

Clay Matters

Ceramics has long occupied a marginal position within the visual arts, often relegated to the realms of craft and applied art. Yet the medium possesses an age-old tradition of both functional and artistic significance. Over the past decades, artists have rediscovered and reinvented this material, allowing ceramics to emerge today as a fully-fledged and versatile medium within contemporary art: at once ancient and current, fragile and powerful, sensual and conceptual.

The appeal of ceramics lies in the direct physical relationship between maker and material: clay is malleable, resistant, and alive, carrying within it the traces of its own making. This tactile quality is used by artists to give tangible form to themes such as identity, nature, spirituality, and politics, and reflects a broader shift within the art world in which attention to material, process, and sustainability has become central.

Clay Matters approaches ceramics as a living, thinking material and brings together artists who each engage with the medium in their own way: from poetic, mythical, and organic approaches to conceptual and sculptural experiments. Alongside artists closely associated with the gallery, such as Luca Monterastelli, Valgerður Sigurðardóttir, Clara Spilliaert, Koen Theys, and Patrick Van Caeckenbergh, guest artists include Justine Grillet, Cameron Jamie, Pei-Hsuan Wang, and Johan Creten. Creten is regarded as a pioneer who secured ceramics a prominent place within contemporary visual art, and thus forms an important reference point within this project.

The exhibition is not conceived as an overview of individual practices but as a spatial dialogue in which works question and contextualize one another. Between the contributions, a field of resonances emerges in which ceramics moves between extremes: between tactility and idea, between the intimate gesture and public meaning, without resolving these oppositions.

Clay Matters brings together intersecting approaches. There is a strong presence of the narrative and the animated: figurative and organic forms that refer to myth, body, and ritual, evoking a world in which human, animal, and hybrid entities merge. In the work of, among others, Van Caeckenbergh, Grillet, Jamie, Spilliaert, and Sigurðardóttir, clay functions as a memory of gestures and stories, in which archetypal references and personal mythologies converge.

At the same time, this materiality is deployed in a more conceptual and critical way. Artists such as Theys, Monterastelli, and Wang use the medium to question systems of representation, identity, power, and context, with sculptures functioning as carriers of ideas: restructuring space, disturbing perception, and challenging the conventional role of the object.

Johan Creten moves effortlessly between these positions. He underscores how porous these approaches are and demonstrates how the sensual and the conceptual do not exclude one another but instead reinforce each other. What *Clay Matters* makes clear is that ceramics is never a singular medium. It is matter and bearer of meaning, craft and concept, body and idea. The exhibition shows how clay not only forms, but also disrupts, interprets, and generates ideas. In the interplay between hand and material, between physical presence and conceptual resonance, a space emerges in which ceramics reveals itself as a dynamic and critical medium: one that does not ask to be understood through a single logic, but invites experimentation, imagination, and dialogue.

By bringing together diverse approaches, *Clay Matters* makes visible how rich and versatile ceramics can be. The medium reflects cultural histories and renders contemporary questions tangible, while continuously responding, challenging, and

transforming. At a time when images increasingly circulate detached from their physical carrier, clay also recalls another temporality: slow, resistant, and unpredictable.

Johan Creten (°1963, Sint-Truiden, Belgium) presents in *Clay Matters* a selection of works around *C'est dans ma nature*, a key project in which his innovative approach to ceramics and his socially critical engagement converge. The presentation includes a photographic collage referring to the original performance, one of ten mobile metal structures with ceramic wall elements in Sèvres stoneware, and a gilded bronze version of the work. By combining bas-reliefs in clay with movable structures of brick-like panels, Creten transforms the wall from a static architectural element into a mobile and symbolic object. The expressive, almost naturalistic reliefs function as metaphors for identity, territoriality, and interculturality, themes central to his oeuvre. The works on view also demonstrate the radicality with which Creten uses ceramics as a sculptural medium that is both poetic and politically charged. In the photographic collage *The Gate*, Creten likewise expresses his social engagement, making mechanisms of exclusion and intolerance visible through subtle but powerful interventions in public space.

Justine Grillet (°1998, Antwerp, Belgium) develops a practice at the intersection of sculpture, performance, sound, and ritual, in which the preparation and sharing of food becomes a fundamental form of connection and transformation. For Grillet, the everyday act of cooking and eating contains a form of contemporary “witchcraft”: an animated practice in which care, poetry, and embodied experience converge. Her work is grounded in a strong affinity with craft and material, rooted in her sculptural training at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, but evolved during a residency in Iceland toward a more performative and ritual approach in which voice and body also became sculptural elements. In *Clay Matters*, this vision appears in works that approach ceramics as a living, sensory medium connected to action, presence, and community. Between object, ritual, and theatre, Grillet creates a universe in which wonder and collective experience are central.

Cameron Jamie (°1969, Los Angeles, United States) has developed a multifaceted practice since the 1990s at the intersection of drawing, sculpture, performance, film, and music, exploring the mythological and ritual structures of popular and folk cultures. This exhibition focuses on his ceramic practice, presenting a recent sculpture and two wall works. Jamie, who was trained in ceramics early in his education, approaches clay as an extension of his graphic and sculptural language. His organically modeled forms, built through successive additions, firing processes, and glazes, move between the figurative and the formless, the anthropomorphic and the animal. The works display rich surfaces of lava-like colors and ethereal markings derived from his automatic drawing practice. Between totem, landscape, and inner projection, these ceramic works demonstrate how Jamie merges conventional and experimental approaches, expanding the discourse on ceramics.

Luca Monterastelli (°1983, Forlimpopoli, Italy) presents three terracotta reliefs in *Clay Matters* that continue his investigation of bas-relief as a “political technology of the body,” a line of research developed in projects such as *La Tempesta*. In these new works, he departs from the historical charge of monumental relief—an imagery used in rationalist and fascist architecture to order and control collective bodies—but subverts that logic from within. The compositions still carry the monumentality of classical relief but refuse to resolve into a readable or coherent whole; the monument fails in its own authority. Where earlier works showed external intervention, disruption now emerges from the material itself: the clay cracks and deforms during release from the 3D-printed negative, so that the “injury” of the image is not added but produced by the process. The reliefs thus become not carriers of power, but of rupture and resistance, where the body is both subject and breaking point of representation.

Valgerður Sigurðardóttir (°1992, Reykjavík, Iceland) presents two recent ceramic works in which a playful, intuitive visual language is combined with an underlying seriousness concerning femininity, mythology, and cosmology. Her sculptures loosely reference art-historical icons, astrological systems, and folklore, merging personal and universal narratives. In *Venus in Libra*, echoes of Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, and Manet's *Olympia* are combined with astrological symbolism of Libra and the planet Venus, associated with love, harmony, and transition. The work situates itself in a moment of tension and anticipation, as if a new existence or identity is about to emerge. In *Whisper*, this emotional world is further developed in an intimate, ambiguous scene in which a hand within an aureole appears to awaken a child, while whispering female figures hover between care, memory, and potential threat. Together, the works show how Sigurðardóttir uses ceramics as an embodied medium in which myth, emotion, and psychological tension converge.

Clara Spilliaert (°1993, Tokyo, Japan) develops her work for *Clay Matters* from personal and mythological narratives around birth, family, and transformation. The sculptures *Peach* and *Bamboo* (2024) were created during a period in which her sister's pregnancy was central, also leading to the exhibition *My Sister is Pregnant* at Kunsthal Gent. *Peach* is inspired by the rounded form of the Japanese horse chestnut, which Spilliaert associated with a pregnant belly, but also refers to the Japanese folklore of Momotarō, the "peach boy" born from a giant peach. In *Bamboo*, she continues this fascination with birth myths through the story of Princess Kaguya (the Moon Princess), one of the oldest Japanese myths, in which an old man discovers a glowing bamboo stalk that, when cut open, contains a small girl. Spilliaert's ceramic practice thus connects intimate experiences with folkloric imagination, where organic forms and plant motifs become symbols of fertility, growth, and genesis.

Koen Theys (°1963, Brussels, Belgium) investigates how Western visual traditions and cultural icons can be deconstructed and reread in relation to contemporary social tensions. In *The Wall of Man*, this research takes the form of twelve ceramic faces, complemented by a separately presented face, together forming a fragile "wall" of human types. Theys uses techniques such as doubling, shifting, and distortion to gradually undermine the recognizability of the face, rendering identity both legible and unstable. The work reflects on how group formation and collective identity function, and how the individual relates to or is subjected to them. By isolating one face from the group each day during the exhibition, the logic of the mass is literally dismantled, shifting attention toward the fragility of individual representation within a collective structure.

Patrick Van Caeckenbergh (°1960, Aalst, Belgium) presents in *Clay Matters* a never-before-seen series of clay sculptures and works on paper titled *Design for Vases*, originating in the mid-1990s. These small works mark a pivotal moment in his oeuvre, in which his fascination with cyclical processes in nature and human existence becomes increasingly evident. Starting from an ecological perspective—growth, consumption, decay, and rebirth—the works unite three fundamental elements of life: animal, plant, and object. Root-like forms, human figures, and vase-like structures merge into hybrid beings reminiscent of the mandrake, the mythological root plant with human features. The works also refer to the vernacular tradition of terracotta wall planters and to Van Caeckenbergh's ongoing interest in folklore, corporeality, and transformation. As experimental models, these *Design for Vases* directly led to a series of large clay sculptures produced between 1995 and 1997, now considered key works in his oeuvre. They offer a rare insight into the emergence of a visual language in which autobiography, ecology, and imagination converge organically.

Pei-Hsuan Wang (°1989, Taipei, Taiwan) explores how identity is shaped by migration, family history, and cultural transmission. Starting from the diasporic experience of her family's migration from Taiwan to the United States, she weaves personal memory together with East Asian mythology, folklore, and geopolitical reflection. Her sculptures and installations bring together narratives of origin, transformation, and kinship in a visual language where each object carries symbolic meaning. In *Family Portrait (Altar)*, Wang refers to the altar as a site where memory, ritual, and generations of

a family converge. The installation is populated by twelve ceramic zodiac sculptures that function simultaneously as symbolic figures and offerings, evoking a cyclical understanding of time and cosmos. Rotating ribbons, inspired by traditional incense burners, introduce movement and evoke the invisible connection between past, present, and future. Together, the ceramic objects form a space of care, memory, and exchange, linking family history to broader questions of continuity, change, and cultural identity.

Koen Leemans

Opening Saturday, June 27, 2–6 PM

The exhibition will be on view from June 27 to August 29, 2026