

HEIRLOOMS OF THE FUTURE

NICHOLAS LEES

*The ceramic artist talks to **Dominique Corlett**
about new ways of working with clay
and blurring the edges of solid objects*



*Black and White
Orbits, 2023,
Parian porcelain
and black porcelain.*



LEFT Nicholas at work in his studio. **BELOW** *Four Leaning Vessels*, 2015. These are some of his earliest lathe-turned pieces for which he won the Cersaie Prize.

Among the accolades picked up by artist Nicholas Lees over his 32-year career in ceramics is an impressive list of museums that have acquired his work. From Chichester and Chippenham, to the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge and York Art Gallery, to leading ceramics museums in Germany and Italy and as far afield as Auckland, New Zealand, Nicholas's work can be found in public collections around the world.

But it wasn't until his solo show at Petersfield Museum and Art Gallery in November last year, which showcased some of his new work, that the hoped-for knock on the door came from the Victoria & Albert Museum. 'The V&A is the big one for a UK ceramics artist,' Nicholas says. 'So that was kind of a lifetime goal achieved.'

The piece bought by the V&A was *Red/Blue Orbit*, 2023, a 16.5cm-high spherical vessel made in Parian porcelain and coloured with soluble cobalt and gold. The piece is typical of the lathe-turned work that Nicholas is now producing, having spent the last 12 years on its development. With its spherical form, framed with a foot

and a mouth, the piece has the familiarity of round pots made by human hands across cultures and millennia. But what's different is what is going on in the space between those framing bookends, as instead of the expected solid clay form, the body of this pot appears to be alive with shimmering energy.

Nicholas has been making the orbits for around 18 months and interest in them exceeds anything he has made previously. 'The orbits have this movement around them, this sort of aura of an object and this sense of life,' he says. 'They feel like they are spinning, which is interesting because they spin a lot in the making – it's almost like an echo of that process is perceptible in the finished piece.'

Nicholas's journey to making his lathe-turned pieces began in 2010 when, after hitting a crossroads in his working life, he decided to make some changes. For the previous decade he had been a senior lecturer in ceramics at Bath

Spa University, something he had done alongside producing his own work. But while he always loved teaching, he found the growing demands of the job meant he was finding less time for making.

The institution was going through big change and when the ceramics BA was axed, he knew it was time to go. 'I had a kind of, "Right, that's it, I want to be an artist" moment, and resigned,' he says. Knowing he could support himself with part-time teaching, he applied for a two-year MPhil at the Royal College of Art as a 'framework within which to develop a new body of work'. 'I wanted to reboot my practice, which had become a bit static,' he explains.

Nicholas wanted to come up with some new forms, and he threw himself into exploring this, relishing the freedom the course gave him 'just to play and experiment'. 'Thresholds and boundaries have always been of interest in my work,' he says, and he found himself contemplating shadows and their blurred edges. 'I wanted to create something of that uncertainty of edge, in clay.'

He spent the next few months 'trying to make clay be half there'. 'I was trying various different ways



Red/Blue Orbit, 2023, which was acquired by the V&A. **LEFT** *Black/White Diptych*, 2021. Over recent years, Nicholas has challenged himself to make ever taller column pieces.

of cutting things away, drilling things, burning bits out of the way,' he says. 'Then, one day, I thought, "Turning, that's how you remove clay".'

His first experiment was with a thick cylindrical form he had thrown on the wheel, which he allowed to dry out, before using the lathe to cut into it, forming a series of fins. (He still has this first piece, which he uses as a tool pot.) 'It took me a while to realise how interesting this was,' he says. 'When I first did it, I didn't really understand it, it was almost too simple. But the more I made, particularly when I started to get the pieces interacting with each other, the more I realised the subtle complexity.'

He continued to work on the idea, building up a collection of monochrome cylinders and cones, throwing the bodies on the wheel before using the lathe to form the fins, which give the pieces their hazy, shimmering edges. At the degree show, which happened to be on his birthday, a private collector bought almost everything. 'It was the bones of what I've been doing ever since,' he says.

Over the years, the forms have evolved, becoming larger and more complex, and moving from mostly tubular to include the spheres, and from mostly monochrome to embracing colour, which adds another level to their vibrancy. The colour is achieved by adding solutions of metal salts to the inside. The pieces are saturated, then dried out in the kiln, with the evaporation process sucking the liquid through the clay, leaving just the edges intensely coloured.

With his work so in demand, (when we speak, he is feverishly preparing for the Future Heritage exhibition at the Design Centre, Chelsea) Nicholas continues to push forwards and to innovate. At Future Heritage, he will show

a series of ink-and-water drawings alongside the ceramic work, while his experiments with colour blending continue to fascinate him.

'What I've come to realise this work is about,' he says, 'is light and body and space in perception. Something you look at is not static. The act of looking changes things. The movement of your body, the movement of light; the conditions around perception change what you perceive. And this work brings that experience to the fore.'

WHERE TO BUY

Nicholas's work is available from cavalierofinn.com, messums.org and his own website, nicholaslees.com. Prices start from around £1,600.

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