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Betty Woodman's Cheery Ceramics Come to London

By Aimee Farrell



Betty Woodman in her studio, Italy, 2012. Credit Stefano Porcinai/Courtesy of the artist

The bright-eyed, 85-year-old American artist Betty Woodman has been creating with clay for almost 70 years, since she took a one-off pottery class in high school. "I still have the naïve belief that having beautiful things around you might make you a better person," she says. Fittingly, her work — on display beginning today at London's Institute of Contemporary Art — depicts cheery and inviting interior scenes, composed of her glazed earthenware vessels among large acrylic canvases.

Throughout her career Woodman has been caught up in changing perceptions of ceramics: "For many years it was a medium that it was not permissible to make art with," she says. "Now it's suddenly acceptable; everyone is looking at clay. It's become the next hot thing. Why? The art world market always needs something new — and ceramics are fashionable." A new school of young artisans is helping to transition the medium from folksy to sophisticated; and just last week in Paris, Schiaparelli's couture collection was presented in front of a wall lined with plates — on a runway that appeared to be scattered with broken dishes.



Installation view of "Betty Woodman" at Museo Marino Marini, Florence, Italy, Sept. 20 – Nov. 28, 2015. Credit Courtesy of the ICA

Woodman's first solo exhibition in the U.K. comes in the wake of her buzzed-about Salon 94 showing in New York — and crucially, in perfect synchronicity with the upcoming London Fashion Week. Also on view will be a series of experimental "wallpapers" comprised of ceramic off-cuts arranged in pleasing configurations.

By far the largest of the works on show is "The Summer House." The four-part painting consumes an entire gallery wall, and shows a Pepto-Bismol pink table full of pots and plates and vases, some wrought in 3-D. According to Woodman's husband George, this particular piece recalls the couple's colorful Chelsea loft. And the idea of the table, and the domestic objects found there, is central throughout. All of which raise the question: What kind of ceramics grace the table at the Woodmans' own Manhattan and Tuscany homes?

"I have soup bowls from Joan Platts, who's working in New York. I have plates by Aspen's Alleghany Meadows, and old and new pieces by Linda Sikora," says Woodman, wearing a saffron Issey Miyake dress and green-soled black Camper shoes with knee-high, mustard pop socks. "I've been using a vase by a woman named Deborah Dell from Colorado. It's wonderful — and perfect for all the anemones that are in the New York at the moment."



Woodman's "Country Dining Room," 2015. Credit Bruno Bruchi

What the makers she gravitates towards appear to share is not a unified style, but a nuanced understanding of their medium. Similar to Woodman, they know inside out what clay will and won't do, and how to exploit that. As to whether the couple ever disagree on the contents of their table, Mr. Woodman says sagely: "We've been married for 63 years; our tastes have converged." His own work — specifically a collection of photographs from the last few years — will go on show in Buffalo in the spring.

Woodman's personal appetite for studio pottery remains ferocious: "If I need something, I make it," she says. "Last summer we found we were eating too much ice cream, so I made smaller bowls so we wouldn't eat as much."

"Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic" is on view through April 10th at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Mall, London, ica.org.uk.