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Sculptor Betty Woodman at the ICA: 'Ceramics was always a macho world'

by Hannah Ellis-Petersen

Call her a potter at your peril. As Betty Woodman's first solo UK show opens, the 85-year-old powerhouse opens up about small-minded curators, super-sized art and her lifelong love affair with the sticky stuff.



'People don't know how to define my work' ... Betty Woodman at her show Theatre of the Domestic. Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

In the hands of Betty Woodman, the possibilities of clay seem endless. Voluptuous vases, ornate wallpapers and even a gaggle of kimono-clad women burst into life from her pottery wheel. But call this octogenarian a potter at your peril.

Woodman learned her craft making dinner sets and decorative crockery, but from the 1950s onwards, she pushed her work into the realm of sculpture, creating vibrant, unruly pieces that have occupied art galleries rather than kitchen cabinets. It is only now, at the age of 85, that Woodman has her first solo show in the UK, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.

Theatre of the Domestic is an expansive collection of the sculptor's work from the past decade, incorporating triptychs of vases, wall-mounted mosaics and even canvases that push the boundaries of ceramics.

Born in 1930s Connecticut, Woodman has been so influential in the US that she was the subject of a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art 10 years ago, a rare accolade for a living artist. Yet even Woodman herself is unsure why it's taken so long for the UK to catch up.

"I think it's partly because people sometimes don't know how to define my work, or where it fits into art history," she says. "When I started out, ceramics was not even a material you made art out of. People might have liked what I was doing, responded to it, bought it, eaten off of it, but it had nothing to do with being an artist – it was about being a craftsman."

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Betty Woodman: 'Though it's taken me a long time, I'm really putting it out there.' Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

The ICA show is a testament to a prolific spirit – Woodman is still creating work in her studios in Chelsea in New York and a farmhouse in Tuscany. Ideas, she says, come to her by making rather than sitting, thinking and planning. The more she creates, the “more I am inspired and the more one thing leads to another. I'm not interested in repeating myself.”

One wall of the ICA gallery will be covered with Woodman's “wallpapers”. The idea for the works was a happy accident, born from a decision to glaze the offcuts of ceramics she had been holding on to and then mount them arbitrarily on a wall for people to take home. Taken with the pattern, Woodman has been making these mosaic-style pieces ever since.

As a female artist starting out in the 1950s, it was not always an easy ride for Woodman. She fell in love with clay as a teenager and her family supported her decision to become a potter, but the ceramics world was not always so welcoming.

“At the beginning, people were quick to dismiss me or not take me seriously,” she says. “Back then, the world of ceramics was totally male dominated, it was a very macho world. If you weren't willing to be one of the boys, it was very difficult to be a part of it. But I'm a little combative, so I guess I also enjoyed it.”

It was only in the 1970s, when art curators began to be embarrassed by their all-male lineups, that Woodman was invited to exhibit her work, which acknowledges the rich history of the vase, from ancient Roman and Etruscan vessels to more recent Mediterranean styles, while pandering to no one.

In the ICA show, a naked female figure, painted from a life model, adorns a pair of pots on one side while bright abstract patterns cover the other. On the floor above, a new work stretches eight metres across, combining a painted canvas of a domestic scene with several pieces of pottery, such as jugs and plates, pinned to its surface.

Rather than slowing down at 85, Woodman says old age had proved liberating. “I was always interested in my work being seen in a broader context, to be displayed in museums, not shut away in cluttered cupboards,” she says. “And though it's taken me a long time, with these recent works, these paintings, I'm really putting it out there.”

Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic is at the ICA, London, until 10 April.