Human Conditions of Clay

15.10.21 – 13.02.22
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Human Conditions of Clay is an exhibition exploring how humanity is expressed through the material use of clay. The title refers to the interaction between the artist and the material; the moulding and sculpting, the emotion and intention behind the work and the traces left (or not) by the artist.

The exhibition comprises of work by 18 artists demonstrating the dynamic use of clay through the manipulation of material and presentation – from installation, animation, works on paper, sculpture, film, performance – exploring lines of enquiry and interests including: history, current affairs, human behaviour, folklore and tradition.

Clay is a hugely versatile material that humans have been using for thousands of years for both decorative and practical purposes — the oldest known ceramic artefact is dated at around 28,000 BCE.

This exhibition examines contemporary artworks that carry a human trace and presence, exploring histories, identities and narratives through clay.

Hot Future, 2018
Francis Upritchard
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.
Photo: Angus Mill
This pack is designed for use by teachers and other educators in relation to the Human Conditions of Clay exhibition. It provides contextual information about the exhibition and the exhibiting artists, the techniques and processes that have been used to create the artworks on display, key themes explored in the work and some project ideas and points of discussion.

The information and activities in this pack has been informed by requirements outlined in the National Curriculum for Wales in Art and Design, specifically targeting Key Stage 2 and 3 pupils. However, these can be adapted as required for older or younger pupils.

The work in the exhibition offers a number of discussion points which align with requirements in the National Curriculum, encouraging creative thinking in all subject areas, including:

— **History** through the discussion of social and political events which contextualise the artworks.

— **Mathematics** through the discussion of shapes, symmetry and sequence.

— **Science** by discussing materials, their properties and uses, with a particular focus on clay.

— **Language** through the communication of ideas and emotions in response to works in the exhibition, developing a creative vocabulary.

— **Art and Design** by encouraging creative responses to the work through drawing, sculpting, painting and group discussion.
This pack provides clear sections, dividing information into easily digestible portions. It can be used to devise projects around individual artists, artworks or themes, or you can use the pack in its entirety to explore the ideas provided, or to supplement them with your own ideas.

It’s possible to engage with the Human Conditions of Clay exhibition through a gallery visit or by using the images and resources from this pack.

To arrange a school trip to visit this exhibition, please contact learning@chapter.org

For more information about Chapter, visit www.chapter.org

@chaptergallery

Now go around the corner and get your brother, 2021
Shawanda Corbett
Before visiting the gallery (or exploring the work in the classroom) it may be useful to open a discussion with pupils about the themes and ideas explored in the artworks. Here are some discussion prompts for activities which may help prepare pupils for the exhibition:

- **What is clay? Where is it found? What is it used for?**

- **What do you think of when you hear the word clay? Is it clean and delicate like a clay vase or messy and mouldable like raw clay? Has the exhibition changed the way you think about clay as a material?**

- **The title of the exhibition is Human Conditions of Clay. What do you think this means?**

- **Discuss the gallery visit with pupils. Have you visited a gallery before? What did you see? How did the work in the gallery make you feel?**

- **Discuss and research the list of artists that are represented in the exhibition. Have you heard of any of them before?**

- **Explore the artworks online or in the gallery and write initial thoughts on them. Which is your favourite? Why do you like the work?**

- **Discuss the themes of the exhibition. Is it important to explore themes like these in art? Does it make you think differently about these topics?**
Reading Artwork

Below are some examples of questions to encourage pupils to look more closely at the artworks and to open a discussion about the works in the exhibition:

**Space**
Do you experience the work differently from different angles?
Is the work affected by the environment it’s displayed in?
Does the work interact with any of the other pieces on display?
Why do you think these particular artworks were chosen?

**Experience**
Which is your favourite piece and why?
Does it remind you of any other artwork you’ve seen?
Do you need to do anything other than look?
Do you need to look more closely or be further away?
Are there sounds?
Can you see more if you spend longer looking at the work?
Are there any links that you can make to history, politics or everyday life?

**Title**
What’s the title of the work?
Does the title tell you anything about the work or the subject of the work?
Does it make you think of anything else?

**Colour**
What colours have been used in the work?
Does the colour convey any emotions or feelings?
If it was made with different colours, would it affect the way you see the work?

**Process**
How do you think the artist made the work?
What materials and processes do you think they have used?
Do the materials used have any meaning or associations?

**Concept**
What is the artist trying to say in the work?
Are they exploring personal subjects or does their work talk about broader issues that affect some or all of us?
Does the work help us understand the artist’s emotions or the subject in new ways?
Human Conditions of Clay explores a number of themes and ideas which students can use as a starting point for discussion and experimentation. This pack highlights five of the most prominent themes that are presented in the exhibition providing key phrases, points of discussion and suggestions for activities that relate to the works on display.

The themes are:
- Tradition and Folklore
- Storytelling
- The Human Form
- Sensations
- Art and Activism

The artists have been divided by theme, however a number of the artworks can be applied to multiple ideas. Pupils could discuss the range of themes explored in the works and the way that a single work can explore a number of themes simultaneously.

Blue Mask, 1982
Nancy Herbert
Collection of Aldo Rinaldi. Photo © Jamie Woodley
Tradition and Folklore

Key points: cultural identity, craft, history, spirituality, symbolism, artefacts

Points of enquiry
Is it important to keep traditional crafts alive?
Are traditional techniques important to cultural identities?
Are techniques relevant to us today?
In what ways have masks been used in the past?
How does this contrast with the way we use them now?

Suggested activities
Nancy Herbert and Jonathan Baldock both draw inspiration from rituals and traditions to create playful, colourful masks. Inspired by this work, pupils could make masks of their own with recycled materials. What are masks used for? Think about the traditional use of masks in ritual and performance and the way that masks are currently part of everyday life due to COVID. Think how a mask can transform a person into a completely different character, like a superhero. If your mask was part of a ritual, what would the ritual be for?

Experiment with simple, traditional clay crafts inspired by the works of Zoë Paul and Renee So, who are both influenced by historical artefacts and ancient mythologies. Create carved clay tiles with air drying clay – these could then be displayed together as one larger piece or kept individually. Pupils can discuss how clay has been an essential material for tens of thousands of years. What was clay used for besides decorative purposes? How were clay crafts used to tell stories? Is it important to keep traditional crafts alive today?

Pupils can make abstract papier-mâché sculptures inspired by Tal R. The work is influenced by Gongshi or ‘scholar’s stones’. Why do you think scholars used these objects for meditation? Can you see anything in the shapes? The artist uses a special Japanese firing method called Raku which uses all four elements: water is used to keep the clay damp, and after firing the piece cools in the air. Do you think this is significant to the artist?
Key points: narrative, imagination, mental health, characters, the everyday

Points of enquiry
What do we learn about the artist or about humans through the stories the artists tell us?
Do the artworks tell us something personal about the artists or something broader about humanity?
Is it important that the story is clear or should we make our own narratives?
Do these narratives remind you of any other stories you know?

Suggested activities
Lindsey Mendick uses an accumulation of everyday objects to create autobiographical sculptures. Create a collage that uses mundane objects [magazines, catalogues, flyers, receipts, wrappers, etc] to create a story about yourself. Discuss how artistic intervention can transform the meaning of an everyday object. When does an object become a piece of art? Is art an effective emotional outlet? How do artists convey narratives to the viewer?

Inspired by the clay puppets in Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg’s *Dark Side of the Moon*, pupils can make simple hand/finger puppets with found materials that can be used to tell a story [existing or made up]. What is the character of your puppet? How would they interact with the puppets made by other people? Consider how we display human emotion on inanimate objects.

Discuss the way Francis Upritchard creates otherworldly beings, working in groups play the exquisite corpse game to create a character. How would they talk? Where are they from? What are they called? What’s their favourite food? Discuss how artists can build their own worlds and characters and use them as storytelling devices.
Sensations

Key points: tactility, sound, interaction, emotion, contrasts, process, form, malleability

Points of enquiry
What senses do the materials affect? (Is it visual? Do they smell? Can you hear anything?)
What do you think the work feels like? Is it rough or smooth?
Heavy or light?
Do you feel certain emotions when looking at the artwork?
Do you feel like you are part of the artwork by interacting with it?

Suggested activities
Pupils could use air drying clay (or make salt dough) to create objects inspired by Ryan Gander’s Spending Time, a vending machine containing objects marked with dates and locations of significant events. Using found objects (or hands) to make marks in the dough. Think about the way the dough can be manipulated; the way it holds the impression of whatever was pressed into it. Close your eyes and think about how the object feels in your hand? Is it light or heavy? What kind of shape is it? What marks are left on it?

Oliver Beer uses objects that once belonged to his family to create sound installations. Pupils could make their own piece of sound art working in groups, collaging different noises they find interesting. These could be noises they make themselves or from the surrounding environment. They could then try to identify the noises in each other’s pieces of sound art. What do these sounds remind you of?

Pupils can explore the tactility of clay, inspired by William Cobbing, whose work explores human relationships through clay. Use air drying clay (or a similar material) to create busts of themselves or others, using your hands. Discuss the texture and malleability of the clay. Is it easy to manipulate? Do you like the feeling of clay? How does the dried result feel in comparison? How would it have felt to be under one of the clay heads in the video?
The Human Form

Key points: identity, movement, performance, disability, traces, absence and presence, individuality

Points of enquiry
- How is the human body depicted in the artworks?
- Do the artists use their own bodies or someone else’s?
- Is this significant?
- Do any of the artworks make you aware of your own body?
- Does any of the work capture motion?
- What kind of movements are being made?

Suggested activities
- Rachel Kneebone’s Whirl combines porcelain ribbons, tendrils and limbs, creating the illusion of movement. Pupils could create a collage using images of people inspired by this work. How can different forms be combined to create one image? Think about the way people are moving (or not) in these images. How can you capture movement in a still image?

Pupils could also experiment with fingerprinting in ink. How does the ink trace our fingertips? Think about the way fingertips are individual to each person. Do our fingerprints tell us anything about ourselves? Would you recognise your own fingerprints? Can you create an image using just your fingerprints?

Create paintings by printing with (or drawing around) body parts, this can be done individually or in groups on large pieces of paper. Think about the way Antony Gormley and Shawanda Corbett use their bodies as part of the artwork. Think about the shapes your body creates, do these vary from person to person? Is the body part of the artwork?
Art as Activism

Key points: migration, history, politics, race, juxtapositions, cultural identity

Points of enquiry
What message are these artists trying to get across?
Is it important for artists to discuss political issues in their work?
Can you link the artworks with any important political/historical events?
What is the significance of using such a delicate, fragile material to discuss such difficult topics?

Suggested activities
Discuss how art can be used to explore current events through traditional craft techniques. Pupils could think about the way that epic stories were depicted on Greek and Chinese vases and compare to Ai Weiwei’s Porcelain Vase — depicting the horrendous journeys that migrants undertake to reach safety — and the drawn vases in the work of Pio Abad, that examine social and political histories through the possessions of public figures. Ask the pupils to design their own vase that tells a story. What kind of story would you want to tell? Is it personal or political? What would you put on the vase?

Lubaina Himid paints over domestic pottery with Black figures in order to confront the dark histories of the Slave Trade and the British Empire. Inspired by this work, pupils could experiment in creating an image with multiple layers (through painting, collaging, printing or a combination). Think about the way the layers change the initial image. Can you create a narrative? What do the different layers and images tell us?

Pupils could discuss the importance of art as a form of activism in relation to works they have seen in the exhibition. They could create a banner or sign for a cause (big or small) that is important to them. Why is it important to discuss these feelings? Should art be used for political activism? Can you express yourself well in a visual medium?
Human Conditions of Clay comprises of artworks by 18 contemporary artists, spanning a wide range of mediums and themes, that all use clay in some form.

The work displayed ranges from traditional clay crafting techniques — for example, Zoë Paul’s clay beads in Our Bodies, In Fragmented Gesture and Ai Weiwei’s Porcelain Vase (Crossing of the Sea) — to performative works that explore the materiality of clay through human interaction such as William Cobbing’s Long Distance and Shawanda Corbett’s It Was Just Yesterday. While the works differ greatly, they each explore humanity through the use of clay, carrying a human trace and presence. The artists represented in the exhibition are: Pio Abad, Nancy Herbert, Zoë Paul, Lubaina Himid, Jonathan Baldock, Francis Upritchard, Antony Gormley, Renee So, William Cobbing, Ai Weiwei, Rachel Kneebone, Tal R, Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg, Oliver Beer, Lindsey Mendick, Shawanda Corbett and Ryan Gander.

**Maske XXNI, 2020**  
**Jonathan Baldock**  
Copyright Jonathan Baldock. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Mark Blower
Pio Abad is concerned with the social and political significance of things. He uses appropriation to explore alternative or repressed historical events, unravel official accounts and draw out threads of complicity between incidents, ideologies and people.

In this piece, Notes on Decomposition, No. 2, Abad attempts to illustrate our current state of cultural disenchantment through a collection of objects bought and sold at high profile auctions in recent years. Abad depicts twenty-four pieces of Chinese porcelain from the Lehman Brothers collection – auctioned two years after the 2008 financial crisis bankrupted their infamous investment banking company – arranged in descending order according to auction value.
Nancy Herbert’s mask series is inspired by her own Celtic heritage, pagan ceremonies and the indigenous art of her adopted homeland, Canada, and its Inuit communities.

This series of brightly coloured masks — created throughout the early 1980s — combine glazed ceramics and knitted and woven fabrics, echoing the traditions and rituals of the past. The masks appear suspended in a circle from the ceiling, floating, as if they are being worn by an unseen presence.
In her practice, Zoë Paul works primarily with sculpture and textiles, exploring the character of domestic spaces, in particular the point where the threshold between the interior and exterior disappears.

In this piece, Our Bodies, In Fragmented Gesture, Paul utilises traditional crafting techniques, which she combines with found objects – often industrial waste. Hand-rolled beads which have been fired at different temperatures to create a range of earthy tones, are woven together to create a scene portraying nude figures in motion, reminiscent of ancient Greek and Roman murals.
Lubaina Himid

Lubaina Himid is an artist whose work focuses on themes of cultural history and reclaiming identities. *Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service*, is a collection of old ceramic plates, bowls and jugs, purchased in Lancaster, overpainted by the artist to explore the city’s role in the slave trade, telling a new story while still being able to hear the echoes of the old one.

Himid’s work is politically charged, tackling questions of race, gender and class by contrasting the delicate, decorative crockery with images of slaves, African textile patterns, white gentry and goods associated with the slave trade, like sugar and tobacco.

*Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service, 2007*

*Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London*
Francis Upritchard makes colourful, figurative sculptures that tread a line between realism and fantasy, appearing familiar, yet alien in appearance.

*Hot Future, Buey* and *Four Dead* depict strange figures wearing vibrant traditional costumes from around the world. Made from polymer clay and multicoloured textiles, Upritchard’s figures seem to be taking part in some sort of pageant or masquerade, with expressions that are meditative and soulful, as if they are deep in contemplation.

*Four Dead, 2017*
Francis Upritchard
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.
Photography: Angus Mill
Jonathan Baldock works across multiple mediums including sculpture, installation and performance.

Baldock’s *Maske* series is saturated with humour and wit, channeling his long standing interest in mythology and folklore. Through this work, the artist playfully explores the symbolic function of masks and examines the communicative potential of clay. Using brightly coloured glazes and animated expressions, Baldock creates forms that are simultaneously comical, mischievous and macabre.

Maske XXXIII, 2021

Jonathan Baldock

Antony Gormley is known for his sculptures, installations and public artworks that investigate the relationship of the human body to space, often using his own body to create the work.

*Blanket Drawing I* examines the registration of the position of a sleeping body on a blanket covered in clay. The body creates an absence in the clay, giving the illusion that it’s floating. Using white clay and linseed oil on a white blanket, Gormley plays on notions of presence and absence, encouraging the viewer to consider the way their own body interacts with space, objects and the bodies of others.
Renee So’s work spans numerous traditional craft techniques including ceramics, print and hand-woven textiles.

So explores representations of female figures in prehistoric cultures, mythology and archaeology through a feminist lens. So’s work playfully upends preconceived notions of traditional crafting techniques, her sculptures Woman and Untitled are reminiscent of ancient artefacts that depict fertility goddesses – the most famous example being the Venus of Willendorf, a Venus figurine estimated to have been made around 25,000 years ago. Venus of Valdivia is a drawing made up of a number of tiles, where two female forms are depicted in earth tones, referencing several genres of prehistoric art and pottery.
*William Cobbing*’s art practice encompasses a diverse range of media, including video, photography and installation.

In *Long Distance*, Cobbing examines how human relationships can be expressed through clay; performative encounters are devised using the material. The two protagonists are engaged in a repetitive cycle of manipulating formless surfaces, communicating a real engagement with material and touch. This piece rejects the notion that art made of clay should be static objects of beauty and utility. Instead, Cobbing explores the malleable nature of the unfired clay, using the material as an extension of the body.

*Long Distance, 2018*  
*William Cobbing*  
Courtesy of the artist
Ai Weiwei

Ai Weiwei is renowned for making strong aesthetic statements that resonate with current issues across today’s geopolitical world.

*Porcelain Vase (Crossing of the Sea)* examines displacement, made in response to the ongoing refugee crisis.Referencing traditional Chinese art, the piece depicts refugees’ desperate attempts to cross a treacherous sea to safety. *Remains* consists of life-size porcelain replicas of human bones that were excavated from an archaeological dig at a Chinese ‘re-education’ camp that operated under Chairman Mao in the 1950s. The delicate porcelain becomes a subversive vehicle for asking us to look closely at a wide range of contemporary social and political issues including violence, oppression and Chinese identity and social history.

*Remains, 2015*  
Ai Weiwei  
© Ai Weiwei; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery
Rachel Kneebone’s intricate works address and question the human condition. Working in porcelain, the material properties of her work further heighten and convey an awareness of opposing states, appearing to be not only heavy, solid and strong but also light, delicate and soft.

In *Whirl*, Kneebone depicts a mass of swirling tendrils, limbs and ribbons, unified as one in porcelain. Giving the illusion of bodies in motion, these swirling forms merge together as one, creating a sense of movement, so that her art is always alive with possibility.

*Whirl*, 2017
Rachel Kneebone
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube
Working across a diverse range of media including painting, drawing, print, textiles, and sculpture, Tal R questions our conceptions of and presumptions about our surrounding reality - what we’re seeing and where its meaning lies.

In creating Scholar’s Palace, the artist used the traditional Japanese firing technique of Raku, a notoriously unpredictable process, which colours the clay’s surface according to the intensity of its exposure to the smoke. The result is an almost creature-like abstract form, evocative of Chinese Scholar’s rocks, Gongshi – formations valued for their aesthetic properties, traditionally used for meditation.
Through a collaboration of clay animation and atmospheric scores, Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg create psychologically charged work that explores human emotions and animalistic desires.

In *Dark Side of the Moon*, clay vignettes tell the story of the moon and other protagonists in a series of interwoven twisted fairytales. Made from modelling clay the figures resemble children’s storybook characters but on closer inspection reveal a dark and menacing side.

*Dark Side of the Moon, 2017*
Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg
© Nathalie Djurberg & Hans Berg; Courtesy of Lisson Gallery
Oliver Beer’s family relationships often inform his multi-disciplinary work, engaging with personal yet universal concerns such as the sound and memories contained within possessions.

*Resonance Vessels (British Quartet)* is a series of items that were once owned by the artist himself or his family — including jugs, vases and garden ornaments — creating a family portrait of objects that “hum and sing as a wine glass may when a finger traces its rim”. The sound produced is determined by the object’s specific volume and geometry, responding to the viewer’s interaction with the vessels in the gallery space.

*Resonance Vessel, 2021*
Oliver Beer

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © the artist.
Image courtesy of the artist and Thaddeus Ropac, London
Lindsey Mendick’s work playfully combines the everyday and the mundane with elaborate sculptural installations, enabling the viewer to explore the personal history of the artist.

Cigs, Sushi, Tea and Putin tell the parallel tales of the artist’s experience of having a nervous breakdown at the age of eighteen, forcing her to leave art school and return to her parent’s home and the poisoning of their neighbour, Russian Spy Alexander Litvinenko. These colourful works illustrate this episode depicting the sushi bar where the first attempt to poison him occurred, the teapot referring to the tea that was poisoned with polonium, the artist herself cautiously peering out of her window, looking for spies, and Vladimir Putin, who allegedly ordered the poisoning.
Shawanda Corbett’s work examines the human body through cyborg theory and the artist’s own experience as a Black woman with a differently-abled body.

In *It was just yesterday* and *Now go around the corner and get your brother*, the artist herself appears with a defiant expression, masked in clay marked with gestural lines, like a second skin. Corbett relates to the malleability of the material as life, time and environments shift continuously.

*It was just yesterday, 2021*
Shawanda Corbett
Ryan Gander’s work connects the overlooked and the mundane with abstract, complex ideas.

*Spending Time* is a vending machine holding a variety of small sculptures that are marked with longitude and latitude coordinates, ISBN10 or ASIN identifications and numbers referencing historically significant dates. Viewers can purchase an object for £10. The work raises questions of function, cost, tactility, ownership, and authorship of art, giving the audience the opportunity to take home a piece of art for themselves.
Further Reading and Resources

Pio Abad
www.pioabad.com

Zoë Paul
www.zoepaul.studio

Lubaina Himid
www.lubainahimid.uk
www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/lubaina-himid-2356

Jonathan Baldock
www.jonathan-baldock.com

Francis Upritchard
www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/francis-upritchard-7285

Antony Gormley
www.antonygormley.com
www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/antony-gormley-1192

Renee So
www.katemacgarry.com/artists/50-renee-so

William Cobbing
www.cookelathamgallery.com/artists/38-william-cobbing/biography/

Ai Weiwei
www.aiweiwei.com
www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ai-weiwei-8208

Rachel Kneebone
www.whitecube.com/artists/artist/rachel_kneebone

Tal R
www.victoria-miro.com/artists/16-tal-r

Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg
www.lissongallery.com/artists/nathalie-djurberg-hans-berg

Oliver Beer
www.oliverbeer.co.uk
www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/explore/artist/beer-oliver

Lindsey Mendick
www.lindseymendick.com
www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/explore/artist/mendick-lindsey

Shawanda Corbett
www.shawandacorbett.com
www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk/explore/artist/corbett-shawanda

Ryan Gander
www.lissongallery.com/artists/ryan-gander
www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ryan-gander-9102
Acknowledgements

This education pack has been written for Chapter by Catrin Wallace, MA Curating student at University of the West of England.

We’d love to hear feedback and see how your students have interacted with the exhibition.

Please share your images and responses with us using #HumanConditionsOfClay

To arrange a school trip to visit this exhibition, please contact learning@chapter.org

For more information about Chapter, visit www.chapter.org

Swallow Hard: The Lancaster Dinner Service (detail), 2007
Lubaina Himid
Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London