demonstrated a change in aesthetic direction, and a turn towards geological and biological structure, the very architecture of the natural world. This avenue enabled successful experiments that fused shape and surface with greater dexterity and confidence. For instance, the *New Arrivals* series enabled Eastman to reconcile apparently antithetical forms into a hybridized but carefully balanced piece. The shapes that Eastman used in this series, spherical cell-like objects attached to regular

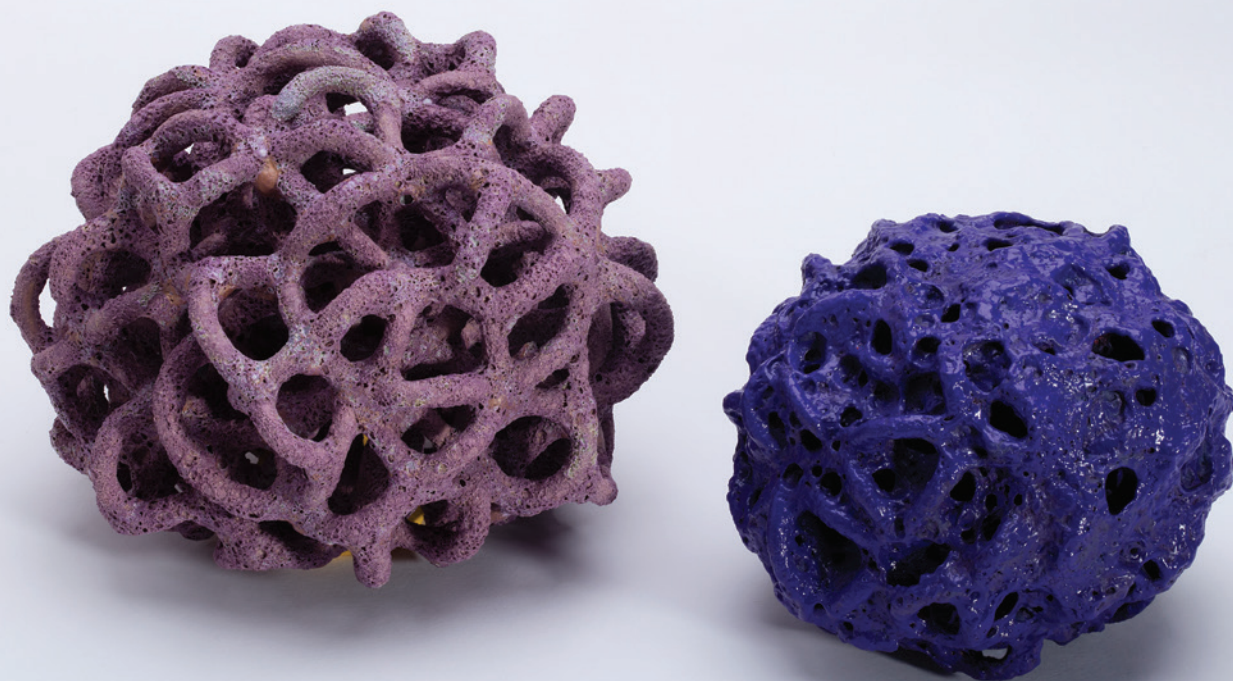
She keenly deconstructs notions that are regarded as incompatible opposites: life and death, the sentimental and the brutal, fantasy and reality.

face of each mouse is vacant save for a brightly coloured nose, with ears sparsely decorated with dabs of black glaze on an otherwise shiny white sphere. This is a reference to the psychological design of some toys (such as Hello Kitty), which do not have facial features so that children can project the emotions they feel on to the object. Here, the effect is intensified into a kind of Jeff Koons-like abstraction, which dissolves the separation between innocence and worldliness. Whilst the blank face may be receptive to emotional projection, the body speaks of a different psychology: the finger imprints on the body of the mouse hint at the tight grip of parental anxiety. Thus, like a clown at the circus who provokes both laughter and terror, the *Mama Maraca Mice* describe the joy associated with infant toys, but also the exhausting desperation of parents when absolutely nothing, not even white noise from the infant's favourite rattle, will stem the flowing tears.

net-like supports, speak to the separation of centre and structure proposed by Derrida, but also evoke something of the beautiful yet ominous microscopic imagery of a virus feeding upon a healthy cell to multiply and increase its infectiousness. Eastman develops a new sculptural language to once again remind us of the complexity of an interpenetrated world, and how the basic principles of life and death are utterly intertwined.

The imbrication of life with death via natural structures was also significant to *Creatures of the Deep* and *Symbiotic Creatures*. In these two series of work, Eastman explored life on the fringes of the known, creatures that might live in the fissures of volcanic rocks, or in the dark recesses of the oceans. Being of the earth, clay is redolent with the symbolism of death, of ashes-to-ashes, and dust-to-dust. Yet, decomposition releases nutrients that enrich the soil, and thus death nurtures the ecosystem on which all

Mama Maraca Mice.
2011, glazed ceramic and plastic, 19 x 11.5 cm.



life depends. In the same way, Eastman gives the dead clay a new structure, surface, and purpose, and breathes into it a new life. This transformation is underscored by her choice of glaze. Lively forms, with lighter, shinier glazes, feed upon underlying structures that are tactile and lava-like. In *Symbiosis (Creature in Bone Nest)* (2015), for instance, the textural surface of the bone-like base suggests decaying coral, yet its vibrant blue-green colour implies a bountiful richness and plentiful food source. The larval creature that sits upon it is of the same colour, alluding to its absorption of the nest as foodstuff. Hollowed out globular joints inspired by tree root formations – which are further highlighted with 22k gold lustre – animate this worm-like creature. Far from being content, however, the creature seems to be rearing away from its nest, as though straining for the sun, or seeking out new territories. Deprived of its home and food, it faces an uncertain future. Eastman depicts the creature as being trapped in a state of dependency: it recognises the finite nature of the resource upon which it sits, but is incapable of responding to its diminishing situation. As our planet rebels with greater voracity against its human desecrators, this seems an ever more salient point to drive home. Yet, collectively, these works are more than

simple *memento mori*; they are a celebration of transience, of recognising one's place and impact on the world, of understanding the inevitability of death, but ultimately of revelling in the dynamism and vibrancy of life.

In her most recent body of work, *Cloud Bundles*, transience remains a key area of investigation. Clouds are, after all, one of the most transient entities in nature: they are in a constant state of mutation, of coming into being, and of receding into nothingness. As holders of water, clouds sustain life through their central role in the water cycle. Whilst Eastman's clouds nod to this natural phenomenon, they are by no means literal representations. Rather they are, like the technological repositories of the same name, storage containers of data sets. Eastman's clouds invite us to access a wealth of memories, emotions, and associations.

When I was young I can recall lying on the grass in my grandmother's garden and looking up at the blue and white sky. In the clouds I would see animals and people: all manner of imagined dramatic scenes playing out between different kinds of characters as the wind shifted the clouds out of sight. I am hardly alone in having this memory. But in prompting this remembrance of childhood, Eastman's work reminds us of how we used to playfully activate

Above left:
Matt Purple Cloud,
2017, glazed ceramic
sculpture, 18 x 18 x 14 cm.

Above right:
Gloss Purple Cloud,
2018, glazed ceramic
sculpture, 12 x 12 x 11 cm.

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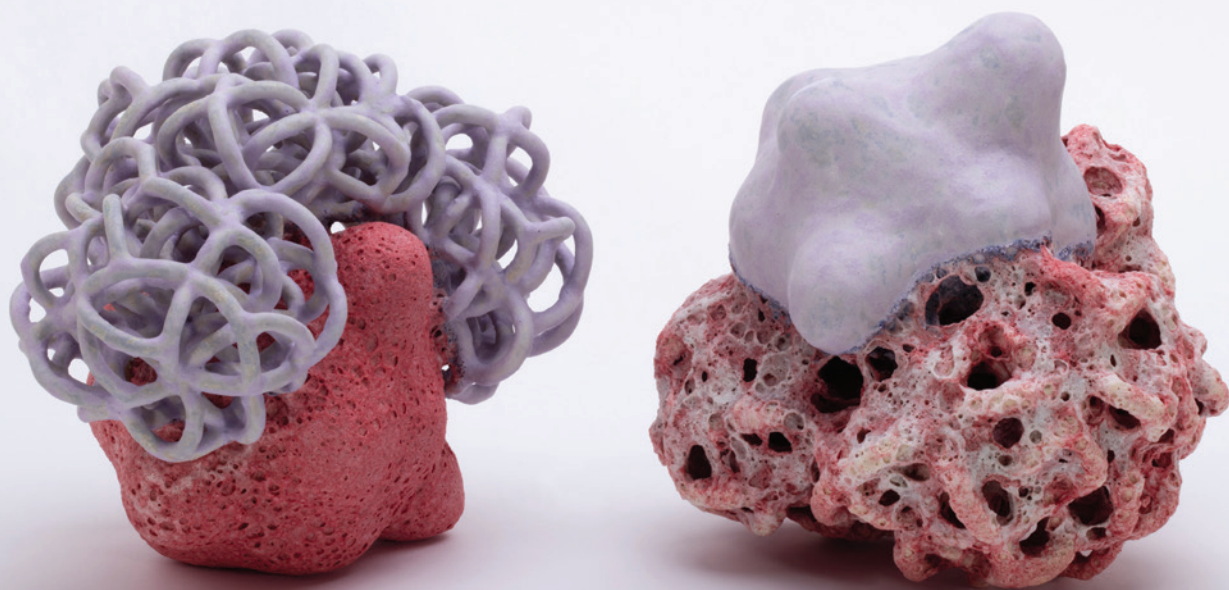
Ashley Thorpe

our imagination. This activation of memory, of a kind of emotional movement, is expressed in the relationship between the different aspects of each cloud. Clouds are grouped together according to whether they *cocoon, erupt, burst, sprout, or conceal*. They are always in motion, just like the processes that enable us to remember, or repress our memories. The *Cloud Bundles* function as sculptural portraits of remembrance, of thinking, and of being. But they are also reminders of mutability and incoherence. Like a cloud releasing water in a rainstorm, our memories flood before our eyes as partial happenings. But the cloud also reminds us of the transience of these reminiscences, and how we remember things differently, at different stages in our lives, in different places, and with different people.

It is of no surprise therefore, that structural individuality is a central concern of these cloud sculptures, where compositional differences provoke divergent phenomenological interpretations. For instance, the loose

structure and matt surface of *Matt Purple Cloud* (2017) suggest lightness and openness; air can literally pass through to the core of this piece. In contrast, *Gloss Purple Cloud* (2018) is tighter, evincing sensations of heaviness, compactness, and solidity. The deployment of different configurations and surface treatments is intensified in the cloud bundle sculptures. Here, a dialogue is established between two oppositional structures, giving the works a sense of emergence and expansion. In each sculpture one component seems to reluctantly concede to the forces of the other. In *Pink Lavender Baby Cloud Bundle* (2018) and *Lavender Pink Baby Cloud Bundle* (2018) the combination of structure and surface treatment alters perceptions of weight and density. The loose structure comprising the bottom section of *Lavender Pink Baby Cloud Bundle* seems weighed down by the heavier, more solid, lavender cloud above. In contrast, the upper section of *Pink Lavender Baby Cloud Bundle* is looser, and seems to be trying to pull, even raise,

Below left:
Pink Lavender Baby Cloud Bundle,
2018, glazed ceramics,
21 x 21 x 18 cm.
Below right:
Lavender Pink Baby Cloud Bundle,
2018, glazed ceramics,
21 x 21 x 18 cm.



the heavier, tighter pink section that resolutely anchors itself to the ground. It is in the interplay of these dynamic forces that the sculptures achieve a sense of movement and vitality, harnessing structural disjointedness to conjure emotionality. Yet, the precise associations they stir ultimately lies in the eye of the beholder. For work so concerned with structure, they invite responses that are startlingly amorphous.

Some audiences for ceramic art remain challenged, if not outright perplexed, by works that do not take the literal shape of the vessel. In some contexts, though perhaps more so in Britain than elsewhere, the pervasive influence of Bernard Leach seems to have produced a rather reductive approach to what ceramics can and should be, despite successive attempts over many decades to shift boundaries.

The stellar international commercial success of contemporary artists such as Edmund De Waal, Grayson Perry, and more recently Jennifer Lee, attest to the art market's enduring love of the vessel. But what of ceramic sculpture? Even celebrated British artists who were seminal in the move away from the philosophy of the Leach aesthetic – such as Elizabeth Fritsch, Alison Britton, Carol McNicoll, and Martin Smith to name but a few – have nevertheless remained wedded to the vessel as the site of their formal investigations, even if practical function has been a minor or non-existent concern.

Creature in Bone Nest,

2015, glazed ceramic,

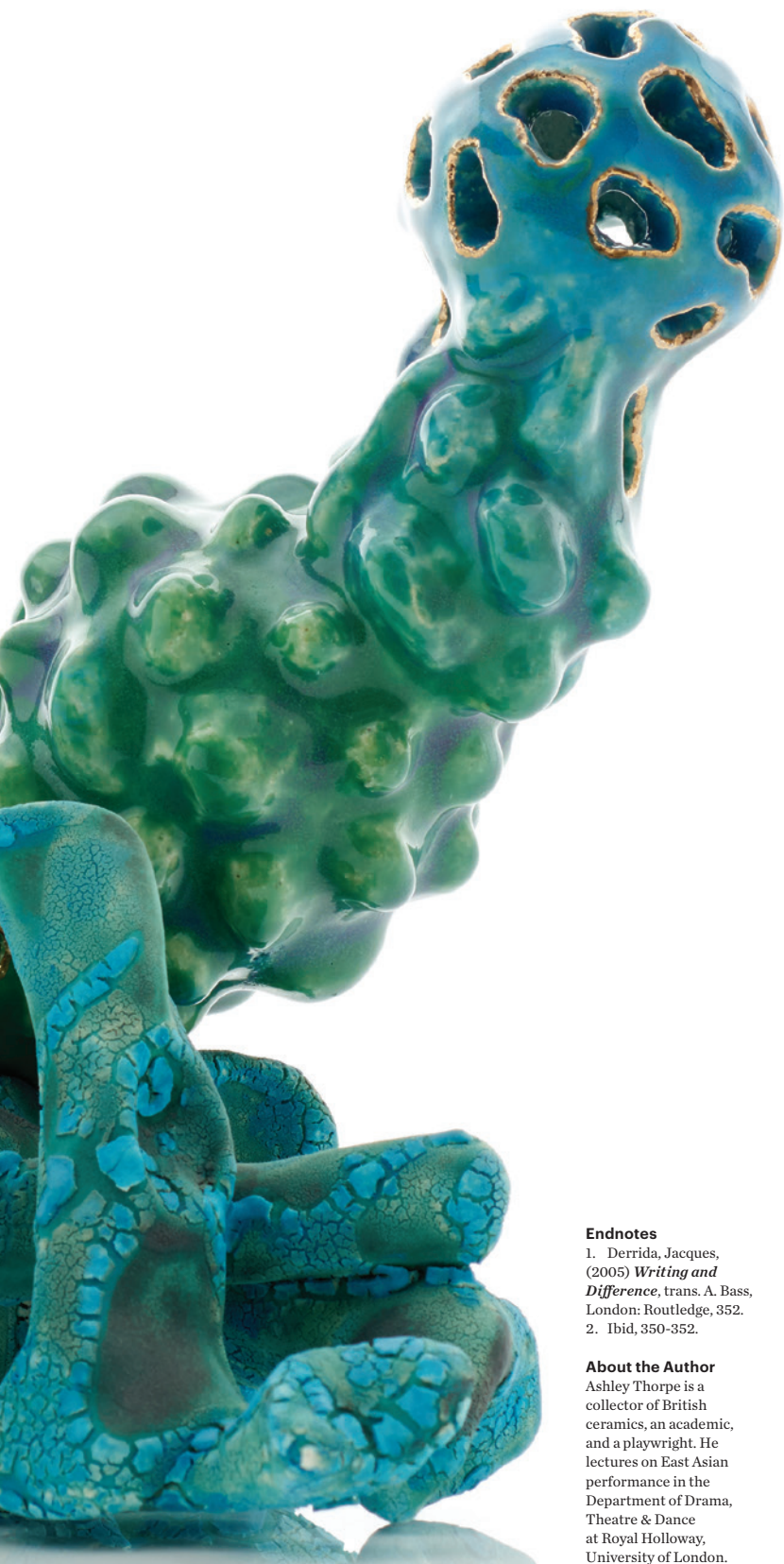
30 x 23 x 30 cm.

Image credit:

Sylvain Deleu.



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Yet there have been a number of British ceramicists whose work has addressed questions of containment without resorting to the vessel. The late Mo Jupp, for instance, explored containment of the head through his series of clay helmet sculptures, whilst Sara Radstone's practice has explored caskets as vessels in the sense of a ship or canoe, and sculptures inspired by the notion of books as containers of knowledge. The organic anatomical sculptures created by Jacqueline Poncelet in the mid-1980s investigated questions of containment through enclosure and interior space, whilst Barnaby Barford's *Tower of Babel* (2015) playfully repurposed the notion of the vessel by producing thousands of ceramic shops (containers of goods) as a means to critique capitalism. Alongside the more sculptural output of Richard Slee, the last two artists in particular offer a genealogical line of introduction to Eastman's work, signalling her own contribution to a tradition that approaches the idea of the vessel as a conceptual question, rather than as a formal device. Steeped in an understanding of the vocabulary of ceramic traditions, and yet existing happily in-between the art/craft divide that still seems to generate so much discursive heat, Eastman has broken new ground formally and conceptually to become a distinctive voice in contemporary ceramics. As the opening quotation by the philosopher Jacques Derrida highlighted, "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of desire." Eastman's work is coherently incoherent, and all the more emotively powerful because of it. It teeters on the edge of the vessel, but also of unlocking an exciting future direction for ceramic sculpture. ■

Endnotes

1. Derrida, Jacques, (2005) *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, London: Routledge, 352.
2. *Ibid*, 350-352.

About the Author

Ashley Thorpe is a collector of British ceramics, an academic, and a playwright. He lectures on East Asian performance in the Department of Drama, Theatre & Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London.