

CLAIRE PARTINGTON

HISTORICAL FICTION
SELECTED CERAMIC WORKS







Claire Partington's mixed media ceramic works are rooted in both the traditional and the contemporary and embody her enthusiasm for aesthetic styles that span centuries. Directly referencing portraiture from both art history and today's social media, Claire's work is a social commentary on gender and power.

The imagery of folklore and fairy tales are a constant theme throughout her work and she approaches these narratives with a conscious redressing of the gender motifs that have carried on unquestioned for centuries, playfully displaying a contemporary sense of humour and a fondness for the surreal.

Her work has been shown worldwide and features in notable international collections including the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Museum of London, the Walker Art Gallery, Seattle Art Museum, Ömer Koç Collection, Istanbul and the Reyden Weiss Collection in Germany.

Spanning ten years of her artistic practice, Partington's first monograph features selected highlights from 2011 - 2021. With insight from the Artist herself and text contributions by Danielle Thom (Curator, Museum of London), Amy Orrock (Senior Curator, Compton Verney) and curator and educator Michael Czerwinski, this book offers a unique glimpse into Partington's working methods and the concepts behind the works.

Since 2014, we have devoted ourselves to compiling and presenting the art of our gallery artists within our beautiful publications. Through our curation of KochxBos art books, we introduce and immerse you in the visual worlds of our artists. We guide you with great pleasure and pride on our journey through Claire Partington's work, showcasing the immense wealth of thoughts, backgrounds and historical constructions of the Artist.

Esther Koch & Hans Bos
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- Cover **The Bachelorette**
2021, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 22 X 60 X 31 CM
- p. 2,3 **Saint Lucy**
2019, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 73 X 53 X 25 CM
- p. 4 **Detail of Venus**
2015, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 71.5 X 39 X 20 CM
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2012, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 71 X 54 X 26 CM

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FEMINISM

A feminist artist, whose feminism is - crucially - intersectional, Partington addresses the implicit hierarchies of race, gender and class which underpin the decorative arts by conferring agency upon her figures. This enables them to question and critique the historical contexts which inform their appearance; something which is particularly apparent in *The Collector (Pica Pica)* (2015), based upon Frans Pourbus' opulent 1599 portrait of Isabella Clara Eugenia of Austria. With interchangeable bird and human heads, *The Collector* shifts between royal patron of the arts and greedy magpie, or *pica pica*. The real Isabella Clara Eugenia, ruler of the Spanish Netherlands, was a noted patron of the arts, assembling a *wunderkammer* of curious and 'exotic' objects. Here, that urge to collect is presented as something more mundane; her dress covered in the collections of everyday life: keys, buttons, charms and tattoo motifs. Even so, the effect of the whole remains opulent, balanced against the ordinariness of its constituent parts.



Venus

2015, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 72 X 39 X 20 CM

GROWTH

This sense of balance, of figures presented as simultaneously 'ordinary' and royal or divine, is a constant presence throughout Partington's body of work. *Santa Margarita* (2019) takes a selfie as the dragon curls around her Adidas-clad feet, while a many-armed *Venus* (2015) manages to juggle a cigarette and a dog leash while touching her pregnant stomach. Pregnancy, also, is a recurring motif, serving as a metaphor for potential and growth, as in *The Urban Planner* (2014). It also situates her female figures as liminal entities, saints and goddesses whose bodies are subject to injury and decay; as is the case with *Venus* and her *London Venus* (2015) counterparts. The grotesquerie of the female body, and the incipient horror that arises from the idea of childbirth - what Julia Kristeva refers to as 'abjection' - is acknowledged and allowed, simply, to *be*.



The Collector (Pica Pica)

2015, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 78 X 32 X 34 CM



The Hunting Party

2019, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

INTERCHANGEABLE HEADS

From potential comes change - the other overriding theme at play here. Each of Partington's figures is in a state of flux, often expressed literally through the use of interchangeable heads. Tapping into the medieval and early-modern traditions of masquerade and carnival, these heads hint at the destabilising potential of disguise. The original, medieval 'carnival' was a time of inversion in a society ruled by binaries, where the normal rules and categories were temporarily suspended. The poorest became powerful, male became female, human became animal, and the grotesque body ruled all. The two figures which constitute *Forest Fruits* (2017) exemplify this tradition. Richly dressed in European court fashion of the 1750s, the dainty heads of these two women are interchangeable with those of stylised, horrifying



Johan Joseph Zoffany RA, 1733–1810
GERMAN ACTIVE IN BRITAIN (FROM 1760), THE DRUMMOND FAMILY
CA. 1769, OIL ON CANVAS

bears - the monster lurking in the forest, consuming and then becoming its victim, stands proxy for the monster within us. And yet these bears are also victims - modelled on 18th century Staffordshire bear jugs, a relatively crude type of earthenware drinking vessel based upon the cruel and plebeian sport of bear-baiting. Thus the boundaries of class are transgressed alongside those of gender; and this boundary-crossing is expressed through the idea of masquerade.

TRUE ORIGINAL

After a period of working predominantly with single figures, Partington has recently returned to the format of the group ensemble, where her practice originated. Combining the various themes and motifs at play throughout her work, the interaction between figures provides greater opportunity for constructing complex narratives. *Taking Tea* (2018) and *The Hunting Party* (2019) each comprise four standing figures, whose variations in materiality and decoration produce distinct social and cultural identities for each. In *Taking Tea*, a site-specific installation within the Porcelain Room at the Seattle Art Museum, the history of the global porcelain trade is expressed through four standing figures in eighteenth-century dress. Taken as a group, they speak to histories of capitalism, colonialism, gender and work - indeed, it is no coincidence that the figure of the pregnant maidservant, rendered in humble earthenware against the elegant porcelain of the others, is the one most closely associated with labour every sense of the word. Claire Partington's witty and incisive scrutiny is brought to bear as she turns her practice as a historical ceramicist inwards, critiquing the very history of her discipline, its materials and its modes of consumption. The work - like the artist herself - is a true original.

Danielle Thom is a curator, writer, broadcaster and lecturer with a dual focus on contemporary craft, and eighteenth-century sculpture and decorative arts. Currently the Curator of Making at the Museum of London, she worked previously at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Her PhD explored satirical art in eighteenth-century London. Thom is a BBC New Generation Thinker, and the recipient of an Art Fund New Collecting Award.





16. Detail of The Concubine

2013, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 63 X 24 X 27 CM



Detail of The More We Are Together

2014, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 81 X 90 X 40 CM

THE MORE WE ARE TOGETHER is inspired by the couple in van Eyck's iconic *Arnolfini Portrait* and the title is taken from a 1969 documentary about architect Eric Lyons's "Span" housing which "examines the benefits and dangers of the close-knit communities" generated by community housing. The Mr Arnolfini figure is more diminutive than his wives and he stands on a plinth to raise him level to their height, his large black hat elevates him further.



18. The More We Are Together

2014, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

the tea set on the tea table in the act of Taking Tea. At the centre of the group is the wealthy merchant couple, whose desires would have driven the porcelain trade: *The Woman of the House* is the height of fashion and an ornate homage to luxury. Made from porcelain, she mimics the style of Sèvres, the premier porcelain producer of the eighteenth-century. Her wide-pannied *robe à la française* dress is decorated with the golden logos of modern luxury brands and her high-powdered wig is topped with a golden galleon in a nod to the merchant ships. Her empty hand is held in a pose with little finger aloft, as if she were holding a tiny tea bowl according to the strict rules of etiquette surrounding tea drinking.

The Man of the House is made in the style of Bow porcelain, which was produced in London in the mid-eighteenth century. His jacket is decorated with a Bow pattern that imitates a real Chinese pattern - used here to hint at his social aspirations - but he's not quite the same quality as the blue and white Chinese porcelain barrel on which his Chinese Pug dog rests. He's part of the new merchant class, but definitely not the aristocracy and his clothes and wig are seventeenth century in style, so he's behind the fashion of his companions. He holds his empty hand as if clumsily wrapped around a tea bowl - not as refined as his wife.

The Boy mimics the style of Chinese Wanli porcelain to indicate he is the authentic expensive luxury imported item and his clothes echo the pattern of a Wanli charger (a large serving plate) from the Museum's collection in an adjacent case. He wears a silver slave collar around his neck and he holds his empty upturned hand as if he holds a tray to serve.

The Maid resembles a small red stoneware teapot, the first Chinese ceramics to be imported to seventeenth-century Europe, highlighting her utilitarian role. She is shown as heavily pregnant, with her bump decorated in the Bow pattern used on the *Man of the House* to imply the abuse of power within the domestic setup. She is taking on the pose of a teapot with her arms in the pose of handle and spout.



The figures of two Sailors made in celadon glazed carved porcelain, obtrude on the domestic scene. One lies dead, washed up at the feet of the tea group, with the image of a kraken attacking a sinking ship carved into his back. The other sailor desperately clings on to the table edge, reaching out to be saved, while the characters of the tea party look on unaware. He has the shipwreck verse from Byron's *Don Juan* etched onto his skin. The drawer to the front of the table is open to reveal a haul of shipwreck porcelain shards recovered from the South China Seas.

Opposite the figurative group in a space between the cased porcelain collections, a gilded wall panel is installed to display shipwreck recoveries that had been lost alongside the many lives on the hazardous sea journeys from East to West. The items, sourced by the Artist from divers off the coasts of Britain and the Philippines, were broken, heavily encrusted and saturated with the smell of the sea, acting as an evocative link to the realities of the porcelain trade.







MICHAEL CZERWINSKI (Artist, Curator of Public Engagement and Director of creative agency Studio Tucktite taught the ceramics evening class at Kensington & Chelsea College. This is where Claire started to make ceramic work)
AND CLAIRE PARTINGTON IN CONVERSATION ON 12TH JANUARY 2021

MC: Tell me about your relationship with process? Do you have a relationship with process?

CP: It's all really formulated in my mind; I have so many ideas and not enough time to get everything out. I very rarely draw anything, so the "process" is the idea that's already very clearly formed in my mind and I just need to get it out. The work changes very little from how I perceive it to how it emerges, only the practicalities of the weight, the loadbearing on the figure.

MC: The engineering?

CP: Yes, the engineering, that's it! The only time I really draw is to illustrate commission ideas such as for the Seattle Art Museum, where I needed to show them the idea in my head, and sometimes I use Photoshop to make a collage of the idea. But, because I'm usually working in isolation and I'm not having a rapport with anyone else, as long as I know what I'm doing then it works. If I have a lot of work to make, then I possibly need to make a plan.

MC: For someone who's getting to know more about how you work, I'm intrigued by how you say

you know what you're going to make - with an image which is in your head. But is there a journey you go through, a thinking process or an idea development process that leads you to that realisation of knowing what you need to make?

CP: There must be an idea development process but I think it's all internal and I'm just constantly musing about things. An idea can change slightly if I walk through the park and spot someone, and I like their stance or their style and think "they look great, they'll make a good figure". So I take elements from my environment and I spend a lot of time doing internet research and looking at books, so I guess there is a research and development process, but because I'm not really pushing the materials anymore, because I've been doing the same thing for such a long time now, I instinctively know where I'm going with it.

MC: It's also interesting that when I referred to process you immediately connected that word with the realisation of an idea rather than the manipulation of the materials.

CP: I feel I have a formula now. I mainly use



Allegorical figure made at the beginning of the Coronavirus Pandemic. **ZOONOTICA** is loosely based on 16th century statues of Nano Morgante riding a tortoise. This sculpture depicts a pagan god in the form of an infant astride a pangolin steed and reflects the early zoonotic theories on the origins of Covid-19 from pangolins. Holding a jewel encrusted Covid virus in its hand, the figure also reflects the human desire to conquer and control nature - to disastrous effect.





120. Saint Sebastian

2019, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 79 X 34 X 34 CM



The imagery of **SAINT SEBASTIAN** penetrated by arrows is so well-known. This Saint Sebastian is shown in Spanish Court dress and he is accompanied by his Spanish Ibizan hound. His golden skull is a reference to the golden treasures taken from South America by the conquistadores.



SANTA MARGERITA is version of Saint Margaret and the Dragon, and partly inspired by Francisco de Zurbarán's painting of the Saint in contemporary (17th century) dress, in which she stares at the viewer and seems oblivious to the dragon at her feet. This figure is dressed in vest and shorts and is staring at her phone, taking a selfie. The image on the phone is Botticelli's Venus as a reference to face-enhancing filters on social media apps. The dragon at her feet resembles a status dog in both scale and pose - more a ferocious pet than a mythical threat.

124. Santa Margerita

2019, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 69 X 26 X 26 CM



SAINT MARGARET AND THE DRAGON. This version of Saint Margaret is standing on her dragon in the act of defeating it with her spear. The depiction of a person of colour in 16th century European dress unavoidably references the mass exploitation and enforced displacement of people by Europeans as they sought to open up trade routes and colonise lands. In the St Margaret myth, the devil takes the form of a dragon.

This figure stands atop the dragon with her spear poised to kill – although the figure itself is static, in the pose of a baroque portrait. She wears an elaborate dress - similar to those seen in Dutch Golden Age paintings - and carries a red glove. Gloves were symbolically exchanged as tokens of love, and held connotations of sex.





URBAN PLANNER is based on the female subject in van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. There have been various debates about the woman in van Eyck's painting: was it painted after her death in childbirth? Was she pregnant? The general consensus now is that her appearance is due to the style of thick fur-lined green wool gown and she holds up the fabric to demonstrate the luxurious excess of fabric and her wealth as the wife of a textile merchant.

The debunked theories on the sumptuous van Eyck painting are central to this version of the lone Arnolfini wife who is bearing twins (visible as a pattern on her dress) and she holds a tower block in her upturned hand in reference to the iconography of Saint Barbara.

The Urban Planner

2014, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 89 X 24 X 30 CM



THE BACHELORETTE was made for the group show *Fairyland* at Mindy Solomon Gallery, Miami. The figure is a contemporary everyday fairy in fairy fancy dress, passed out from overindulgence on her hen night.

174. The Bachelorette (back)

2021, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 22 X 60 X 31 CM



LADY LUCK is based on the portraits of Jacobean society in their fantastical symbolic costumes, as painted by William Larkin. The figure references superstitious traditions and is covered in lucky charms and symbols and even has her fingers crossed for extra luck. She has a pair of brass shoes - during the early modern age (late 15th -18th centuries), shoes were often concealed in English houses to ward off evil spirits.

Lady Luck

2021, EARTHENWARE, GLAZE, ENAMEL, LUSTRE, MIXED MEDIA, 81 X 32 X 32 CM



This ambiguous **SLEEPING BEAUTY** figure lies surrounded by her possessions and fairy tale symbolism, as ivy begins to creep over her body. It was inspired by life-size tomb monuments and the touching intimate ceramic sculpture, *Lydia Dwight Dead*, 1674, made by Fulham Pottery to commemorate the death of the six year old daughter of John Dwight, the founder of the Fulham Pottery in London who pioneered the production of stoneware in England.

212. Sleeping Beauty

2017, BLACK STONEWARE, IMAGE, 9 X 58 X 22 CM