

OFF-CENTRE

1 Brenda, 2009, H42cm. (Photo: Jacques Pèpion) 2 Working in the studio on *Mea Culpa*, 2010 .

Andrew Wood is a self-confessed 'clayman' who first discovered the love of his life while a painting student at Falmouth School of Art forty years ago. He now lives in Cortona in Tuscany where he continues to be a stranger to function and a student of the Imagination
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ANDREW WOOD TAKES ON THE UK CERAMICS SCENE.

I have a story to tell.

I now live in Italy because living in England was immensely frustrating on a professional level. During the period 2003-9 I spent thirty percent of my working life trying to get some sort of gig – applications for exhibitions, commissions, teaching, etc – and not a single door opened in my favour.

During the last year I have had a very successful exhibition in a famous gallery in Milan, I was invited to show at the Ceramic Biennale in Albisola where my work hung next to Lucio Fontana's, and in June I sold more than half of the forty pieces that I was exhibiting in a beautiful gallery in Paris just behind the Louvre. In October this same gallery took my latest work to London where they had a big stand at the Pavilion of Art and Design in Berkeley Square. I was the only artist of the forty-odd stands to have a solo exhibition – I should say living artist, because the gallery next door had only Picassos. I've had colour features in *La Ceramica Moderna* and *Antica* and *L'Atelier d'Art* and *Le Figaro*.

Forgive a note of bitterness in this late night ramble from a hospital bed in Kerala, where I am having Ayurvedic treatment for Parkinson's. I have a very long ceramic pedigree. My degree show at Falmouth in 1971 was a sell-out. On the strength of it I was given a studio, a salary, and a solo show by the Nicholas Treadwell Gallery in Chiltern Street, at a time when it was unheard of for a London gallery to go to an art school degree show, let alone take on an artist. While my tutors were trying to persuade me to go to the RCA, in typical fashion, I resisted in order to plough my own furrow. Like him or loathe him, Nick Treadwell was the only gallery in London at that time to show and champion figurative ceramics. All the rest would only show Leach, Rie, and Cardew. Liz Fritch's career began around that time and she has, bless her, been making the same pot ever since. (Don't be so bitchy @ndrew). It is reasonable to say that in 1972 there were probably only half a dozen artists exhibiting figurative ceramics. Now they are ubiquitous, and the art schools breed them like rabbits.

After Treadwell I got a one-way ticket to California, and with my slides in a sock because I couldn't afford a box, caught a Greyhound to UC Davis. At the time it was the single most exciting and revolutionary ceramic department on the planet, and when the history books are written and the hypothetical ceramic show-down takes place between Peter Voukos and Bob Arneson versus Lucie Rie and Hans Coper, the result will, in my opinion, be a no brainer. So I pitched up unannounced at TB9, the UC Davis ceramics studios, and introduced myself to Robert Arneson and he liked what I was making so much that he generously invited me to stay, gave me a studio, materials, and introductions to all the ceramic departments in

and around the Bay area. Returning to England I bought a big old derelict baptist chapel in a remote Cotswold village, where with the help of a CAC (Crafts Advisory Commission/Crafts Council) grant I set up a studio in a corner of the baptistry and for five years made an army of figurative stuff that I exhibited wherever anyone would have me, my most successful champion being Christopher Strangeways.

During 1978-88 I took a sabbatical and converted the still derelict Baptist Chapel into the Prema Arts Centre, in which I ran a combined arts programme of such outrageous ambition that I am breathless with exhaustion to even think about it. Sheila Hancock and John Thaw opened it. The Royal Shakespeare Company, Linda Gunn Russell, Adventures in Motion Pictures, Matisse, Ian Hamilton Fraser, Bert Jansch, Hariprasad Chaurasia (we developed a pioneering programme of world music), Albert Loudon (my passion for Outsider Art resulted in no less than eight exhibitions), Urban Bush Women from NY, Henry Pim, Akademia Ruchu, David Bailey, Heathcote Williams, Emma Kirkby, The Tallis Scholars, The People Show, Siddig el Nigoumi, Michael Nyman, Leo Baxendale the original cartoonist for the Beano, Lynn Chadwick, Lumière & Son, Heathcote Williams, Glen Baxter, Benjamin Zephaniah, Stephen Dixon, Ewen Henderson, Rosemary Butcher Dance Company etc etc. And that little list represents about 1/50th of what we did. And all in a small Cotswold village with a staff of me plus one, with a pitiful grant before the days of degrees in arts administration and curatorship.

I am now making what I believe is the best work of my life. For the last five years I have been making a series of wall-based relief sculptures called *The Shape of Things to Come*. They are abstract, weird, and very wonderful. I am as excited about this current work as when I first discovered clay in the basement of Falmouth Art School and fell madly in love with the medium of my life. CLAYCLAYCLAY. Unfortunately, the obsessive detail in the carving and painting is lost in photos, and anyway, my website is four years old. We inhabit an Art World in which very little is original, where so much is derivative or easily mistaken for any number of other artists.

I defy you to name anything in the history of ceramics that is remotely like my current work. And yet three times have I applied to become a member of the Crafts Council without success (my most recent rejection from the Crafts Council was for the most hilarious of reasons namely, that they did not care for my treatment of the rear and invisible surfaces of the wall based relief sculptures), and twice have I applied to exhibit at *Ceramic Art London* and been rejected. Clearly not up to snuff...

Namaste, @ndrew Wood.

