

## artnet news

Artists

# The New Ceramicists: 8 Artists Pushing the Boundaries of an Ancient Medium

Even as collectors drop millions on ancient objects, a new generation is embedding all kinds of messages in their multifarious ceramic creations.



Simphiwe Mbunyuza, *MTHIMKHULU* (2024). Photo: On White Wall Studio, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

by **Brian Boucher** | May 8, 2025

For much of human history, the ancient medium of ceramics may have been associated, as much as anything, with Ming vases, women's work, decorative arts, and humble utilitarian objects. Yet the art form has experienced an incredible resurgence in recent decades. A new generation of artists is exploring innovative takes on the art form, and museums around the world are highlighting these novel approaches.

Ceramics as a form of craft goes back centuries, with Chinese pottery dating as far back as the Paleolithic era. The ancient Greeks are known as much for their pottery as for their sculpture and architecture. Today, collectors go gaga for ancient Chinese vases and the like: In 2014, Shanghai buyer Liu Yiqian shelled out a record \$36 million for a so-called chicken cup from the Ming Dynasty that was called a holy grail—despite being just 3 inches in diameter.



The Meiyintang "Chicken Cup" fetched a record \$36 million at a Hong Kong auction. Courtesy Sotheby's.

When the Dutch East India Company brought Chinese treasures to Western shores in the 17th century, makers like Meissen in Germany and Sèvres in France rose up to serve the European market.

While ceramics have remained a cornerstone in the sector more commonly deemed craft, artists in the fine-art realm have paid increasing attention to it, starting in the mid-20th century. Hugely influential was Greek-American artist Peter Voulkos (1924-2002), who established ceramics departments at both the Los Angeles County Art Institute (now the Otis College of Art and Design) and the University of California at Berkeley. He taught major figures from the next generation, including Ken Price (1935-2012), a retrospective of whose work toured major American museums starting in 2013, and Ron Nagle (b. 1939), who earned a berth in the 2013 Venice Biennale. Also beloved from their generation is Betty Woodman (1930-2018); she was the subject of the first show for a living woman artist at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 2006.

International museums have also recently mounted major group shows devoted to the medium. London's Hayward Gallery organized the 2022-23 exhibition "Strange Clay: Ceramics in Contemporary Art," which included Price and Woodman along with a new generation, such as Woody De Othello and Brie Ruais.



Installation view of "Funk You Too! Humor and Irreverence in Ceramic Sculpture" at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Photo: Jenna Bascom, courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design.

"Funk You Too! Humor and Irreverence in Ceramic Sculpture" at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (2023) united artists from the West Coast 1960s Funk generation with artists carrying on their subversive spirit, including Viola Frey from the former and, from the latter, Genesis Belanger and Ruby Neri. And from 2021-2023, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), in North Adams, showed "Ceramics in the Expanded Field," featuring artists such as Francesca DiMattio, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, and Kahlil Robert Irving.

"The major turn toward ceramics in the past two decades is in great part due to a change in reception—by curators, museums, art historians, and art audiences," said Susan Cross, curator of the MASS MoCA show, in an email. "Although artists have worked in clay for hundreds of years—for millennia actually—in the modern era (in the West), ceramics have been traditionally siloed as craft and undervalued. Ingrid Schaffer and Jenelle Porter's 2009 exhibition 'Dirt on Delight' at the ICA, Philadelphia marked a shift. Featuring ceramic works by several generations of artists in a contemporary museum was called groundbreaking by [*New York Times* critic] Roberta Smith.

"Far from being siloed, clay is now integrated into practices that include video, painting, printmaking, etc." she added. "Yet as the world is becoming more and more abstract, more digital, I also think the immediacy, the tactility of clay seems particularly appealing. It is simultaneously strong and fragile, contemporary and

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Jessica Jackson Hutchins' *Restless Animal Kingdom*, performed on June 25, 2022, in the exhibition "Ceramics in the Expanded Field." Dancers: Sarah White-Ayón, Nami Yamamoto, Myssi Robinson, Lauren McKeon. Cellist: Lottie Malkmus.

primordial, familiar and also so much about transformation."

Some of the most interesting artists of our day are working in ceramics, expressing ideas about craft, high vs. low art, identity, and art history through this form. Here's a far-from-comprehensive, alphabetically arranged roundup of some of the most acclaimed practitioners of the medium today, all born since 1970 and earning attention for their work in the press, in galleries, and at major museum exhibitions around the globe.



## Simphiwe Mbunyuza



Simphiwe Mbunyuza, *INTOMBI ZE KHAYA* (2024). Photo: On White Wall Studio.  
Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

South African artist Simphiwe Mbunyuza (b. 1989) brings together African iconography and artmaking techniques in his stunning, colorful, sometimes large ceramic works. The artist follows his intuitions and impulses, so that, say press materials for his recent show at David Kordansky Gallery in New York, "in a way, the circumstances of each piece's creation carry a divine quality in and of themselves."

Five-foot-tall works in that show represent ancestors who are often invoked in religious ceremonies, while smaller examples represent younger spirits that inhabit

living relatives, including Mbunyuza and his family. The pieces bring together ritual and iconography associated with the Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa; the artist lives there, in his native town of Butterworth.

The works in the Kordansky show bear markings in the forms of houses, animals, garments, and abstract patterns, in large swaths demarcated by contrasting colors, some vivid, some an earthy brown, and impressed linework that imparts an irresistible texture.

Since earning both fine art and technology degrees at South Africa's Walter Sisulu University and an MFA at the University of Oklahoma, he's been in group shows from Oklahoma Contemporary in Oklahoma City to A.I.R. Vallauris, France, and Art in the Yard Gallery, Franschhoek, South Africa. His work is in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Warehouse Dallas Art Foundation in Texas.

## Ruby Neri



Ruby Neri, *Monkey on My Back* (2022). Photo: Jeff McLane, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

Sculptor Ruby Neri (b. 1970) has worked with clay since 2005, both incorporating it into sculptures with other materials and sculpting solely in clay. "I use clay to satisfy my sculptural and painterly needs," she told the Independent art fair in 2018, ahead of a presentation of her work at the fair by L.A.'s David Kordansky. "I align the clay-building aspect of my sculptures with object-making, and the surface impressions and glazes with mark-making. I think of the mark-making as a form of painting." That makes sense, since she earned her degrees in painting, she points out.

She caught Artnet News' eye at Independent that year and again in 2019, when she had her first New York solo outing, at Salon 94. It was a fairly meta show, Sarah Cascone pointed out: "The large-scale sculptures recall the pioneering female ceramicist Viola Frey, and evoke powerful women on the brink of losing control." Back in 2012, she had already earned *Art in America's* notice, with Paul Soto writing, on the occasion of a solo at David Kordansky and a berth in the "Made in L.A." show at the Hammer Museum, that her latest works, "towering abstract bodies in clay and plaster, invoke [Jean] Dubuffet's call for art's primordial return to terra firma."

She's appeared in major group shows at venues like the High Line in New York, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in California, and the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris. Her work resides in collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, the Brooklyn Museum, San Francisco's De Young Museum, and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. She earned a BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA at UCLA.