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OPINION

Porn in Plain Sight? The Subversive Tactics of Inappropriate Ceramics

The prim and proper, and slightly twee, associations of ceramics ultimately make them all the more fun—and all the more effective—as carriers of explicit material. And the impulse to get your freak on at the wheel is as old as time itself. Words by Louise Benson

When you think of ceramics, you might be more likely to think of cups and saucers than smutty artwork that ought to come with its own X rating. But artists and amateurs alike have been freely expressing their sexual side in clay for thousands of years. From phallic talismans discovered at Pompeii to the sex pottery of pre-Columbian Peru, the impulse to get your freak on at the wheel is as old as time itself. Forget timid paisley patterns or tasteful mid-century stoneware; who said that ceramics had to be prim and proper, anyway? Now, a whole host of contemporary artists are offering up their own take on ceramics, subverting the medium with their depictions of firmly erect penises, rampant copulation and some particularly disturbing images of a teddy bear's foursome.

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For Egyptian-born artist Ghada Amer, clay is used as a means to create fantasy visions of the nude female body, as curvy and lushly proportioned as pin-up models. Her images are

often taken directly from pornography. Long-haired ladies tangle their limbs together in sexual liaisons that range from playful kissing to cunnilingus, mouths wide open and eyes tightly closed in ecstasy. Sound problematic? Well, Amer thinks so too. The submission of women to the male gaze is a subject that she is keen to unpick. All too often, lesbian relationships are appropriated as fodder for the straight male wet dream—something that Amer seeks to reclaim specifically through the use of ceramics.



The women represented by American artist **Rebecca Morgan** couldn't be more different from Amer's. Hairy, blemished and fleshy, her ceramic busts and figurines may well be as far from the canonical ideal of beauty as it possible to get. Inspired by her own childhood growing up in the rural western landscape of Pennsylvania (to which she has since returned to live and work), she explores the stereotype of the redneck and country bumpkin. "For me, the characters represent a real kind of blissful ignorance—they're totally happy living in the country and doing their own thing. They're totally fine with looking so hideous and awful, it's of no consequence to them," she reflects.

Ceramics are still seen by some as a "low art" or termed snootily as an "applied art", in a distinction that is not dissimilar to **Morgan's** interest in these types of social stereotypes and

standards. Her use of the medium to present her “hideous” portraits emphasizes the challenge that she mounts, asking hard questions about what we are willing to accept and what we are happy to reject, and about our own internalized prejudices. When taste and an appreciation of the arts is so closely entwined with class, it is impossible to view Morgan’s work as anything but political.

Of course, it is the prim and proper associations of ceramics that ultimately make them all the more fun—and all the more effective—as carriers of explicit and pornographic material. Like a dirty novel hidden inside a more suitable cover, they undermine expectations and force you to reconsider your own preconceptions. No longer just the pursuit of ladies at leisure, pottery has been fully embraced by artists as a weapon against the prejudices still held by many. After all, it is often the illicit and the forbidden that is most alluring, and the power of inappropriate ceramics is in their ability to seduce as well as shock.