

A passion for precarious porcelain

Mella Shaw

The Royal College of Art graduate talks to Teleri Lloyd-Jones. Photography by Julian Anderson

Working as head of exhibitions at London's Dulwich Picture Gallery a few years ago, Mella Shaw found herself at a City Lit open day for a ceramics diploma. She had been enjoying a night class run by Duncan Hooson, and he suggested she take a look at the City Lit course. It was a revelation. 'I just thought "Oh god – I can't believe that I'm not doing this." I was physically pained that other people were doing this and I wasn't,' she recalls. Thus began a new direction for Shaw, which saw her graduate from the Royal College of Art this year with a series of extraordinary sculptures, built up with small porcelain bricks. Each piece sits on the cusp of implied collapse, as though one mistimed nudge might end in total destruction.

Although clay was an epiphany to her in adult life, it was already a steady presence in her childhood. Shaw began ceramics classes at the age of six, as did her older sister – and though the latter promptly dropped the class a week or so later, Shaw continued for years. She became such a regular she was centring each pupil's clay on the wheels at the start of a lesson.

With such a long-standing relationship with the material, you might wonder why Shaw detoured away from making, but she has another love: museums. Her father was keeper of natural history at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and as a child she spent so much of her spare time there that it felt like a second home. With her family still based in Edinburgh, she describes her response to museums as 'almost visceral', her museum visits are a way to allay any homesickness.

She studied Anthropology at Durham (partly because Durham has no art school to divert her attention), afterwards moving to London to work first at the Victoria & Albert Museum, then the Dulwich Picture Gallery.

While she may have switched focus, Shaw continues to revere objects, taking delight in their meanings, and grappling with text as well as stuff. For example, the linguistic inspiration for her graduating work is a rather complex Portuguese word, *saudade*. This has no direct



Above: *Blue Wave*
Opposite: Shaw at the Old Spode Factory, with left, *Bridge (Yellow)* and right, *Bridge (Grey)*. All by Mella Shaw, body stained porcelain, 2013

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translation, but refers to a sense of longing for an absent something or someone. Certainly one can see both beauty and tragedy in her tilting constructions, and Shaw is fully aware that the concepts are hard to grasp: 'I'm only interested in things that are on the periphery. I don't want to tell people things, I want them to think about things, perhaps things they weren't expecting to think about.'

Back at City Lit, the Diploma was booked up with a new intake only every two years, but a fortuitous cancellation meant she was very quickly dividing her working week between Dulwich and college. Under the tutelage of (among others) Robert Cooper, Sara Radstone and Annie Turner, Shaw says she 'was completely turned on to how brilliant ceramics can be. When I started that

course, my partner said I'd become an evangelical potter. All I could talk about was how brilliant clay is. It completely changed by life.'

With a contagious smile, Shaw describes how her new life snowballed and she got into the Ceramics & Glass department at the RCA. Like a kid in a sweetshop, she went eclectically from one piece to the next – and looking at them you'd be forgiven for not recognising her hand: 'It was a brilliant opportunity to learn as much as possible – so much going on, so many skills, so many tools. You can make anything out of ceramics – so how can you limit yourself when you're learning?' Alison Britton, one of her tutors, noticed a distracted restlessness in her student and suggested Shaw take two weeks to make as many maquettes as she could, to let all the ideas out of her head. The process worked, liberating Shaw from the pressure to create a single piece of work that communicated all her thoughts.

Towards the end of the second year she began producing her final collection, and while there may be few aesthetic connections with her previous work, the ceramist explains that looking back she can see a conceptual thread: 'My work was always about thresholds. It was always about something on the edge of decay or collapse. Trying to catch the energy when it is about to change.'

Shaw has two residencies in the calendar over the next year – one at Farnham's University College of the Arts and another at Stockholm's Konstfack – and appreciates having the time to push her current work forward. She has plans also to write, as well as some larger installation work, but talking with her one is overwhelmed by the joy and possibility she now finds in her work: 'It snowballed – it's completely my life now and I can't believe that it hasn't been. It's very scary, but I feel like I'm right at the beginning of something.' Mella Shaw's work can be seen in 'FRESH' at the British Ceramics Biennial, Old Spode Factory, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 1JB, from 28 September – 10 November. www.britishceramicsbiennial.com www.mellashaw.co.uk

