

One giant leap for ceramics



Ceramics education has declined in recent years and with it the national body that guided its cause. *Tony Quinn*, course leader at Central Saint Martins, believes it's time to give higher education a reboot and open up the ceramic community to more opportunities

For many years in what might be described as the heyday of ceramics degree level education, NACHE (the National Association of Ceramics in Higher Education) acted as the subject association that guided an affiliation of art schools, which were also driven by their connection to clay. It acted as a discussion platform and an ideas hub, hosting conferences and the exhibition *Ceramic Contemporaries* at the V&A in 1993, then later the *FRESH* exhibition at the *British Ceramics Biennial (BCB)*. At its height it had nearly 40 affiliated institutions.

In the last ten years or more however, NACHE has witnessed the progressive decline of the subject at higher education level. Factors such as cost of provision and the failure to grow or recruit new students compelled higher education institutions to close many successful courses. The tutors who had previously been working together on national collaborations found themselves in a very real local fight to save courses and preserve the subject. As course after course closed, mirrored by factory after factory, an unequivocal and entrenched discourse grew. One of a subject and industry in terminal decline. Once the rhetoric of decline was set, it effectively became self-fulfilling.

POPULAR CERAMICS

If you think about it, the idea of formal accredited ceramic education is a relatively new one. People have been working with clay for nearly 30,000 years and as a consequence teaching each other by the passing on of skills through demonstration and discussion. You didn't need a certificate to show you were good at it. You could tell that from looking at the pot, handling, touching and using it. As

a course leader, I am not suggesting that we don't need higher level ceramic education, however I am saying that it is only one facet of a healthy subject. It's time to reboot the rhetoric and adopt a more inclusive and celebratory discourse. Okay, let's try.


At present there are only two single honours ceramic degrees left in the UK, however there are a number of multi-disciplinary degrees with ceramic provision across the country. I can state with some confidence that ceramics is more popular than ever, more diverse, more open to all, more accessible and more egalitarian. There are more people learning to throw, handbuild, press mould, slip-cast, coil and glaze than ever before.

We have witnessed a sharp increase in popularity, in part due to events such as the *BCB*, *Ceramic Art London (CAL)* and *The Great Pottery Throw Down* on TV. Alongside this there has been a surge in community clay studios who use a subscription model, such as the Kiln Rooms and Turning Earth in London, the Clay Shed in Bristol and the Clay Studio in Manchester, to name just a few, plus private pottery classes abound in individual studios all over the country. The caveat here is that there is still a requirement to reach everybody, to allow access to the subject without payment. In the last ten years the Crafts Council's Firing Up and Make your Future projects have sought to reintroduce the subject into the curriculum.

I have been expounding this theory for some time now. Towards the end of the *BCB* in 2017, we held an education summit calling together educators from within the sector, of which a number were what we might describe as lapsed NACHE members, but also including representatives of group studios, individual makers, the Crafts Council and The Council for Higher Education in Art & Design (CHEAD). The simple aim was to test the theory about a more open, diverse ceramics community and probe how we might sustain it. There was an overwhelming desire to move forward with a more representative 'broad church', one that might offer different layers of access and community depending on your role and support a range of views and needs. Since then I have made a number of speeches at the opening of *CAL* 2019, the *Restating Clay Conference* at CoCA in 2018, and the *BCB* awards evening in 2019, proposing we adopt a new celebratory message and move towards a more open ceramic community.

A CALL TO ACTION

The future of the subject has to be in the creation of an inclusive community, one that supports participation, endeavour, craftsmanship and acquisition of knowledge. A community that can advocate for the subject with a coherent and universal voice. So, it is in this context that we propose to relaunch NACHE as The National Association of Ceramic Educators (NACE). The intention being to reflect this broadening definition of what education means and of who is an educator.

I'll leave the last word on the subject to Helen Felcey, the existing chair of NACHE: 'We are a community of people who believe that clay is an essential part of arts education in a healthy, progressive society. We want to establish the association to drive this mission forward, developing new mechanisms for enabling the network. We begin with a strong and fervent commitment from individuals and organisations, embracing ideas and learning opportunities, which shape our lives. So please join us if you support our vision.' 

If you are interested in participating and joining the community, contact info@NACCeramicEducators.org

NACE proposes the following mission:



- **SUPPORT AND PROMOTE** the diversity of ceramic education from individuals to institutions
- **ENSURE** that everybody has the opportunity to experience a material-based transformative education
- **ADVOCATE** for teaching with clay across the entire curriculum from Key Stage 1&2, GCSE, A-level, FE, HE to lifelong learning
- **COMMIT** to the teaching and sharing of specialist knowledge
- **INITIATE AND SUSTAIN** local and national networks for the growth of the subject
- **CELEBRATE** diversity of professional practices through conferences, exhibitions and competitions



COMMUNITY VOICES

Tony Quinn asked other members of the wider ceramics community their views too. Here is a selection...

'CERAMICS HAS SEEN A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN OPPORTUNITIES OF INFORMAL LEARNING AND MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY-ENGAGED INITIATIVES, WHICH HIGHLIGHT A NEED AND WANT FROM A WIDER PUBLIC. IT IS VITAL THAT ACCESSIBILITY IS CHAMPIONED AND SUSTAINABLE FOR THE ENGAGED COMMUNITIES AND FOR THE MAKERS INVOLVED.'

RHIANNON EWING-JAMES, CERAMIC ARTIST

'Making, specifically with clay, offers points of creative and cultural access to concepts, analogies and metaphors difficult to access in any other way. This experience is invaluable to people of different backgrounds, generations and cultures, whether amateur or expert and at whatever point in life. There is a growth of interest by students and makers to share their knowledge of the ceramic process in diverse community settings to support such agendas as health and wellbeing.'

Duncan Hooson, creative director, Clayground Collective

'The positivity and abundance of routes into ceramics is currently high and lots of people feel welcome to try their hand with clay, which is fantastic. However, I'm concerned about the price that people have to pay to have regular access. Degrees are too expensive and the cost of adult education rises every year. As interesting as places like Turning Earth and The Kiln Rooms are, one needs to have disposable cash to commit to a model like that.'

Matt Raw, ceramic artist

'Those of us who have the skills need to share them and be open to people learning. Give away more than you expect in return and we'll lead the development of our craft and

see the fruition of our passion. Push from the front, learn from the new generation, share. Without guidance it can go wayward, so I implore all makers, open your doors from time to time, not to sell but to teach and to learn, we are stronger as a community and it is imperative that those who have been given the gifts of good teaching, pass them on, make a good run a great one and bring quality work with quality thought to the fore.'

Stuart Carey, The Kiln Rooms

'CERAMICS IS BECOMING AN ESSENTIAL CREATIVE THINKING TOOL WITHIN WIDER STUDENT LEARNING, NURTURING A HIGH LEVEL OF MANUAL SKILL AND ILLUMINATING THE POSSIBILITIES OF MATERIAL AGENCY IN OTHER SUBJECT AREAS. ITS MATERIAL VERNACULAR IS IMMENSE. IT IS PRECISELY THIS CAPACITY FOR INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY THAT UNDERPINS MANY OF THE RICH AND DIVERSE COMMUNITY-BASED PRACTICES EMERGING ACROSS THE UK SUCH AS HAPTIC/TACIT, COLLECTIVE MATTER AND CLAYGROUND COLLECTIVE.'

NATASHA MAYO, CARDIFF METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

'The proliferation of ceramic studios offering access to facilities and learning opportunities is further evidence of the continued and growing interest and popularity in engaging with ceramics. The moment is good, the energy, enthusiasm, interest, profile and conviction of value now gives forward momentum that can be maintained, accelerated and deployed in order to address areas of most urgent need to secure the long-term future vitality of the ceramics community.'

Barney Hare Duke, artistic director, BCB