

Ceramics

and the human condition

Colin Martin visits two London exhibitions by artists Rachel Kneebone and Emma Hart, and reflects on their ceramic explorations of a spectrum of human themes



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Sculptures by Rachel Kneebone at the Victoria and Albert Museum and *Mamma Mia!*, a large-scale immersive installation by Emma Hart at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, differ dramatically in both visual style and display. However, both artists harness clay to explore aspects of the human condition – ranging from the lofty right down to the domestic.

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

Kneebone's porcelain works were first exhibited alongside bronze casts by Auguste Rodin at the Brooklyn Museum in 2012. In *Rachel Kneebone: Regarding Rodin*, curator Catherine Morris described this as 'an experiment in the juxtaposition between two artists whose work intersects in remarkable ways.' The catalogue lists eight Kneebone sculptures and 16 Rodin casts. Installation photographs demonstrate the dialogue established between Kneebone's porcelain tableaux of anguished figures and Rodin's monumental bronze casts.

The Victoria and Albert Museum's more modest juxtaposition of five sculptures – including Kneebone's *The Consciousness of an Unbearable Tragedy at Once Dreaded and Desired*, 2013, with a white plaster cast *Metamorphosis of Ovid*, about 1886, from Rodin's unfinished *Gates of Hell* project – failed to provide the dramatic contrast between black-cast bronze and white-glazed porcelain achieved in the Brooklyn exhibition. However, it does show how Kneebone's fluid contemporary forms echo the plasticity of Rodin's entwined figures. Layers of white limbs, resembling bleached

bones in an untidy ossuary, cascade from a central cracked sphere in *The Solitude in the Depth of Her Being Begins the World Again But Only Begins It for Herself*, 2014. As with Rodin's nearby *Fallen Angel*, 1895, showing a collapsed winged figure supported by a naked female, Kneebone's tableau is initially perceived as an undifferentiated, inert mass, before closer examination reveals its complexity and sense of movement. Both sculptors portray human figures experiencing extreme physical and emotional states, capturing moments of stillness and torment.

In *The Search for a New Myth*, 2015, (above left), Kneebone captures the instant when human life is extinguished, presenting the dual prospect of everlasting ecstasy or eternal damnation. This is an astonishingly dark topic to be rendered in porcelain – a medium more often associated with Rococo sweetness and light.

Displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum's Medieval and Renaissance Gallery, amid 16th-century sculptures, Kneebone's heptagonal column *399 Days*, 2012-13, winds the art historical clock still further back. Rising to a height of 5.3 metres, there is no denying its monumentality, reminiscent of Roman triumphal columns. Comprising nine tiers of seven porcelain panels (63 panels in total), it is supported by an internal armature of mild steel, visible through a vertical gap in its construction.

Visitors swarm to it, scrutinising its panels for narrative content, like tourists squinting to see panels on Lorenzo Ghiberti's 15th-century monumental bronze doors to the Baptistery in Florence. These were dubbed the 'Gates of


Paradise' by Michelangelo. Here, Kneebone's figures could just as easily be contemplating damnation. The fragility inherent in the human condition is mirrored by the fracturing of porcelain and collapsing of bases in the kiln, both key features of this sculptor's oeuvre. By accepting material faults in the clay in which humanity is rendered, Kneebone symbolises and celebrates human imperfection.

KITCHEN-SINK DRAMA

Having previously worked mainly with photography and video, Hart first recognised clay's expressive potential in 2012. 'I realised that the pursuit of the real, the mess, trauma and frustration with life I was initiating in my work could be better served with ceramics... I needed to get behind surfaces; clay enabled me to do that,' she explains in the accompanying catalogue for her touring installation, *Mamma Mia!*, which launched at the Whitechapel Gallery in July. In a large, dimly lit room, ten ceiling-mounted maiolica lamps project empty 'speech bubbles' of light onto the floor. One floor-mounted lamp projects onto an end wall. The pieces are the result of her six-month Italian residency in 2016, which she undertook after winning the 6th Max Mara Art Prize for Women.

The empty dialogue projected by the lamps was informed by Hart's observation of family therapy sessions in Milan, where instead of verbalising feelings, couples and families physically re-enacted their patterns of psychological interaction. On encountering the expressive decoration of tin-glazed earthenware (maiolica) in Todì, its patterns and

vibrant colours suggested a means of materially consolidating her research. Working with ceramic artisans in Faenza, she developed large head-shaped handleless jug forms, used here as lamps. When inverted, their triangular spouts resemble noses, forming the 'tails' of the speech bubble-shaped pool of light below each.

The lamp's exteriors are monochrome, with minimal line drawn decorations – either of hands with elongated fingers, or the ruler-like markings of a humble measuring jug. Their interiors are filled with riotous colours, pictures and patterns, alluding to thoughts and feelings impossible to express with speech or kept silent by patterns of family interaction. Ceiling fans comprised of metal knives, forks and spoons rotate threateningly beneath the lamps, casting mute shadows across the speech bubbles. The cartoonishly decorated ceramics punctuate the gloom to darkly humorous effect. Stepping in to Hart's installation, visitors become participants in a rendering of the complex dynamics of domestic life. 

• Rachel Kneebone, *399 Days*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1 April 2017–14 January 2018; vam.ac.uk
• Emma Hart, *Mamma Mia!*, was at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 12 July–3 September 2017; whitechapelgallery.org, touring to Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, Italy, 14 October 2017–18 February 2018; collezionearamotti.org, then finally at Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 3 March–3 June 2018, fruitmarket.co.uk

Image: courtesy Victoria and Albert Museum; Thierry Bal