

## Ceramic artists: top trail-glazers breaking the mould

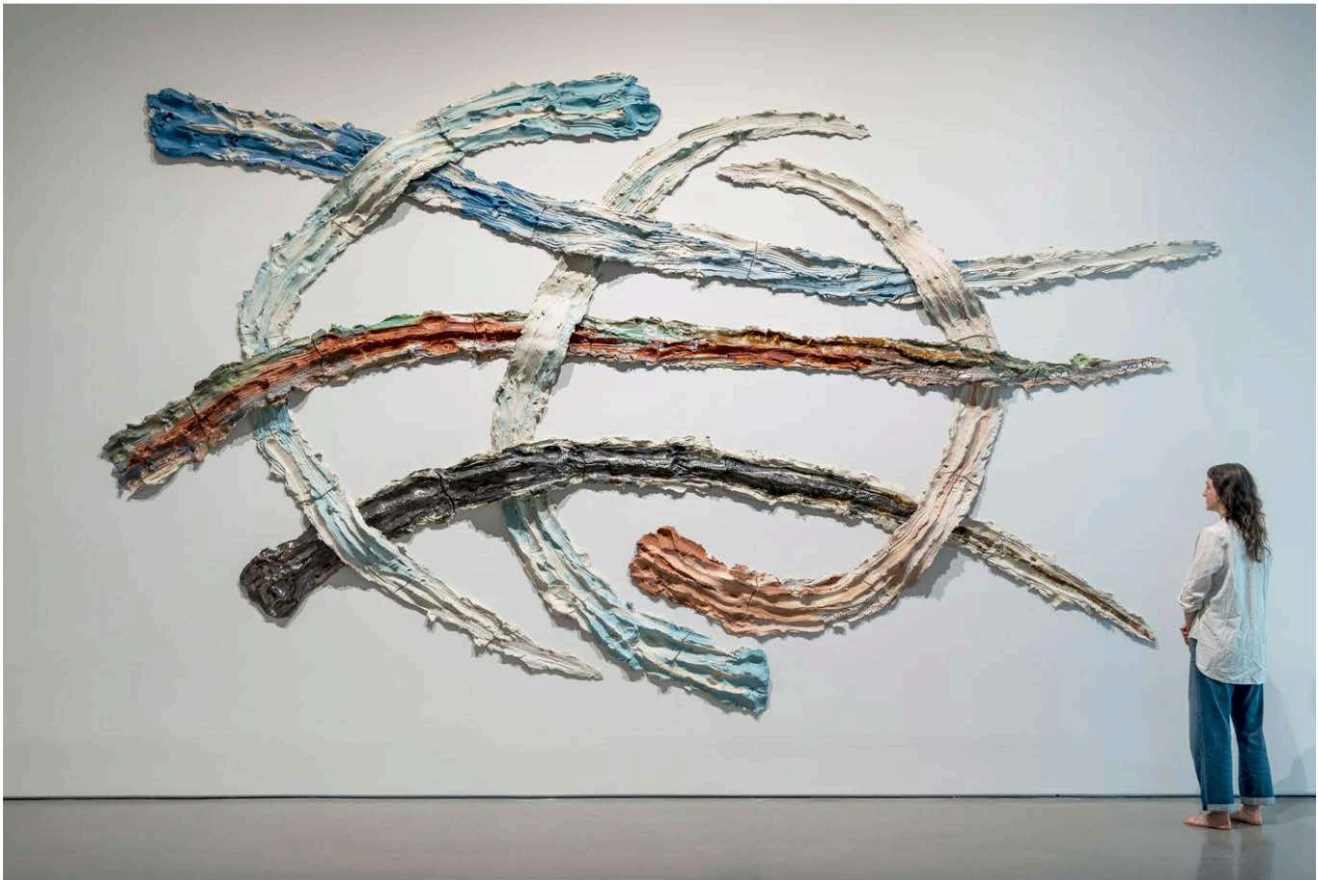
A way with clay: contemporary ceramic artists are firing up the canon into a new age

**C**eramics and art have a companionship longer than most. In a story that began in the Palaeolithic period, this potent fusion of water, earth and creativity has evolved through many modes. 21st-century ceramic artists are proving that the medium has as much potential for concept as function, lured in by its versatility, sensuality and role as a platform for provocation.

From artists upholding age-old techniques with a twist, to those unearthing radical ways to push materials to their limits, these are the trail-glazers, the mould-breakers and future-shapers on the cutting edge of ceramic art.

### Brie Ruais

Brooklyn-based Brie Ruais uses one primary tool to fashion her dynamic clay pieces: her own body. Each of her sculptures is made with the equivalent of her body weight in clay, resulting in pieces that uncannily mirror human scale. Each gouge, scrape and fold is evidence of raw physical engagement with her material, reminiscent of work by Ana Mendieta and Lynda Bengalis. Ruais' often creates alone in the desolate desert terrain of Nevada's Great Basin, with no Wi-Fi or phone service. The intensity of solitude, and the charged intimacy with her material, as she rolls, pushes and pulls her body across it, results in works that blur sculpture and performance. Ruais' solo exhibition at the Moody Center for the Arts, Houston runs until 28 August. Her work will be shown at Night Gallery during Frieze London, and in December, she will have a solo show at Albertz Benda New York.



Installation view of 'Brie Ruais: Movement at the Edge of the Land', at the Moody Center for the Arts, Houston.

## Ron Nagle

It's a rare trait in the arts, but acclaimed American ceramicist and prolific musician Ron Nagle has managed to master two very distinctive mediums with singular zest, conviction and unpredictability. Clay began as a rebellion for Nagle, both against his parents' 'closed-minded' view of suitable vocations, and the conventional ceramic applications that ruled 1950s California. Gaining prominence in his 20s, he joined forces with other like-minded artists, such as Peter Voulkos and Ken Price, and soon found his rhythm. The results were small-scale, huge impact pieces that the artist has been perfecting for the last 60 years. An amalgam of hyper-polished and rugged surfaces combined with spicy, saturated hues, his works are imbued with the legacies of California: pop culture, the Finish Fetish movement and its sun-soaked vernacular.

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## Apparatu



Inside Apparatu's vast ceramics studio in Rubi, Spain. Pictured: finished pieces from the CAP sculpture series. As featured in the April 2019 issue of *Wallpaper\**. *Photography: Alex Cascallana*

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Barcelona-based ceramic studio Apparatu is something of a family affair. Founded 50 years ago by Juan Mañosa (and joined later by Juan's wife, Aurora) it produced dishes and objects mostly sold work through trade fairs. When Juan's son, Xavier joined the business a decade ago, their approach shifted gears and they began pushing the medium of ceramics to its limits and artfully straddling the boundaries of contemporary art and design. For Apparatu, whose vast studio is based in an old industrial warehouse in Rubi, material experimentation is at the heart of their practice, which spans everything from handmade ceramic furniture to objects, vessels and light fixtures. As Xavier told *Wallpaper\** in 2019, 'I like going back to the basics, and being in that grey zone, teaching myself new things - just by listening and sharing, you can learn a lot.'

## Magdalene Odundo



Left: *Untitled*, 1990, burnished and carbonised terracotta by Magdalene Odundo. Right: The artist in her Surrey studio. Photography by Sophie Green for the March 2019 issue of *Wallpaper\** (W\*240)

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Over a four-decade career, the Kenyan-born British studio potter and revered educator has made a tangible mark on ceramic art. Her restrained, often asymmetrical sculptures allude to the curvature of the female human form and affirm the inextricable and profound link between humanity and clay. As a young ceramic artist, she travelled to Nigeria, New Mexico and China, immersing herself in various approaches to craftsmanship. The artist's hollow vessels carry a catalogue of global histories, technical approaches and cultures: graphic design - which she first trained in - diasporic identities, British studio pottery, ceremonial vessels from Kenya and Nigeria and Ancient Greek and Roman techniques. In place of the potters' wheel, Odundo makes use of a coiling technique to hand-build her vessels, which she fires and burnishes repeatedly. The resulting objects have a surface akin to satin, and range in colour from flaming orange to subdued black, and sometimes a combination of the two. Odundo's solo show at Salon 94's newly-renovated 89th Street location will be on view until 3 July 2021 in New York.

## Ai Weiwei

Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei is just as famed for breaking ceramic art as making it. In 1995, in one of the most memorable and controversial moments of art-world theatre, he intentionally dropped an alleged 2,000-year-old Han Dynasty Urn, which shattered at his feet. A year before, Ai painted over another with the red Coca-Cola logo. This erasure of artefacts – and ergo cultural history - is a recurring theme in Ai's work, with ancient ceramic vessels often his tools of choice to question who or what ascribes cultural value. In a different, but no less striking ceramic mode, Ai dominated Tate's turbine hall with 100 million individually hand-crafted life-sized sunflower seeds sculpted and painted by specialists in Jingdezhen, China. It was an invitation to reflect on the 'Made in China' phenomenon, and more broadly, contemporary cultural exchange. Ai confronts the vast history of ceramic art, smashes it open and pieces it back together to astonishing, and explosive effect.



Ai Weiwei, *Coca Cola Vase*, 2011. Han Dynasty vases (206BC-220AD) and industrial paint. © Ai Weiwei. Courtesy Lisson Gallery

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## Grayson Perry

A mere whisper of the term ‘ceramic art’ is usually enough to bring Grayson Perry’s work into the conversation. The artist’s command of the medium as a storytelling device is nonpareil, chronicling scenes of contemporary British life with wit, poignancy and nostalgia. At first glance, these pieces are alluring, playful and spirited. A closer inspection often brings with it a change in mood, as his sgraffito surfaces reveal loaded stories of prejudice, injustice, desire, disaster, religion, mass media and power. His work – which also extends across cast iron, bronze and printmaking – is dense with autobiographical references and unflinching societal statements. Perry simultaneously flips ceramics on its head to question the social status of the medium itself – turning its purity into a vehicle for fiery allegory.



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## Genesis Belanger



Ceramic sculptures by Genesis Belanger, shot in her Brooklyn studio for the October 2020 issue of *Wallpaper\** (W\*258). *Photography: Jillian Freyer*

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In the work of Brooklyn-based sculptor Genesis Belanger, nothing is quite what it seems. Demure pastel hues and mundane objects are skewered with sharp wit and cultural critique - ingredients that make for uncanny visual consumption. Unlike many ceramic artists, Belanger eschews glazes in favour of a matte surface. Colours use either the natural tones of the clay or involve blending pigments into the stoneware or porcelain. Often involving mid-century furniture, pills, food, telephones, candles, flowers and displaced body parts, Belanger's ceramic compositions are smorgasbords of surprise and conceptual depth. Each piece is packaged like a surreal novella, bound up in contemporary realism: feminist critiques of contemporary America, vanity, excess, consumerism, and in a 2020 show at The Aldrich, grief and loss.

## Theaster Gates



Theaster Gates's Ceramics Studio, Chicago, 2020. © Theaster Gates. Photography: Chris Strong. Courtesy Gagosian

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American artist Theaster Gates has a practice of many facets. Through his socially-engaged art, Gates delves into race, territory, and the history of objects. He trained as a potter, and maintains a deep affinity with clay. For Gates, the ceramic vessel is rooted in metaphor: a container of spirituality, ritual and universality, and architecture for shared experiences. Last year, Gates staged 'Black Vessel' at [Gagosian New York](#), in which he created a space for contemplation through large-scale works in glazed and fired clay. The artist's ability to unify age-old traditions and ceramic sensitivities with contemporary themes and aesthetics anchors him as a forerunner of contemporary ceramic art, and a great deal more. [Read a full interview with Gates for our At Home With series.](#)

## Lubna Chowdhary

The work of London-based artist Lubna Chowdhary is all about tensions and hybridity: between manual and industrial, East and West, minimalism and superfluity. Born in Tanzania to Indian parents, the artist creates vivid hand-painted tiles, three-dimensional objects and spacial installations that defy easy categorisation. Chowdhary's interests lie in the malleability of clay, its relationship with the human hand and colour's capacity to generate visual and emotional responses. Through her bold lashings of colour, lustrous surfaces and gridlike geometric constructions, the medium is imbued with wide-ranging histories, geographies and cultures. Her new exhibition at Jhaveri Contemporary in Mumbai centres on the concept of code-switching, the act of shifting between linguistic codes and systems. This, in the context of Chowdhary's work, means an interchange between different modes of production, cultural references and media, conveyed through tiled ceramic work, paintings and collages on paper. Lubna Chowdhary is currently [exhibiting at Frieze New York](#) in the Jhaveri Contemporary online viewing room.