



CUT AND ALTERED VESSELS BY ASHRAF HANNA

Good at acting, "terrible at art"

James Nesbitt is honing his craft (collection) via a leading London gallerist.
By Charlotte Abrahams

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN McMAHON

James Nesbitt is standing in his London living room, looking at a perfectly spherical, intriguingly spiralling object. "I look at this piece with real wonder and hope," says the actor, whose credits run from TV drama *Cold Feet* to Peter Jackson's film series *The Hobbit*. "There is an endless, integral beauty to it that I find very moving. It's extraordinary. Almost wondrous."

Nesbitt's stoneware sculpture is the work of Isle of Wight-based ceramic artist Matthew Chambers – a rising star of the craft world whose work is featured in London's Victoria & Albert Museum. With its smooth, dark-grey surface, it is composed of multiple hand-thrown layers in various subtle shades of English winter, drawing the eye into its intricate form. It is Nesbitt's latest – and most significant – acquisition from southeast London gallery Cavaliero Finn, whose co-founder, Juliana Cavaliero, he met at the gates of his daughters' school 15 years ago. Their burgeoning friendship helped him to build a collection of what Cavaliero describes as "contemporary paintings, works on paper and ceramic sculpture by emerging and mid-career artists".

Nesbitt's role as collector was not an instantaneous fit. "At school, I was really terrible at art," he admits. "For a long time, I felt that art was a medium I would never be allowed to embrace, or have any say about. But Juliana taught me that I should trust what I liked; that it doesn't matter if you don't know a lot about art. That opened my eyes and I started to find works that spoke to me."

These include an exquisitely fine Parian porcelain *Floating Bowl* by Nicholas Lees, its ribbed surface so perfectly turned on the lathe that it appears machine-made; "big, funny, comfortable pots" by ceramic and glass artist Daniel Reynolds; and a trio of *Cut and Altered Vessels* by Egyptian-born Ashraf Hanna, who creates elegant hand-built pieces in his Pembrokeshire studio.

"I look at all these things together and I feel enveloped in them," says Nesbitt. "Hanna's pieces speak of something ancient to me; they're like drawings brought to life. It took me a wee while to come round to his work, though. There's a certain sadness in the vessels that's so personal I felt at first like I was intruding." At other times, the appeal is more instant, as with the first piece Nesbitt bought from Cavaliero – a large abstract painting of a coastal landscape entitled *Where Is Everyone* by British artist Angela Charles (whose eyesight has been deteriorating for the past 10 years and who is now registered as blind).

Right: Juliana Cavaliero and James Nesbitt at his London home



"Jimmy saw this painting at our stand at the Affordable Art Fair in Battersea Park and was immediately struck by the colours," says Cavaliero of the work that still hangs in Nesbitt's kitchen. "He is quite spontaneous and his choices often take me by surprise. For example, he didn't know who Nicholas Lees was, but when he saw the *Floating Bowl* at my house, he just looked at it and said, 'I like that. I'll have it.' He has a good eye; all these artists are on the rise."

Not that Nesbitt buys with rising prices in mind. "I'm proud to be supporting artists and creating something to leave to my two daughters," he says, adding that through Cavaliero he's been introduced to artworks that take him outside his comfort zone. "The great thing about Juliana is that she's not afraid to educate and challenge me." This, agrees Cavaliero, is the crucial role of a gallerist. "In the age of Instagram,

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anyone can go straight to the artist," she says. "So people like me have to pull out the best work and steer clients towards the pieces that are significant." Right now, she is steering Nesbitt towards one of Daniel Reynolds' sculptural glass and ceramic mobiles.

The London-based artist is an increasingly prominent figure in the contemporary-craft world: he has worked in New York's Museum of Art & Design, and *Madrigal*, a 2m x 2.7m kinetic sculpture was one of the highlights of the Crafts Council's Collect fair in London earlier this year. "Reynolds' mobiles are an amalgamation of everything he is about," says Cavaliero. "They show his skill as a maker, the fine balance he achieves and the unique combination of stoneware,

porcelain and glass. It's usually the hanging that puts people off them, but I can do that."

When I ask Nesbitt what he is eyeing next, however, he speaks not of sculpture but of painting. "I've commissioned a work from contemporary landscape painter Gill Rocca. She creates astonishingly still, calm paintings of the sea. I've bought two from Juliana already, but I wanted to commission something for my house in Portrush. It's the area of County Antrim, Northern Ireland, I'm from, and the idea of introducing Gill to that landscape and asking her to make her own interpretation of it is very exciting."

Cavaliero laughs. "I'm certainly not trying to manipulate his choices – this is a process of buying with him, not for him. But combining paintings and sculptural objects is what Jimmy's collection is all about – and there's plenty of room for a mobile in his Portrush house too..." ■ HTS cavalierofinn.com. craftscouncil.org.uk

FLOATING BOWL BY NICHOLAS LEES



Left: Grey Green Spiral by Matthew Chambers

