

# Elemental relationships

In preparation for a new solo show touring Wales, Paul Wearing has been experimenting with glazes and textures to take his practice to the next level. *Ceri Jones* discovers more







**ABOVE LEFT:** *Tilt Ellipse*, stoneware, multiple slips and glazes, H31 x W33 x D22 **ABOVE RIGHT:** *Tilt Ellipse*, H36 x W32 x D18 **RIGHT:** *Extend Ellipses*, H27 & 29 x W19 x D30

Paul Wearing's making is on the move, through landscapes, time, emotional and physical states. His work leans, lifts, erupts and melts. It is evocative and sensual, in its making and its viewing. Wearing's experiences inform the physicality of his work and our own predilections will further shape what we experience from it. His making is motivated by how he feels being in the landscape, being part of his surroundings. While these surroundings will have a particular look at a particular moment; be it stormy or calm, bright or brooding, it is his sense of being within that environment that is fundamental to Wearing's creative process.

Immersing himself in the landscape and its climate has emotional and physical effects that he invests in his creative practice. The volcanic terrain of Lanzarote, the shifting atmospherics of Iceland and the tilting strata of Wales' Ceredigion coastline all resonate in his ceramic forms. So too does the vulnerability of exposure to the elements, the awe of peering upwards from beneath a jagged cliff face or the contemplation of a shimmering horizon. 'We're not separate from nature, we are nature,' muses Wearing as he handles one of his latest pieces. The physical character of his work evolves and grows as lichen does in ancient woodland. It takes time, natural components and the right atmospherics.

Over the past couple of years, Wearing has been working towards a solo show entitled *Flux and Poise*. The horizon has changed during that course and challenged his focus at times. The influence for his making is so deep-rooted however, that this new body of work is firmly anchored in the observations and considerations he has nurtured for decades. Through making, he explores the human condition in relation to nature. For Wearing, vessels are representative of people, illustrative of civilisation, and naturally evocative. The organic forms and surfaces he renders have qualities that are characteristic of our natural world and expressive of our sentient relationship to it.

#### GLAZING CHALLENGE

Our most recent chat is via screens but it still effervesces with enthusiasm as Wearing shares his delight over glaze test success. At last, and, inevitably, on the final straight of making before his imminent solo show opens, he has achieved a pale hue to his most volcanic of glazes. The test piece is steadied close to the camera and, even in 2D, I can discern the familiar texture of an erupted surface. Instead of dark shades of green and black, a light, bright aquamarine wraps around the test vessel. It is exciting to be privy to a new reveal, to the alchemy of glaze behaviour. Wearing's tenacity in developing, testing, tweaking, challenging and

mixing glazes, then testing again, is impressive. It pays off too. He has found what he was looking for, a softer palette to bring some calm.

As a child growing up, Wearing enjoyed a strong connection with nature, which has now come to be embodied in his creative practice. His work is personal, it expresses his feelings and responses to how we interrelate with nature. He experiments with glazes and oxides to build a tactile palette; he is interested in how the surfaces feel. Dry brushed oxides including iron, copper, cobalt, vanadium and manganese are used, dolomite glaze adds layers and a bright green pocket might erupt from a barium glaze. Wearing has been working with these volatile glazes since his undergraduate degree, though his use of them has altered over the years. In the past, he rendered texture onto surfaces with tools. Now the texture is rendered wholly through the application of glazes and chemical processes during the firing. For Wearing this feels more authentic, a natural reaction perhaps, rather than a man-made effect.

Movement, light and texture are each key influences. When making figurative work, years previously, there was dynamic movement through the forms, visceral and urgent. That pace has calmed but the dramatisation has not. The effects created by glazes sliding and venting across the clay bodies of his vessels is intense and striking.

*The physical character of his work evolves and grows as lichen does in ancient woodland. It takes time, natural components and the right atmospherics*

They contrast beautifully with the flatter, gradated colours across the elliptical breadth of some of his works. These palettes of slips, oxides and glazes alter in tone as light moves across them. The shifting light of skies or the craggy depths of chasms captured within them, a natural state of flux that Wearing strives to evoke.

#### MEMORIES AND INFLUENCES

An important influence during Wearing's degree was being introduced to Geoffrey Swindell's work. He recalls being 'blown away by what Geoff was achieving,' being inspired as much by the precision of form as by the surfaces created. Swindell has been a welcome, technical mentor

Images: courtesy of the artist; Dewi Tannat-Lloyd



## WEARING'S JOURNEY

- **2000:** BA (Hons) Ceramics, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff; co-founded Elements Studio and Gallery in Cardiff
- **2001:** setting-up grant, Arts Council of Wales
- **2002:** *Welsh Artist of the Year Craft Prize*
- **2003:** MA Ceramics, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
- **2007:** joined Fireworks Clay Studios, Cardiff
- **2016:** Selected Member of the Craft Potters Association (CPA); elected member of the CPA Governing Council, 2018
- **2017:** *Ceramics in the City*, Geffrye Museum
- **2018:** *Relic*, Bluecoat Display Centre; *Jus de Ceramique* at Keramiekcentrum Tiendschur Tegelen, Netherlands; *Lasting Impressions*, National Craft & Design Gallery, Kilkenny and Ruthin Craft Centre
- **2019:** *Art of Wales*, Oita, Japan; *David Tress painting*, Paul Wearing ceramics, The Albany Gallery, Cardiff; Yorkshire Sculpture Park showcase
- **2020:** *Counterpoint*, Sladers Yard, Bridport
- **2021-2022:** *Flux and Poise*, travelling exhibition in Wales

He has also been a regular exhibitor at *Ceramic Art London* and *Art in Clay*, among many other fairs in the UK and Europe



**BELOW:** *Cylinders*, stoneware, multiple slips and glazes, H19, 14 & 10 x W15cm

during the development of this latest body of work. The honed aesthetics of painters such as Kyffin Williams and Joseph Turner also influence him. So too do the elegant ceramics of Jennifer Lee and Jack Doherty. The eloquence of these artists in manifesting natural environments so evocatively is a tangible inspiration for Wearing's practice.


Ever present in his studio and a constant, possibly unconscious, resource is his collection of pet rocks, as he affectionately refers to them. He curbed his modest collecting some years ago, mindful of pick-pocketing nature. His rocks are not only treasured and widely varied but they also hold experiences for Wearing, physical and emotional memories of places and activities. When he is working in his studio, such direct reminders of time spent out in the landscape affect his making.

Wearing's studio is in the dynamic Fireworks Clay Studios in Cardiff city centre. Its collective energy and supportive eco-system can help buoy creative journeys. Now one of the directors, he has been a member of Fireworks since 2007, yet he joined during what he refers to as his 'wilderness years.' After completing his MA in Ceramics in 2004, he sold his kiln and embarked on a library management course, believing he would never make again. His MA year had been an intensive one that dashed his confidence in his making. Deconstructing and questioning all he had come to know about his practice proved to be creatively destructive. It took him a long time to realise the value of what he had learnt and to process such a forensic experience. It wasn't until 2011, after a visit to St Ives, that Wearing re-engaged with ceramics and started making in his Fireworks studio.

He has always been a handbuilder. He fondly remembers his first encounter with clay, while at primary school. His mum still has the press-moulded, terracotta house that

he built in sections and glued together. A weekend class in Swansea introduced him to coiling techniques and, despite trialling numerous other processes through college years, coiling is still the foundation of his making. Literally. He now hand-rolls, rather than extrudes, coils, which gives him greater control over their weight and thickness. The bases of his vessels are weighted just enough to allow them to lean, stretch and balance. Building in this way enables him to achieve angles in his pieces that he often counterpoints by presenting them in pairs or groupings.

## MAKING EVOLUTION

This new body of work charts a journey of exploration. It reveals something of the process of spending time observing and walking the Ceredigion coast specifically. It was a conscious activity that had a dramatic effect on Wearing's spirit, energising him physically and creatively. *Flux and Poise* marks an evolution in his making; from wide, elliptical, painterly surfaces to tilting, dark and encrusted forms. It is a vivid development that exemplifies the sensual experience that making is. His sentient approach and new-found confidence in his studio practice reveal an energy in his vessels that is on the move. 

For details visit [paulwearingceramics.com](http://paulwearingceramics.com); *Flux and Poise*, Ruthin Craft Centre, dates tbc, [ruthincraftcentre.org.uk](http://ruthincraftcentre.org.uk); Aberystwyth Ceramic Gallery, 27 March–6 June 2021, [ceramics-aberystwyth.com](http://ceramics-aberystwyth.com); Llantarnam Grange Arts Centre, Cwmbran, 3 July–28 August 2021, [lgac.org.uk](http://lgac.org.uk); Mission Gallery, Swansea, 22 January–12 March 2022; [missiongallery.co.uk](http://missiongallery.co.uk)