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Betty Woodman and her vast body of work in ceramics

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At 86, and with new shows in London and Manhattan, the artist shows no sign of wanting to slow down



Betty Woodman at her studio in New York

On the dining table in Betty Woodman's Chelsea loft are a cluster of cups and saucers in Sèvres porcelain. There are the recognisable colours of the venerable French house — the deep aubergine, the peerless cobalt, the pink enriched with gold — though the shapes and decoration are defiantly different from their 18th-century antecedents. Saucers, extended like those of sauce boats, have unevenly crimped edges; they are streaked with gold lines and dotted with spots. Cups, gilded at the rim, have a free-form fluidity. These prototypes for limited-edition pieces have been in the works for quite some time. "It's been a while — years," shrugs the American artist impatiently at the French manufacturer's sluggish approach to completion.

Betty Woodman is 86 years old, and her vast body of work in ceramics is testimony to a life spent doing, rather than waiting around. An exhibition of new pieces that opens in London's Institute of Contemporary Arts next week will provide more proof, were it needed, that she's showing no signs of slowing down.

“I work compulsively,” she says as we move down a long corridor lined with pastel-painted doors to her capacious studio, where a small, yellow, well-used kick-wheel sits in the corner by the window. “I’m trying not to be so compulsive, but since my New York show opened on Thursday night [at Salon 94], I’ve managed to finish these two pieces.” (It is now Sunday afternoon.)

The two new works are magnificently scaled canvas wall pieces, with plenty of nods to Pierre Bonnard — brightly painted perspective views into cosy but light-drenched rooms where the domestic objects are all in three-dimensional ceramics.

Her output has always been matched by a hearty, even promiscuous, appetite for influences. Over the years she has taken inspiration and forms from Roman, Greek and Etruscan vessels; from the glazes of Japanese Oribe and the Chinese Tang dynasty; from Italian Bargello needlepoint; from Matisse; from the curling handles of fine 18th-century porcelain and classical pots. The results are brilliantly coloured, restless forms, always centred on the idea of the vessel but breaking the boundaries of that notion at every turn. Floor rugs made in painted canvas have vases growing out of them. Vases shaped like shells sprout two-dimensional flowers cut from clay.

At the ICA, though, she will be demonstrating a new strand of practice, creating two vast “Wallpaper” pieces, which consist of studio offcuts being reconfigured into energetic 3D friezes. “The biggest will be a 20ft-long abstraction,” she says. “I’ve always been inspired by what’s left around in the studio.” As Katharine Stout, the curator of the ICA’s exhibition, says, “We’re all talking about salvage culture, and here’s Betty just getting on and doing it.”



Woodman's 'Posing with Vases at the Beach' (2008)

Betty Woodman was born Elizabeth Abrahams in Connecticut in 1930 to socialist Jewish parents. “They were very open-minded,” she says, her bob steely grey, her dress the black-and-white striped T-shirt style she likes best, this time teamed with yellow sneakers. “My father worked for a supermarket but made furniture for a hobby, and I got a lot from my mother, who worked in an office. She didn’t give me any sense that a woman should stay at home and look after the children.”

A single pottery class aged 16 set her on her life-long love of clay, and she went on to study at the School for American Craftsmen in Alfred, New York, where students were taught to make a living from craft practice. “The school was trying to preserve these traditions, like weaving and blacksmithing, at a time when manufacturing was eroding it all,” she says. Frank Lloyd Wright’s daughter, Frances, led the marketing course. The British potter Bernard Leach, then the doyen of studio practice and exponent of minimalist Japanese aesthetics, came to teach. “I stood at the side of the master!” says Woodman.

But it was a trip to Italy, rather than Leach’s Anglo-Japanese mantra, that worked its magic on the young potter. “I went to Florence in 1951, just after the war. It was filled with heaps of rubble, but also with hope. And I fell in love with it. I’ll never forget seeing the Duomo — a pink and white building! They didn’t have buildings like that in Boston.”

The colours of Renaissance art and the confident, exuberant decoration of Majolica pottery has influenced her ever since. Once

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she married her husband George, a philosophy student-turned-fine artist, the pair would travel to Italy yearly, finally buying an old farmhouse in the Florentine suburb of Antella, where they now spend up to half the year.

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The Woodmans' New York home, a former industrial space bought 36 years ago, incorporates George's own studio, filled with his latest photographic works, as well as Betty's. Antella, on the other hand, provides spectacular views of the Tuscan countryside.

"The coming and going between the two places has had an enormous influence," says Woodman. "The stopping and starting is hard but the different conditions are good. In Italy I have red clay, and work with a white slip and a transparent glaze and then colours. And in the US, it's a white clay with rich colour slips."

For years Woodman kept a studio practice going, turning out thousands of more functional pieces. But a series of events, including the tragic suicide in 1981 of their daughter, the photographer Francesca Woodman, at the age of 22, meant Betty taking stock of her practice. For the last 30 years, she says, she has identified herself as an artist rather than a ceramicist, the various vessels and clay pieces as surfaces on which to deliver her work as a painter.

Francesca's work has gone on to be increasingly highly feted and valued: a finite supply of photography with the young artist both psychologically and physically at its centre. Betty's work, meanwhile, seems inexhaustible.

'Betty Woodman: Theatre of the Domestic', ICA, London, February 3-April 10. ica.org.uk

Photographs: Tim Knox; Bruno Bruchi
