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Betty Woodman's charismatic ceramics

by Louisa Buck

Vivacious ceramics pose, protrude and prance through the ICA, in octogenarian dynamo Betty Woodman's first UK solo show.



Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic  
Picture: Mark Blower

The jaunty vivid ceramics of Betty Woodman which are currently colonising two floors of the ICA defy easy description. Vessels morph into figures into plinths and then sometimes don a kimono for good measure. Some emerge from painted paper bases, and a lot of posing goes on. Brilliantly coloured rooms are conjured from hybrids of glazed earthenware, resin, lacquer, acrylic paint and canvas which process and protrude throughout the galleries.

Then there are her "wallpapers," the exuberant curlicues which started life as offcuts but have now been unleashed across a series of walls. Here, emblazoned with a variety of glazed and painted surfaces, they assume a life of their own, sometimes as cavorting dancing figures or in one instance, a crazy mantelpiece bearing a prancing procession of pots.

These days clay is now fully accepted as a fine art material but things were not so easy when 85-year-old Woodman – who had fallen in love with ceramics at high school – started out as an artist in the 1950s. You were either placed firmly in the craft camp as a potter, or you had to slug it out in what was a predominantly male-dominated ceramics revival of the time. "It was very macho – it was a man's world and being a woman made it difficult to achieve any kind of recognition," Woodman remembers.

However she continued undeterred, keeping a studio at home while she was bringing up her children – the electronic artist Chris Woodman and the late photographer Francesca Woodman – and now works between Chelsea, New York, and a farmhouse in Tuscany where for over half a century she and her artist husband George have spent half of each year. Eventually recognition came – in spades – and in 2006 Woodman was given a full-blown retrospective at New York's Metropolitan Museum, although it has taken another decade for her to have her first UK solo show here at the ICA.

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While she concedes that "I guess my work has quite a lot of visibility at the moment", for this octogenarian dynamo, it is the making that matters. "I'm always interested in the next piece I'm going to make," she says. And she shows no sign of stopping. Some of the largest pieces at the ICA – including a particularly riotous multimedia piece that stretches along an entire wall of the upper gallery – have been made especially for this show, along with a whole clutch of drawings and paintings on handmade paper.



Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic at the ICA  
Photography by Mark Blower

This multimedia extravaganza shows a characteristically dynamic blending of numerous sources including Minoan and Egyptian art, Italian majolica and Sevres porcelain as well as the paintings of Picasso, Bonnard and Matisse. Her show may be called "Theatre of The Domestic" but these are rooms with a world view.

Then there is also the undoubted influence of Woodman's time spent in Tuscany, home to the mysterious ancient Etruscans, who according to their artworks were pointy of foot and feature, lovers of dancing and music, and creators of fantastical beasts. Their vivacious spirit and delicacy of touch permeates Woodman's playfully subversive hybrids, while at the same time her voice is always emphatically – and unmistakably – her own.

*Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic is at the ICA until April 10*