

Barbara Gittings

The Power of the Cut

by Tim Saunders

Fashion and ceramics are closer bedfellows than you might think, and for South African potter Barbara Gittings, they are inextricably linked. While still in her teens, this style aficionado opened a boutique with a friend in Cape Town. They sold their own clothing designs and enjoyed eighteen months of successful trading, generating the funds to travel around Europe in a camper van.

Clay as an Alternative to Fabric

Arriving in England in the late 1970s, Gittings fell in love with the country, home to iconic designers like Mary Quant, famed for her

miniskirts and hot pants. This was the time when David Bowie, fashion's king of self-invention, was pushing the boundaries wearing unusual, striking designs. Perhaps more conservative were Mick Jagger and John Lennon. Gittings was instantly inspired to pursue fashion design and pattern cutting in the UK and went on to enjoy a 30-year career in that industry.

Over the last 21 years, she's been exploring working with clay. "My years as a pattern cutter have certainly informed my ceramics; I visualize shapes in 3D and make paper patterns for my bottles, instinctively knowing which angle will give the right amount of





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twist or lean,” she says. “The exposure to all those fabric prints has sunk into my subconscious, surfacing every so often. Toward the end of my career in the fashion industry, I began to explore clay as an alternative medium to fabric. In fashion, the layering of textiles and the power of the cut merge to find new balances and forms, the biomorphic and geometric held in tension.”

Her work in clay continues to explore this. “I’m fascinated by the patterns and shapes in nature, especially as growth and random chaotic forces skew and distort the initial perfect symmetry, leading to irregular forms.”

Catching Echoes of Nature

Gittings’ ceramics explore the multi-layered effects nature creates through the laying down of strata, weathering, and erosion. Her father was a geologist who she remembers “used to bring home amazing rock samples,” which she thinks first attracted her to the beauty in nature. She says she is also “drawn to primitive mark making, tribal art; all things geometric . . . I endeavor to catch echoes of all this in my work while trying to embrace chance, the accidental and, as French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) said, ‘the unforeseeable novelty.’”

Pottery evening classes were the first port of call in her ceramics journey in 1999, where Gittings says she “was soon obsessed.” A week-long smoke-firing course with Jane Perryman followed. “This was wonderfully inspiring. While there, we were encouraged to use her molds to create pieces to smoke fire. At this time, I was obsessed with perfection and symmetry. I was bitterly disappointed when the bottle I made from her gourd mold came out leaning and



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1 *Tilted Bowl #27*, 9¾ in. (25 cm) in diameter, grogged nerikomi porcelain, fired to 1915°F (1046°C), 2021. 2 Three bottles, to 13¾ in. (35 cm) in height, grogged nerikomi porcelain, fired to 1915°F (1046°C), 2021. 3 Portrait of Barbara Gittings. Photo: Layton Thompson.

slightly asymmetrical. But when I visited a picturesque local village, I realized that all the houses were leaning and I had an epiphany moment. My work has leaned and embraced asymmetry ever since.”

A Way Forward with Nerikomi

A short course at City Lit College in London followed, and while there, she saw a picture of an ancient Chinese marbled-clay bowl and started to think that since she was always disappointed with the results after glazing pieces, this might be a way forward. There are numerous colored-clay techniques. One, termed nerikomi in Japan, consists of cutting and slicing different colored blocks of clay and building up a pattern by recombining the elements into a loaf or brick shape. After seeing this ancient bowl and learning about this technique, Gittings had unwittingly found her new focus: handbuilding bottles and bowls using the nerikomi technique. Traditionally, nerikomi artists have used strong colors made with commercial stains, but Gittings prefers using primarily oxides. She finds that the results she achieves are softer and more natural, adding that “cobalt is one of my favorites; I love the blue.” If she does use a commercial stain, she avoids bright colors.

Once the colorant is mixed into the clay body, Gittings rolls out layers of different thicknesses, stacking up the colors, one after the other. Describing her process for working with the layered clays, she says, “I’ll slice through them and rejoin to make different patterns.” In this way, Gittings makes a block of patterned colored clays, which she allows to sit for a while, so the clays equalize in moisture content and meld onto each other.

When she is ready to create forms, Gittings slices through the block of patterned clays vertically along the face to create slabs, so that the pattern runs all the way through the wall of a vessel that she builds with the slab, rather than merely being a surface decoration. She explains that she pieces these together to create larger slabs to work with, “I join the sliced pieces to make a slab and roll it to strengthen it.” In addition, sometimes she extrudes the patterned, colored clay to create a shape.

Gittings concentrates on building bowls or very geometric bottles. For the bottles, she makes a paper pattern to create a maquette. She produces a big slab from which she can cut the bottle. After cutting the shapes, she then lays the sections alongside each other, so that the nerikomi pattern hopefully matches, prior to assembling the form.

Gittings assembles bowls using plaster molds. She says of her bowls: “On those, I generally build them up in a patchwork, putting in a section, joining another section in, and adding a little bit if there’s a hole, so it builds up gradually. On bowls, I generally don’t have a very strong idea of what direction I’m going in. I allow the pattern to dictate what I’m doing, how they fit together, and so it’s a fairly random process.”

Taking Time to Learn and Grow

When Gittings first started making nerikomi pieces, she lost an enormous number in the kiln because the patterns would separate at the seams between colors. “It has been a long learning curve,” she says. She works on several pieces at a time and says that it actually takes





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4 Large Bowl #2, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, grogged nerikomi porcelain, fired to 1915°F (1046°C), 2021. 5 Head Bowl #51, 5½ in. (14 cm) in height, grogged nerikomi porcelain, fired to 1915°F (1046°C), 2021. 6 Head Bowl #56, 5 in. (13 cm) in width, grogged nerikomi porcelain, fired to 1915°F (1046°C), 2021.

longer to create the patterned clay blocks and resulting slabs than to build a piece. “Sometimes I’ll have quite a lot of patterned clay waiting to be worked on,” she says.

Gittings has to be careful about how she stores her patterned clay and wraps it in damp fabric and plastic to protect it. “You can’t leave it for too long though,” she says, having done this in the past, when she found that it had dried out and cracked irreparably. “The only thing you can do then is reclaim it. I’ll dampen it, slice it and layer it up again and get a totally different pattern. Sometimes those patterns are lovely, totally unplanned and serendipity comes to my aid.”

It can take Gittings a week to create enough patterned clay blocks for a really big pot. Her work started out as very small simple pieces, but as she has progressed, the shapes and patterns within the clay have become more complex. “I’m always pushing myself to make larger pieces. I’ve made a sculptural piece using a big, semi-circular bowl-shaped mold with a 11¾ in. (30 cm) diameter—half molded and half free form. I started off in the mold, then I built up the sides just with free-form slabs. That’s my biggest piece to date. Your heart is in your mouth when you put it in the kiln because you just don’t know what will happen.”

Earthstone grogged porcelain is ideal for Gittings because it contains a very fine grog, enabling it to withstand her smoke-firing process. “The temperature shock can crack clay and especially with nerikomi patterned clay, it can force the colors apart; the grog helps it to withstand the thermal shock.” Gittings loves the whiteness of porcelain and how tactile it is. “It absorbs the smoke and it takes the color of the oxides very well,” she explains. She uses a paper-clay version of the same clay to join with, providing strength to weaker areas during the greenware stage. She adds, “I also intend to start making with the paper clay, because I think I can achieve larger pieces with it.”

Once completed, her work is low bisque fired. In the early days, she would only fire once, but now first fires up to 1472°F (800°C),

ensuring that if there is a crack, she can repair it with clay, and then re-fires to 1904°F (1040°C).

The next step is the smoke firing. “Afterwards I smoke fire it in the bin with crumpled up newspaper to give it an extra layer of effect,” Gittings explains. “It’s a slow process, which means I don’t produce more than one successful piece a week.” The smoke firing has a softening effect. It also can add another layer of pattern; for example in image 6, the dots and darker lines are the result of the smoke firing.

Making more sculptural pieces is another ambition. “I don’t like making the same work again and again. There are some shapes that are successful, so I do keep making those, but I want to make more challenging things, too,” she says. “Wall pieces that stand out in relief appeal to me. I’m playing with ideas.”

Gittings’ combination of the ancient techniques of nerikomi and smoke firing, alongside her unusual modern shapes, place her work in a unique position within the field of contemporary ceramics. Japanese nerikomi often features very regular geometric repetition, whereas Gittings’ work embraces abstraction, chance, and asymmetry while still referencing the geometric.

Since 2013, Gittings has shown at both the May and Christmas Artists Open Houses in Hove at 9A Hove Place.

To see more of Gittings’ work, visit:

www.messumswiltshire.com
www.birchamgallery.co.uk
www.robfogell.co.uk
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