

Mindful making

The handbuilt ceramics of Gabriele Koch have changed significantly since she rose to prominence in the 1980s. *Ashley Thorpe* finds out why

Gabriele Koch has won considerable acclaim for her smoke-fired ceramics. Redolent of the earthiness of clay, the burnished smoothness of water-worn stone, the abrasion of wind, and the lick of the flame, Sir David Attenborough famously proclaimed her work to be 'elemental, in every sense'. Yet, in 2012, Koch changed track.

Increasingly concerned about the impact of smoke-firing on the local environment of her traffic-clogged London street, she also found the repetitive act of burnishing taking its toll on her body. 'I have always been aware of the negative impact the production of ceramics can have on the environment,' she admits. 'I was aiming at refined patterns that I could only achieve by using a variety of sawdust and slow-firing over days. Doing this in a built-up city environment, my firings were noticeable in the neighbourhood, making me aware of the impact it was having.' And so, the sumptuously burnished smoke-fired surfaces made from T-material, presented in mottled browns, reds, blues, pinks and greys, were gone.

Instead, Koch developed pots in stoneware and porcelain with a strong graphic quality, now the hallmark of her style. 'I am inspired by geological landscapes and the contrast of materials, textures and colour,' she explains. 'This change has been extremely exciting for me and, luckily, I think I have taken most collectors with me who still recognise the essence and continuity of my work in these pieces.'

Indeed, she has developed a new and exciting vocabulary for handbuilding. Her work remains elemental, but it also subtly expresses something about how we engage with the environment in the here and now.

CHOOSING CLAY

Born in Germany in 1948, Koch was always interested in art at school but had little access to clay. A visit to Spain in the 1960s introduced her to the paintings and sculptures of Antoni Tàpies and the architectural contours of Antoni Gaudí. This, alongside the textures of the desert-like Spanish landscape of the interior, suggested that clay was the most suitable material for the kind of work she wanted to make.



