

# James Oughtibridge

## Ambiguous and Dramatic

by Tim Saunders

Historically, ceramic glazes have included environmentally harmful chemicals and heavy metals. Although manufacturers claim to be addressing this issue, if the need for such a finish is removed entirely, then all the better for the world.

“I don’t work with glazes and prefer to get the color through the clay itself,” reveals James Oughtibridge, who works from his studio at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. “I blend different clays together to create a variety of natural colors.” Inspired by the stunning Yorkshire Pennine landscape featuring river valleys, hills, fells, mountains, high edges, and valleys, his bold and striking forms in black and white clay are often on a dramatic scale. Mist and fog transforms the curves and valleys of the land “into a monochromatic palette,

where texture is prominent,” and these natural elements of texture, beauty, and form are conveyed with each unique sculpture Oughtibridge creates.

His work has an intentional element of ambiguity to it and a dramatic scale from the offset. He strives to create bold and dramatic work that leaves the viewer wondering what it is made of and how on earth it was made. Sharp lines and curved planes are prominent features, which hold the viewer’s interest. Oughtibridge’s sculptures are created using multiple curved sections of clay bonded together in stages when the clay is leather hard. This allows the sections to stand up without collapsing. Many hours are spent building the pieces, but the especially time



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consuming part is the patient refining of the surfaces, the drying and firing, which can take weeks, sometimes months for the largest forms.

### An Introduction to Ceramics

First discovering clay after leaving secondary school, he went to study an art foundation course at Dewsbury Art College in 1995. Just two weeks of working in the ceramics department with renowned naked-raku ceramic artist David Roberts was a life-changing experience for the young Oughtibridge, who was immediately drawn to clay as a material. The versatility of the clay hooked him for good. Of Roberts, who is known for his large hand-coiled pots, he says, “We’re still good friends today.”

At 18, Oughtibridge was invited to be one of the main artists in a sculpture trail in West Yorkshire. “Apart from my parents, this was the first time anybody had shown an interest in my sculptures.”

The son of police officers, Oughtibridge was destined to join the force but his father perceptively encouraged him to pursue his passion for ceramics, which was a turning point. “Even during my early ceramics education I still saw myself becoming a police officer,” says Oughtibridge. “I’m glad I listened to Dad!”



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1 *White Stoneware Triptych*, 11.8 in. (30 cm) in height, fired to 2156°F (1180°C), 2019. Installed at Marchmont House, Scotland. *Photo: David Fulford.* 2 *Arrondi*, 14.2 in. (36 cm), black and white clay blend, fired to 2156°F (1180°C), 2023. 3 James Oughtibridge refining the channels of a sculpture using a serrated metal kidney. 1-3 *Photos: David Fulford.* 4 *Jet Black Sculpture* on Corten steel base. *Photo: Credit Name.*

Graduating with a first-class honors from Loughborough University, he went on to complete a master of arts at the Royal College of Art in 2001. Afterward, he set up a studio in London before returning to his native Yorkshire four years later. He considers being brought up close to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park “a gift and an education from a very young age.” “The aesthetic of Barbara Hepworth’s work is almost ingrained in me, as though it is the basis of my consciousness of beautiful texture, proportion, line, and form.”

### Works of Various Scale

It is the actual construction and problem solving that Oughtibridge relishes during the making process and he works in three distinct sizes: small, medium, and large. Only recently has he started creating large-scale spherical enclosed form sculptures based on

experimental maquettes. “Apart from the physicality aspect when working on a large scale, I actually prefer it to small scale work. The smaller scale pieces are almost as time consuming and more fiddly to create as you can’t get your hands inside the structure as easily.

“Although similar to my vessel forms, in terms of their tactile surfaces, these large-scale pieces invite a fluid touch that flows around the entire form. The concave and convex shapes create movement within a still piece. These imposing sculptures contain a solidity that reflects natural forms, such as bone fragments and rock formations. With no entry or exit, they exist in themselves as striking sculptures, different from every angle, and every light condition.”

Oughtibridge’s medium-scale maquettes led him to transition his ideas into a larger scale. “The feedback from shows gave me the confidence to increase the scale; they proved to be very popular



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5 *Spiral Echelon*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photo: Credit Name. 6 *Jet Black Concave form*, 23.6 in. (60 cm) in length, black clay, fired to 2192°F (1200°C), 2015. Photo: Sylvain Deleu. 7-9 *Alluvion* amidst construction shown with the final slabs being inserted, completed in the greenware stage, and safely loaded into the kiln ready to be fired. *Alluvion*, once fired, was molded and cast in bronze for Hugo Burge.



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**10** *Labrynthine*, 22 in. (56cm) in height, white stoneware, fired to 2156°F (1180°C), 2023. Photo: David Fulford. **11** *Jet Black Blade*, black clay, 17.7 in. (45 cm) in length, fired to 2192°F (1200°C), 2018. Purchased through Joanna Bird by Sir Nicholas Goodison for the Fitzwilliam museum, Cambridge. Photo: Fitzwilliam museum.

and accessible. These playful, yet refined pieces, enabled me to shift direction.”

Oughtibridge describes the small-scale maquettes he creates as his drawings. “However, I see them as sculptures in their own right. They’re very personable, intuitive, and lively, as they’re made whilst I hold them in the palm of my hand, rotating and refining as I carve. They’re addictive, collectible, and hard to put down.”

#### Making a Living and the Future

Working with individual clients, interior designers, collectors, museums, and galleries across the world, his future projects currently underway see a move into bronze sculpture and some more monolithic, large-scale pieces.

He lives in the same village as his studio. “If the weather is ok and the dog isn’t too tired, we’ll walk to work. I make a coffee and do my social media and emailing, and then go into the workshop. Social media has played a big part with sales in recent years and I seem to have a lot of clients in the US. If it is winter I’ll get my body warmer and woolly hat on and then start unwrapping the latest sculptures and walk around them a few times. I’ll then start sketching on the clay and then commence with the cutting and assembling. I work until about five or six o’clock, but sometimes go back in later on after dinner. I like to leave weekends free for some downtime, although I do go in on Saturdays from time to time, especially if the kiln is firing.”

His clay is bought from Valentine Clays in Stoke and he predominantly uses a white groggy stoneware clay but sometimes black clay, too. “The white clay has really good strength and allows

for some large scale complicated structures with low shrinkage.”

His large electric trolley kiln, previously owned by Ewen Henderson (1934 to 2000) who was internationally acclaimed for taking clay into a new expressiveness, was received when he graduated from the Royal College of Art, “and is still going strong.”

Notable achievements for Oughtibridge include winning the Liaigre prize at “Collect” and then exhibiting with them at Miami Art Basel. He was also commissioned to create some sculptures for the twenty-fourth James Bond film, “Spectre” in 2015 directed by Sam Mendes. In fact most of Oughtibridge’s work is commissioned. His best year for sales was during Covid. “I am lucky in that the type of people who invest in my work, especially the larger works, aren’t affected by economic downturns.”

Teaching courses from his studio helps to deliver a stable income, which covers the rent and all the bills. “I have managed to get a good rate on my energy so although it has increased it is not horrendous.”

Currently, Oughtibridge is working on a series of small sculptures, which have been commissioned by the Hepworth Museum to coincide with two sculptures they have acquired for their permanent collection. His work is also available in Galerie Du Don in France.

For more, visit [www.jamesoughtibridgesculpture.co.uk](http://www.jamesoughtibridgesculpture.co.uk)

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