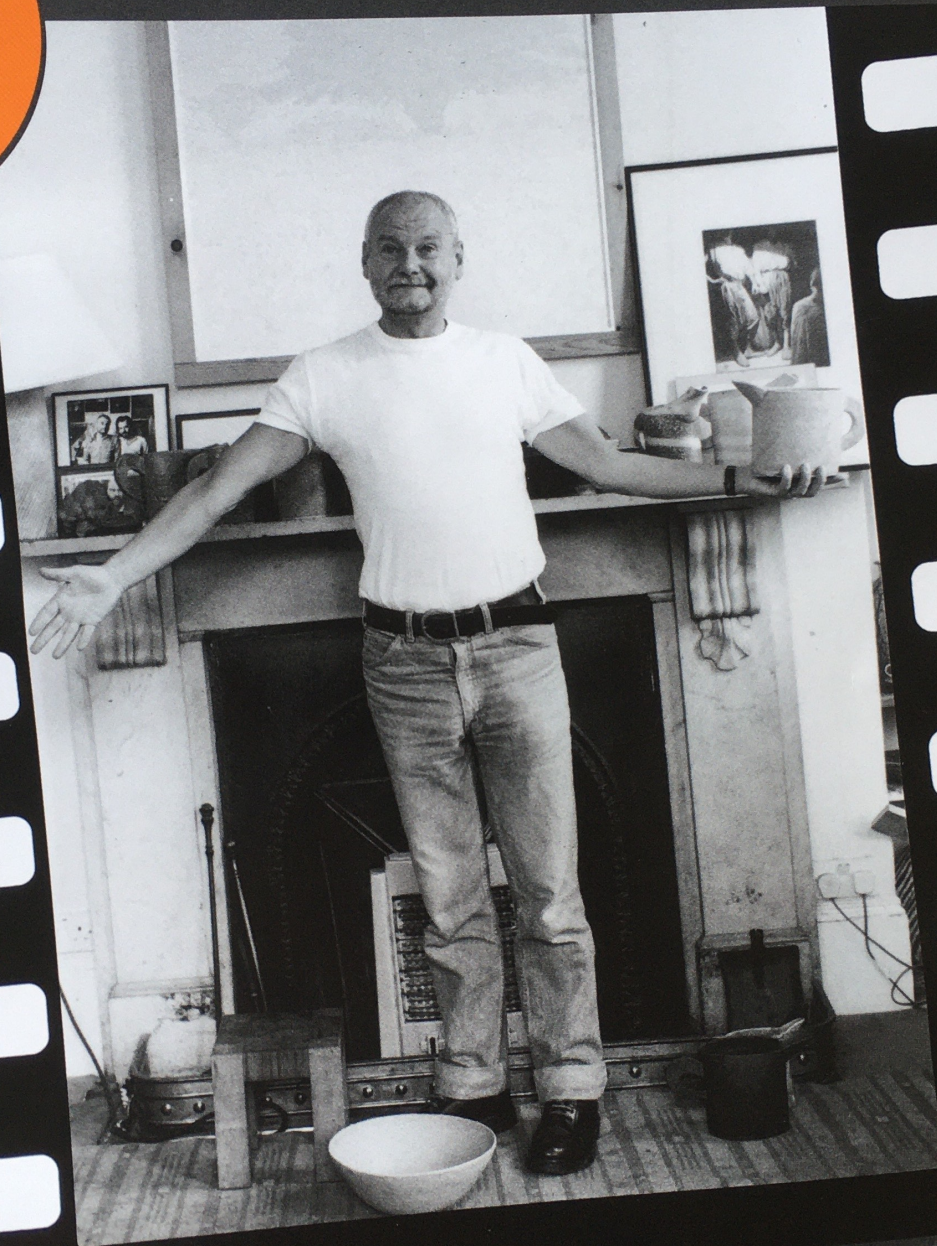


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Potters on pots:

Kerry Jameson

Fascinated by Palissy's aim of capturing life in his work, ceramic artist *Kerry Jameson* explains how discovering the French artist had a profound impact on her sculptures and making practice





My first encounter with Palissy was as a young student at Central Saint Martins when we were let loose with our sketchbooks in the ceramics department at the V&A. At that point in my life, I was still struggling to find my own identity and here before me, among the noisy chattering of so many other objects vying for attention – some screaming and others gently persuading – sat Bernard Palissy, a maker clearly defined by his difference to others.

Born in the 16th century, this French artisan and author contributed to a diverse range of subjects such as natural history, geology and politics. From lowly beginnings he mainly worked as a portrait and glass painter, creating his own legend when he fell in love with a white ceramic cup that he spent 16 years trying to emulate, consuming all his money and energy in the process – including sending his own floorboards and furniture to the kiln. Like most visionaries, he endured poverty and ridicule until he finally developed his *rustique figulines* (rustic pottery), which brought him wealth and influential patrons.

Like the unearthing of Palissy's Parisian workshop during excavations of the Louvre in the mid-1980s, interest in rustic ware has resurfaced over the years resulting in many disciples. It is difficult to find one cast by the hand of the

maker, but The Wallace Collection has work attributed to Palissy. Made in Paris in 1575, this brilliantly infused lead glaze platter (above) demonstrates his glistening custom-made enamels. Cast in high relief it resembles a watery subterranean hollow full of perched frogs, lizards, fish, molluscs and ferns. A snake is coiled at the centre; the uncrowned king of the underworld, its slackened body poised as if an animated serpent lock of filmmaker Ray Harryhausen's *Medusa*. This cast is assembled in suspension between life and death – all is framed within the confines of a domestic plate, hindering any utilitarian function.

Objects have a way of staring back at you, and it wasn't until much later in my career that I reconnected with Palissy and realised how much had remained unseen. Working with a mix of narrative set pieces, tableaux and individual figures, I had started to include other materials into my sculptures. Fighting against the permanent nature of ceramic I wanted to recapture the spontaneity of wet clay – when the medium feels like an extension of your imagination. Frustrated and with many rejections, I started to break my sculptures to bring them back to life. Palissy had also struggled with capturing life. Wanting a likeness that was more profound than a reflection in a mirror, he went to great extremes to compose his clay curiosities.



Like fellow artisans and authors before him, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer, Palissy had a deep connection with his materials. He believed nature had to be known through practising a bodily form of cognition – matter like nature was alive and therefore existed in synergy with the human body. Excellence as an artisan had to be achieved through the observation and imitation of the natural world, which only came about through constant trial and retrial, an understanding that led to a profound and greater knowledge of their materials.

Wanting the truest earthenware representations, Palissy's creatures were cast from actual specimens. Subjects were dipped into urine or vinegar, which temporarily stunned them into silence, making it possible to steal their final gasps of life and give them immortality by entombing them in plaster. Mummified and encased, their earthly life was now fused eternally into the material life of the mould and once cast and fired this served as a record of existence.

In my own practice, that fight to ingrain life into the work, keeping it living and breathing involves many re-edits. Breaking sculptures isn't for the faint-hearted. Standing over a table full of shards tends to induce a feeling of anxiety especially with ingrained ceramic training and an approaching deadline. But that moment of destruction creates opportunities, it unanchors the material and those broken pieces provide the opening from which new situations are invented. Pulling things back together requires labour – physically and mentally – and that fight

stretches the work emotionally. This tug of war gives the work a pulse that perhaps an audience can perceive.

Palissy's moulds, when pieced together, re-enact scenes from the water's edge and capture the complex environments of the shoreline and marshlands. His rock pool basins reconnect us with that first experience of childhood wonder when we stare into rippling water looking for the rare and unexpected against a background of ordinary and commonplace. Hiding between seaweed, pebbles and shells are the creatures that hold secrets to faraway places – these are the relics of the past – resurrected by Palissy with flame and fused in vividly coloured glazes as if their tears had frozen them in a crust of ice.

I have read that life is thought to have originated on the borders, it is here that some of the harshest conditions are endured, but it is only here that things have the highest potential for change. For Palissy life on the borders had generative and transformative powers, holding the key to how nature had been formed. Although the 16 years of failure that galvanised his rustic ware were torturous, without experiment, risk and pushing the boundaries, art remains stagnant. Boundaries represent that which is in and that which is out and those like Palissy that continue to blur and traverse the edge become the masters of survival. ■

Find out more at kerryjameson.com. For enquiries and sales contact Marsden Woo Gallery; marsdenwoo.com