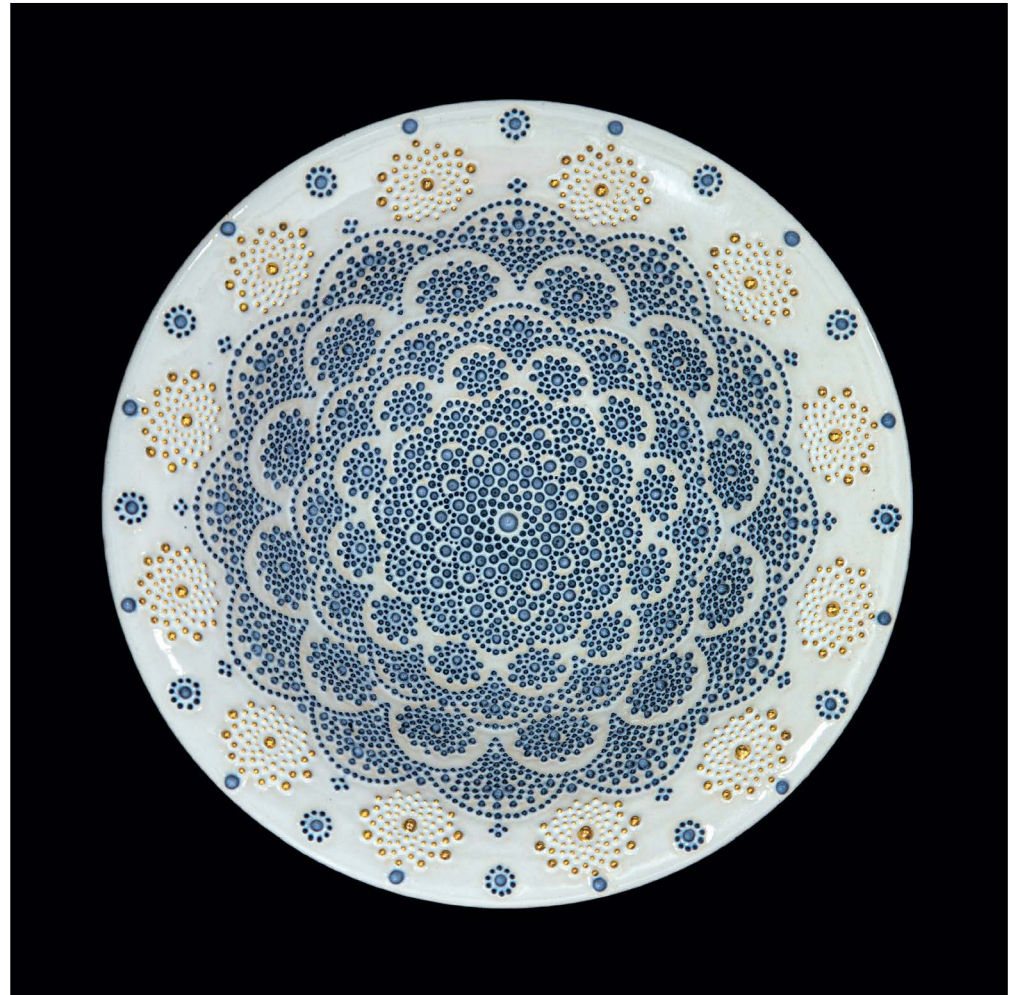




The art of
PERFECTION

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH





*Whitewater Contemporary's new exhibition
is a flawless display of beauty and skill*

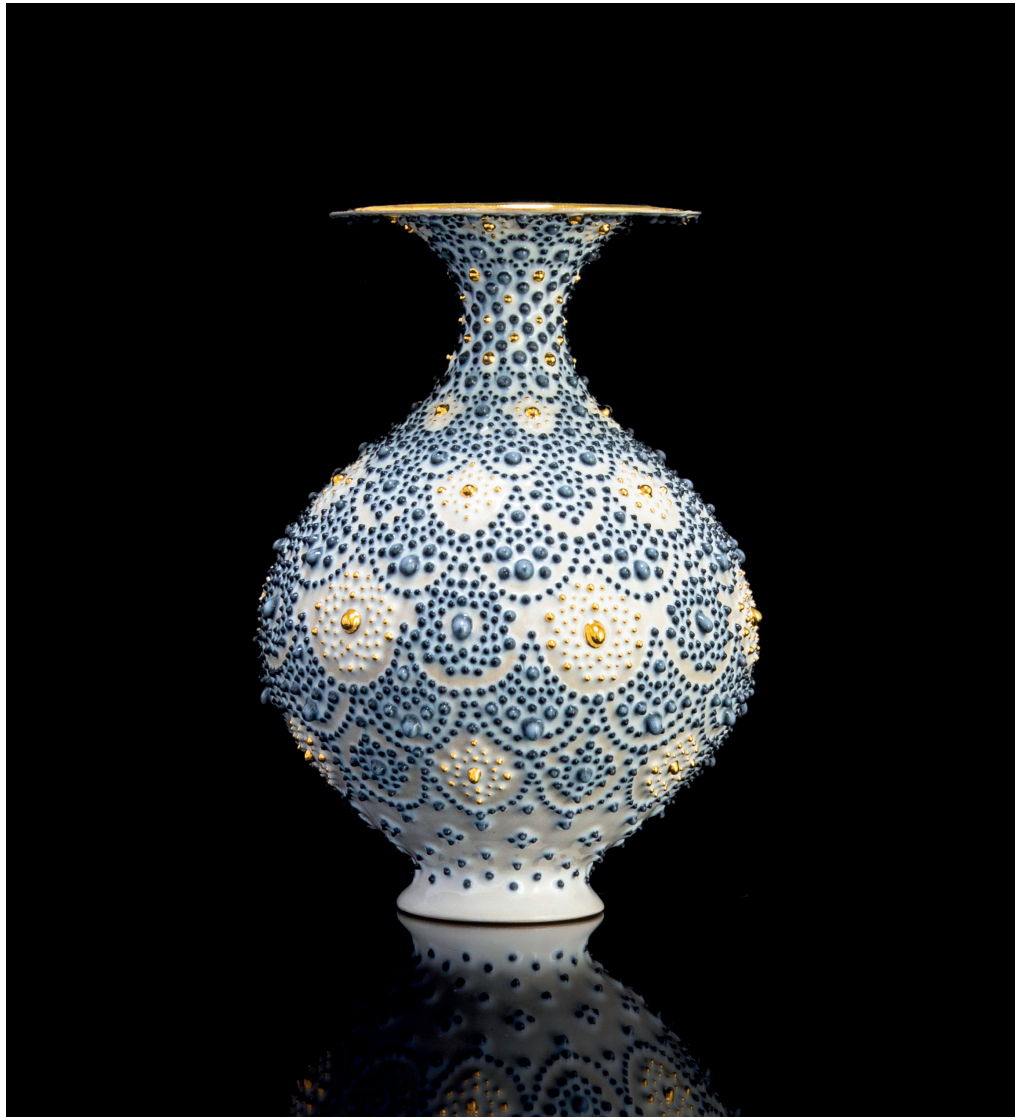
At only 25 years old, Hannah Billingham is still considered to be an emerging artist, but in her first few years as a ceramicist she has already succeeding in defining a unique creative identity and attracting a swathe of collectors. This is all the more impressive when you consider that Hannah is almost completely self-taught: in 2015 she briefly studied Art and Design on a one-year foundation course, but when her ceramics tutor left after just a few weeks, she had to teach herself to throw clay on the wheel. “But I had found my passion,” says Hannah, “and then realising how self-driven I was, I decided to find a local potter to volunteer with and to set up my own business, rather than pursue a degree.”



For a number of years she worked alongside potter Lee Steele, who taught her how to run a studio, how to mix glazes from raw materials and, crucially, gave her the run of his studio so she could develop her own practice. Now, Hannah works from her own studio in the East Riding of Yorkshire, making extraordinarily accomplished work for such a young artist, and she has recently become this year's Prestige Awards Yorkshire Ceramic Artist of the Year. She was also awarded the Gibney Prize for Outstanding Achievement in 2016 and was nominated for the Emerging Artist Award in 2019, making her hot property for collectors of contemporary ceramics.

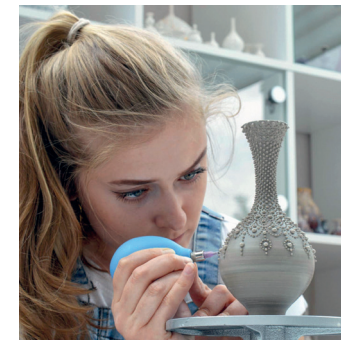
INSET
Hannah Billingham





Hannah's practice combines her passion for clay, glazes and texture with her obsessive love of symmetry. "I struggle with perfectionism and OCD tendencies," she tells me frankly, "so my work is an outlet for that, and also quenches my desire to create. I find many of the processes involved in ceramics both immersive and calming, and working with my hands benefits my mental health." The results of this perfectionism are delicate, hand thrown clay forms that are precision detailed with an intricate surface of raised dots, created in naturally occurring patterns that emerge from Hannah's subconscious as she works. This gives them what she calls "significant therapeutic value" as the clay is transformed into beautiful artworks defined by rhythmic patterns. "My surface decorations were originally inspired by patterns in nature, such as coral and sea life," she says. "As my work has developed further, I have found I am more inspired by the properties of the clay itself and its boundaries, as well as the patterns and shapes my subconscious creates when I am deep in concentration. The forms themselves are inspired by both historical and contemporary pottery. I'm always sketching new ideas. I'll often throw a completely new shape on the wheel and think I've come up with it on the spot, but there will probably be a drawing somewhere in an old sketchbook. It's amazing how the subconscious mind works."

Each of Hannah's works is made entirely through the precision of hand and eye, and they can take months to create from start to finish. "I start by wedging clay and throwing a form on the potter's wheel. After a day or two, the piece will have dried to the 'leather hard' stage and then goes back on the wheel for turning." Turning – or trimming – is the process of shaving off ribbons of clay to remove excess weight and refine the shape. "I have a little obsession with making the pot's walls as thin as possible, while still giving it the structural integrity needed to



withstand later firings," she adds. The decoration of each piece is the next stage, with dots added through a process called 'slip trailing'. "I pipe tiny dots of liquid clay onto the surface, completely freehand," says Hannah. "This is the most time-consuming part of my working processes, and it can take days to complete one piece.

The moisture levels in the clay are vital at this stage: if the clay is too dry, the dots do not adhere to the surface, but if the walls become too saturated with moisture the pot can collapse. It's a tricky balance as the slip itself adds moisture back into the clay walls as they fuse to one another."

The piece is then left to dry out completely to a bone dry stage, and then "once I have built up a big enough collection, the pots go into the kiln for their first firing, to around 1000C. This transforms the clay into a state that can no longer be broken back

INSET
The painstaking process
of piping the dots



down into clay. However, the walls are still porous – which is vital for the next stage.” Next is glazing the piece, a scientifically complicated process that requires a great deal of specialist skill and knowledge. “Glaze chemistry plays a large part in my work, and there are complexities to the art of glazing that most people aren’t aware of,” says Hannah. “I can spend months testing and developing glazes from raw materials, to enhance my delicate textured surfaces. Both the visual and chemical changes that occur with glazes absolutely fascinate me.” Once she has created and refined a glaze, she dips, brushes or sprays it onto each piece. “Each glaze behaves differently, so it is vital that it’s applied correctly, to achieve the colour and quality I want.” The kiln is then fired up a second time to around 1200C, for glaze firing. Finally, some pieces are decorated with 24ct gold or Mother of Pearl lustre, delicately hand painted onto the surface and then fired for a third time, to around 800C. “That’s not high enough to re-melt the glaze,” Hannah explains, “but it’s hot enough to burn off the additional resin in the lustre, so the gold or mother of pearl is fused with the surface.”

The unique process that Hannah has developed within her practice reflects the way that potters today are constantly reinventing their ancient art form.

It continues to be a discipline with endless potential. “21st century ceramic artists use the same techniques to craft objects as would have been the case for most of human history,” says Hannah, “but now we are taking advantage of modern technologies and approaches to create amazing new works. When I took my first workshop in ceramics, I fell in love with the vast array of techniques there are to explore. Now, I push the materials I use to their limits, creating artworks which look like they couldn’t possibly have been created by hand, and yet

this is exactly the case. I strive to make pieces that evoke a reaction in the viewer through their precision and ethereal appearance, and I find comfort in the repetitive, labour-intensive processes that my work demands. There is always a certain level of unpredictability when firing glazeware, which is a huge contrast to the



rest of my processes, but the combination of obsessive control in the first stages, and then surrendering to the fluctuating nature of firings, keeps me completely transfixed.”

See Hannah Billingham’s new collection from 1st to 30th July 2022 at Whitewater Contemporary, The Parade, Polzeath, PL27 6SR.

 whitewatercontemporary.co.uk

 hannahbillinghamart.co.uk