



Peled's forest of shards installation at the RCA

Artisans | From sharp flower petals to 'diseased' cups, Jonathan Foyle looks at the contrasting styles of two porcelain sculptors

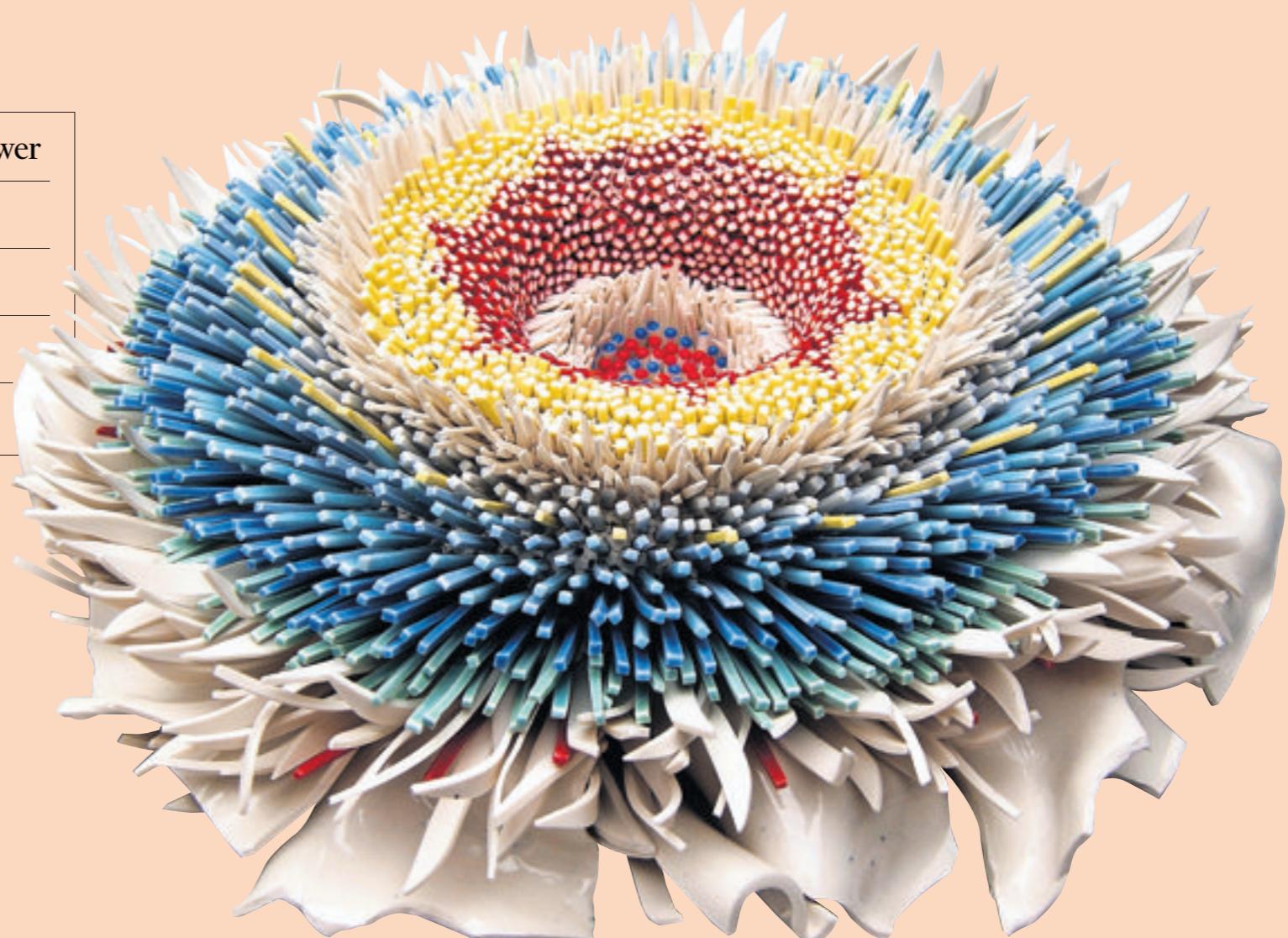
The sun-bleached terrain of the Jezreel valley close to Nazareth is a contested land, home to countless people of many religions over millennia. Zemer Peled spent her first two decades here in a small community of 300 souls at Kibbutz Yize'e'l, as the fourth-generation of her family to tend its soil. Peled watched as spades unearthed fragments of ancient lives, spilling shards of pottery onto the surface.

When she was 21, the trauma of a soured relationship led her to explore art therapy for six months. It was the first time she had handled fresh clay and felt the limitless possibilities in moulding ceramics.

Today, Peled, 32, is based in Montana, US, and is a celebrated porcelain sculptor. She is also part of a movement using porcelain not to mimic nature like so many hackneyed pastel-tinted ornaments, but to interpret its dynamism. Almost a decade ago, Peled was classmates with Tamsin van Essen at the Royal College of Art in London. They now approach porcelain in rather different ways, 4,500 miles apart.

A typical Peled sculpture might herald the discovery of a huge new species of passion flower, a mass of writhing stamens and petals whose exoticism convinces through an immaculate rendering of natural order. Flora may be the rarest beauty in the Levantine desert, but conventional beauty is not the focus of Peled's work. "The end result should be shockingly beautiful," she says.

In the natural world, the promise of nectar or fruit is a lure toward a moment of consumption. Peled has found this to be instinctive. "When people see the flowers, they're compelled to touch them." She enjoys lurking in the corner of a gallery, watching people approach



Shards apart



Zemer Peled installing a display of her work 'Large Peony and Peeping Tom' at 108 Contemporary in Tulsa, US, in 2014

▲ Peled's 'Everything now Auspicious'

► Peled's 'Flowered Lions'



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Tamsin van Essen in her London studio — Charlie Bibby

her work like butterflies, drawn in by the meticulous aesthetic detail. The disappointment is that these miraculous flowers offer no olfactory reward. Viewers encounter a brittle, tactile forest of porcelain shards, both delicate and dangerous, enlivened only by the artist's conjuring with clay, heat and impact.

These blooms will never wither and if you grab them, they can cut you deeper than the thorns of a rose. "The best part of it is the danger, with their weight and fragility. They're so sharp, fragile, and pretty," says Peled. Her materials are



▲ Van Essen's 'Acne (Pustules)'

made from scratch in her studio. She rolls out porcelain clay, forcing clots through an extruding machine into box sections, like raw sheets of pasta. These are cut into strips inches long, in square sections or round. Others are, like Venetian millefiori glass, sandwiched with numerous layers of blue clay tinted with cobalt powder to produce crowded striations, evoking variegated petals.

Her use of cobalt was inspired by a visit to a gallery in Tokyo that impressed on her how oriental porcelain was so often painted deep blue on white.



▲ Van Essen's 'Vanitas'

► Van Essen's 'Contamination (Salmonella)'



▼ Van Essen's 'Ornamental Metamorphosis'



By rendering flowers in three dimensions she melds this artificial colour within the organic form. Familiar botanical features become distorted and challenge preconceptions.

"I do the whole process of making the shards, though it takes for ever — actually, about two months — for each piece," she says.

To make them, Peled presses the moulded porcelain sticks into a grid pattern in a square of soft clay and bakes it at 1,200C for 24 hours. Then she smashes the sticks off. Her destructive tools include a tiny anvil, simple hammers, a geologist's rock hammer, a jeweller's hammer, tweezers, pliers and a thimble. The fired sheets are snapped and shaped with a hard-earned understanding of angle and impact, although

her hands often bleed. Finally, she sorts the many thousands of crafted shards into containers.

Prepared for the construction, Peled presses the shards into a clay core, building elegant, tortuous forms that are fired so that raw and precooked clays become monolithic. The largest sculptures depend on a concrete armature and can take a week to assemble. Is she scared of breaking them? "No! I let people break things all the time." Destruction merely gives way to a new life, like those shards she saw re-emerging.

Decay is a theme embraced by van Essen in London, who uses the same materials but in a completely different way. She was also raised near farmland, but in Cambridgeshire, England. She studied physics and philosophy at Oxford university "with art on the side", then realised her interests in science and medicine were best expressed through clay.

She recalls handling the material aged five at her school pottery club, ensuring it held big bubbles that would explode in the kiln. Now she experiments by incorporating rice, which burns away to create voids like the chambers of tiny pupae, or sodium silicate, to liquefy the clay until the deformity solidifies through intense heat. "Yeast is a wonderful additive to clay — it emulates osteoporosis," she says, cheerfully.

In her series "Vanitas" and "Metamorphosis", van Essen demonstrates her preoccupation with the transience of things: still-life paintings of fruit about to split and spoil, or youth yielding to time.

She describes her "Erosion" series as wanting to "convey the idea of a host being attacked and eaten away by a parasitic virus, highlighting the creeping spread of the infection as it corrupts the body". Yet these are beautiful things, bridges between biology and geology through vermiculated vessels that are worn and scoured, only to reveal stripy patterns that surpass any washed rock plucked from wet shingle.

Van Essen's "Contamination" is a series of white cups that appear to be ravaged by disease, the contusions and glazes suggestive of a scrambling E-coli virus or a bile-green cholera. These are vessels submerged by the impression that bacteria reign supreme, leaving us to contemplate our own vulnerability as organisms. But, of course, although they appear harmful, they aren't. These cups are empty threats, the polar opposite of Peled's petrified ambushes.

Ceramics in the City

Every September for the past 13 years the Geffrye Museum in London's Hoxton has hosted a selling exhibition of contemporary ceramics from promising young ceramicists and more established potters.

This year, many brought playful ideas to traditional techniques, and frivolity to everyday vessels such as mugs and bowls. Some embellished earthen-coloured slipware dishes with modern figurative designs. Others featured text and graphics from advertising. Lucy Foakes encompassed pop

imagery in urns dedicated to artist Jean-Michel Basquiat and musician Kurt Cobain, and ceramic cans decorated with cartoon-like human organs (based on Egyptian canopic jars, these are "metaphorical fizzy drinks for parched pharaohs in the afterlife").

Lucy Foakes' "Ceramic Cans"

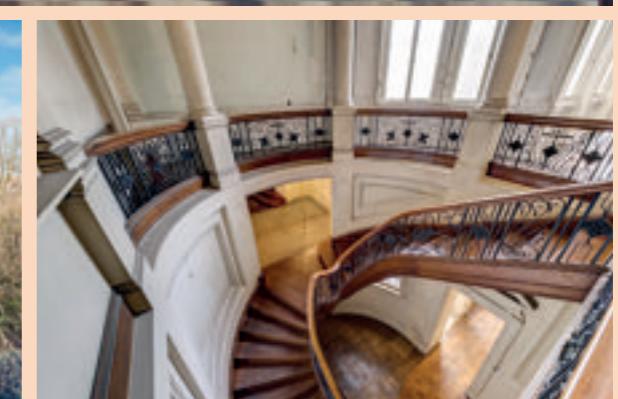
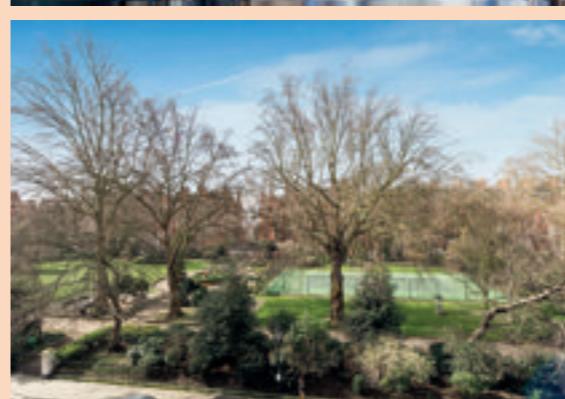
But these more humorous designs don't eclipse the enduring trend for modest, more minimalist styles. Mizuyo Yamashita's tableware takes inspiration from English and French stoneware jars, subtly integrating textures taken from flowers and butterflies using the Japanese Mishima style.

Even more simply, Elliott Denny works a stain of colour into the body of the clay, so it is dispersed subtly throughout his elegantly utilitarian vessels as they are being thrown.

Lily Le Brun

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