

Beth Alden: I'm Beth Alden CEO at New Brewery Arts. Welcome to Craft Conversations, a series of podcasts talking to people about craft.

Today I'm at [Fireworks Clay Studios in Cardiff](#). Fireworks is a studio space for 20 people all working in ceramics. I'm here to meet with *A Language of Clay* curator, Ceri Jones, and two of the ceramicists involved in the project Zoe Preece and Lisa Kriegel. I've been invited to earwig-in on their conversation about their work and the exhibition. You might hear some train noises in the background because their studios are just on the edge of the train line, but don't worry about that. I'm going to quickly introduce them all, and then I'll leave them to have a good chat.

[Lisa Kriegel](#) is an award-winning artist who creates functional sculptural ceramics that explore and develop forms that are found in modern and brutalist construction. Investigating the relationship between food and architecture she's currently building stacked ware that when deconstructed introduces theatre to communal dining.

Lisa Kriegel: Yes, Oh, sorry, hi.

BA: [Zoe Preece](#) has exhibited both nationally and internationally. She was selected for Award, British Ceramic Biennale 2019 and her work is in public collections in the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff and The Museum of Craft and Design in Denver. Her work focuses on everyday domestic objects and ordinary scenes. She uses porcelain to engage with the intangible and emotive aspects of life through material processes and form.

Zoe Preece: Hi there.

BA: Ceri Jones is half of a partnership called [Fieldwork](#) who work across the arts, developing new initiatives and responding to collaborative projects. Rooted in the visual and Applied Arts in Wales, Ceri has developed the *Language of Clay* solo exhibitions which have taken place across Wales since 2017. Last year we asked Ceri if she'd like to extend the project with a group exhibition, *A Language of Clay*, at New Brewery Arts.

Ceri Jones: Hello. Nice to be here.

Ceri Jones: So, as Beth mentioned, we're at Fireworks Studios. You've both moved into Wales, and both made Fireworks your creative home for a number of years actually now. I'm just going to take you back a little bit and just explore a little bit what brought you to Wales? What brought you to Cardiff? And if you could touch on some training along the way, because I know Zoe you trained here, Lisa you trained a long way away. So maybe Zoe first if you just tell us about what brought you here?

Zoe Preece: Well I came originally to Cardiff to study on my first degree at Cardiff School of Art and Design, many years ago now. It was there I suppose I mean in terms of the work I make now whether the last pieces of work, although they were very different from the work I make now I was using lead glazes. Actually, I was working with very traditional vessels and I was breaking them down and I was recreating them out of kind of quite ordinary broken bits of domestic ware, and they were glazed with these quite fluid lead glazes. And there was one incident right near the end of my degree actually when I must have missed-fired (basically over fired) the kiln, and a lot of the lead glazes flowed off the vessel onto the kiln shelf, which

at the time was horrific because the technician at the time Jock - Jock is wonderful, I love, was also terrifying, and he was furious. But I was really totally taken by all of the drips coming off the bottom of the vessel and I suppose that was the probably the origin of my real kind of starting point of the use of flux in the work I make now.

CJ: And that was, that was a while ago. How about you Lisa.

Lisa Kriegel: Okay, even more of a little while ago. For me, I'm from New York, and I went to Alpha University and at the time it was in New York State College of Ceramics, doing my undergraduate degree. It was a fine art kind of a place where there was a liberal arts requirement as well, so not only were we doing our work but we were also doing some other stuff as well. I was 17 when I went to university so I was quite young, I think that for me University was a place where I grew as a person, as well as an artist, to try and figure out who I was, what I wanted to do and how you know what do I have to say at 17. So, I started to make work having to do with my personal experiences. And the turning point for me was I moved into a cabin in the woods with my boyfriend, as you do, when you're young and I lived there for two years. It was the walk in the woods that started me looking at Japanese and minimalist forms and what it feels like to be inside of a wintery space. So, it was about installation, it was about simple forms. Weirdly, those kind of things with things that have come back, I think, into my current work those really simple, simple, simple ways of thinking about form. And Alpha was a really interesting place in itself because not only did we need to learn about what we were doing aesthetically, it was a fine art college-university, so we had to study lots of different processes. It was the ideas that that you develop and then you decide how you want to make those ideas happen. So you have all of these skills so when I found that ceramics was what I wanted to do, then you sort of focus more and more on than technical side of things. I had an amazing technical background, which was really good. So, if I want to make something I think of the thing, and then I think how am I going to do that, and I have the technical skills in order to do it. So my practice, up until this point, has been varied. And it's because of the ability to use any, any ceramic material and make it do what I wanted to do for that idea.

CJ: So you touched on there that you started working with ceramic materials quite early on, so in college there was obviously quite a swift, physical, emotive response you must have had to the material. Was it to the material, or was it to what it could do - the qualities and the technicalities? Because you said you had a very technical, teaching, learning.

LK: It was both, it was a fine art thought process, so you know we were learning all sorts of things. Also, they would ask you questions; why, why, why, why, why are you doing that what is motivating you to do that and what materials do you want to use to make that idea the best possible idea. At the time, I wasn't too happy with it, it was really hard, we were taught ceramic raw materials and clay technology by a, an engineer. It was really dry, and it was really horrible and boring, but you know, thinking back to those days, I'm glad because it gave me the skills that I need. And I'm not scared to try something, and that's what it's because I've got the knowledge I think I'll just try it, see what happens. And that's you know in order to be to get the best out of yourself, you need to make lots of failures in order to get the good stuff. I think it's combination of both, but I fell in love with the material.

CJ: And Zoe, how about your passion and physical attachment to ceramic as a material? What is it about porcelain in particular now for you, what is it about porcelain that compels you to work with it and use it and bend it to your will?

ZP: It's an interesting material really porcelain. So, I do actually work in, with wood I've just recently started working with wood as well but traditionally I've worked in with clay and ceramics, and I suppose in terms of more broadly the thing that I really love about clay and ceramic, I think the thing that I'm drawn to the most is its capacity to exist in these different states, and the way that it moves between states. And I think my work the craft element of it is really integral. It's very much integral to the concept of the work that I'm making, and ideas are a really important part of my work. And this movement between states for me becomes quite metaphoric, and it's quite a useful metaphor. When I'm trying to expose a lot of the time I'm exploring human-ness and what it is to be human and I feel this movement where you know, clay is dug from the earth it's wet and sticky. You add liquid to it becomes this slippery slip that I can pour. You put it into the kiln it becomes brittle and hard but at the top temperatures it will become fluid again and that really excites me. And I suppose porcelain for lots of reasons the subject matter that I return to tends to be very ordinary prosaic moments of daily life. And I suppose a lot of the time there's an endeavor to revalue or to question status, and porcelain for me works very well it's very fine, it holds a certain value, it holds a certain status, so I like it for that reason that by recreating very ordinary objects that we're using every day in a very fine material it immediately kind of starts to ask questions.

But I think it's also that it is very fine, and it is very sensitive and that for many people that's why they hate porcelain. Because it can drive you crazy. But I really love it for that reason. I think because it really requires your full attention, it really requires your time. It remembers what you do to it, it's very sensitive to your touch, it has a sense of aliveness to it. I think material for me is an important part of the ideas and so I feel like I'm in relation with it you see, I feel like I'm really having a conversation with it when I'm working with it. Particularly because of the porcelain shapes I'm making are very refined and they're very specific and I do require them to be right. I'm not using porcelain in that way where I'm happy for it to do its thing in the kiln and move around, I really wanted to have a correct rim on a colander or a saucepan. And there's a demand that I feel like it makes of me, but I feel like there's something about that effort to craft that object in this particular fine material. For me there's a sense I'm dignifying this object which has been used many, many times and is possibly looked over in that effort.

CJ: You describe it very beautifully, and that relationship between idea, concept, material. But then, yes your relationship as an artist with both of those and how it all interrelates and overlaps.

ZP: I say that but I have been (Lisa has been witness to this) driven almost to the point of point of tears for certain. You can put a perfect raw clay porcelain piece in a kiln. But at a certain temperature, you know, at 1260° it really starts to move in the kiln again. And I can use setters and I use alumina hydrate to try and to retain shapes and forms, but it you just don't know sometimes what's going to make it move in a particular way and there were certain forms where it felt like it was never going to get there with them really.

CJ: which ones?

ZP: The Colander, particularly it was that one. I made so many of them before I got one out flawless, it was just, it was a journey. But it was an interesting journey you know, and I think you know it's one of those ones where you really have to question your process and why you're doing it. Actually I think it was through that journey but I really, I really felt the integral aspect of the craft process for me that that I was trying to instill this dignity to these objects and this effort to go about it felt right in a way.

CJ: I think it instills a real reverence in those objects, and as you say appreciating something about that every day that you pass over but that is integral to that everyday domestic or workplace, whatever it might be, sort of activities.

Can I just stay with you a minute. I just want to explore that relationship of concept and craft just a little bit more, because as you said that being able to realise an idea in a material form, having the technical and physical abilities to do that is hugely important you can't underestimate, I don't think, those abilities and skills that you need to acquire in order to achieve that, and especially working in porcelain and as you do. The ideas for you are paramount. The ideas come first, obviously there's an area that you want to explore. But then, do you allow the material to lead you in any way into exploring that? Or is it very much, as you said, you try time and time again to make the form absolutely perfect as you want it in that sort of initial making do you allow the material to lead you at all?

ZP: It's quite interesting that. Well, I had an interesting experience I have some training with Sasha Wardell in mould and model making in plaster and slip casting, and she's a real master of that. It was revelatory to me actually. What was interesting was it was very different from the training you have on a degree, which I think is much more ideas led, you come up against a problem you learn the process, I think that's much more how it's taught at art school. Whereas this was really a process, training, I went to learn process. And what I found, actually found that, you know, in terms of the work on making out, it was probably one of the, it was like a real pivotal moment for me, because what I learned was how to create a bone china cup from scratch. You know, so I carved on the lathe the body of the cup and handle by hand in plaster and I made a mould of them and then I cast it in bone china. And I had this moment, almost like an enlightenment moment for me where, when it came out of the kiln, Sasha brought it out of the kiln, she gave me my bone china cup. And I was in awe of this cup, I was just in a place of wonder at this cup. And I suppose it's because I knew the raw materials I'd made it from, and I knew the whole process to get there and there was this really fine bone china cup there. It was almost like it was the first time I'd seen a cup, it was that kind of feeling. And I'd say it was really integral because that feeling I really wanted to somehow elicit in the work I made that sense of wonder at something very ordinary, cups are probably the most kind of ubiquitous object, we're constantly holding them, to almost feel like I was seeing it for the first time again felt like a really a wonderful thing. I think that is creativity in a way, that's what we're endeavoring to do as artists all the time is, how do you see as if you've seen for the first time. So, you know, in terms of answering your question I felt that was absolute process that led to really an idea.

CJ: I'd like to explore process a little bit with you Lisa actually very different. Well, I was going to say very different but that's not true philosophically. Do you want to talk about that relationship, between concept or idea, and then the actual making of a finished piece?

LK: It's really interesting because it's similar. The relationship with clay and I just forget you know I don't think of it in the terms that Zoe just mentioned, which is exactly the same thing. The material that I use weirdly (because I put stains into a clay body) acts similarly to porcelain, unfortunately, because of what I've done to it. I have used porcelain before, but for me it would be inappropriate for this particular work that I do.

Usually ideas for me come in lots of different ways, usually from seeing. This particular body of work is from two ways, I went to the dark side by going and see [Goya's Black Paintings](#) in the Prado. That was the beginning that turned me from being fully kitch to going to the dark side. And then I went to Berlin, and I saw the [Eisenman Holocaust Memorial](#), and the stones and stelae of that piece of work blew me away. And I started making pieces sort of not stacking them at the time but sort of making those kinds of pieces. Research sort of underpins things that I do, I'm always looking. So I looked up Eisenman in research that he's an architect who makes modern brutalist buildings and this work I'm doing now, it just the whole package for me, it creates sculptural forms that are reminiscent of those kind of buildings, and the early 1960s buildings of the concrete, horrible, ugly things that governments put into place so lots of people from different cultures and worlds would come and live together and people had to be with each other. I quite like the idea of people having to come together and their differences are laid out on a table, and usually the best place to do that is around food. So that combination of unpacking, being able to unpack the work and take down those layers, as if people coming together around a dinner table and slowing people down and having conversations. Somehow it evolved in my brain in some weird way.

(ZP: Lisa is a great cook as well.)

LK: I do like cooking. It is part of it. I think it just took me a long time to grow up to being the person who I am. It took me years and years and years and doing all sorts of other jobs and not being able to just focus on this particular practice. I think that the opportunities of living in this country and being able to travel through Europe, and being able to teach on a university course and all those things have made me grow up and develop the work that I'm doing now, which is probably the most mature thing that I've done.

CJ: Going back to thinking about yours Zoe, and the domestic, it's not just domestic objects, it's the culinary again, that partaking of shared moments together. You bring a very keen sense of your relationship to those domestic objects to the making of them. Other people will bring a whole load of nuanced other references to bear. Do you mind in a way that people will interpret your work in a wonderful array of different ways, different responses?

ZP: No I don't mind that at all. I think that's part of, I think that's the invitation in a way. Partly that's why that subject matter is so important to me, it's prosaic it's ordinary. The domestic realm is inhabited to a greater or lesser extent by everyone so there's a way in for everyone. And that feels important to me because ultimately, even though I'm talking about

these very prosaic kind of activities, it is the human-ness underneath that I'm endeavoring to express.

It was interesting at The Eisteddfod that piece of work was the washing up on a table, and it was titled '*An Archive of Longing*' and the table that sat next to it was the part-cleared table which was the CNC milled surface was titled '*The Way the Earth Remembers Our Bodies*'. I wanted to express, longing, that human experience of longing. I was a mother from quite a young age, and I spent a lot of my younger years as a woman really embedded in the domestic realm, that was my world for a long time, and there was a longing in there for me, of other aspects of myself.

I think for me the porcelain, I spend so much time removing any trace of any kind of hand on those objects, they're untouched. I want there almost to be a longing to touch them, and I feel that they almost have a longing to be touched.

Interestingly, at the Eisteddfod a poet was asked to respond to some of the works, and they wrote a poem about my work and possibly it was in response to the title '*The Way the Earth Remembers Their Bodies*' but their response was to do with World War One, and those killed, and obviously it wasn't what was in my mind at all but it was so interesting, people bring their own memories to it. I remember another person coming to talk to me and saying '*oh you know I grew up in the valleys, and when I look at this, the first thing I thought of was my mum, she used to have this kitchen table and everyone used to come and sit around our table from all sorts of different people would come*' and he told me his story, and that was just perfect in a way, that was exactly, for me, what I would hope for.

CJ: I find your work incredibly poignant, and I think because it is so perfectly pristinely finished, and as you say almost untouched. It just makes you stop in your tracks and pause, and you know you need to give yourself a moment to share time with the work. You talked about capturing a moment in time. And that's probably quite easily illustrated through the glaze pouring off your spoons like just capturing a moment. Did that come to you after you'd made the pieces and you were presenting them together as a body or were you conscious as you were making them about moments in time?

ZP: I think it's actually just been one of those things that probably is underneath all of the work that I've made that was really an early starting point for me. You asked us a question earlier about our education and my master's I found this this object it was a kiln waster, I should probably describe what a kiln waster, it's basically an object that's used to pack a kiln in order to regulate the movement of heat around that kiln it is not is not intended for use outside of that. Anyway, there's kiln waster, you know for lots of reasons I loved it I found it in the V&A and, and it had this this glaze pooling in the bottom of it. Obviously, the glaze was hard, but it looked like it was still pooling and that was quite an important object. It felt like it embodied lots of different things for me, it was around that time that I started becoming really interested in these kind of inbetween spaces, or this point of transition I just was really taken with this idea of language we categorise and define this is that, and this is that, and I've just become very intrigued I suppose, curious to what you know what happened in those spaces in between this and that. I feel like still life in a way, I love still life paintings which is interesting, I never used to love, to like paintings I used to walk past or like paintings and think

'god they're so boring', but now I really love them for that reason that you just said, that they invite you, they almost demand that you stop and pay them attention, otherwise you don't notice anything really. When you do stop you notice so much, they are in that space between what just happened and what's about to happen, they've caught, they are a space, and I'm always interested I think somehow kind of capturing that space, really.

CJ: How about you, Lisa, we're in your studio and surrounded by pictures and postcards of architecture and images but is there is there one that you return to as a touchstone almost?

LK: So terms of form the other artist which would have gone back to just really bizarre is a person called [Miralda](#). He's an installation artist but he also uses food in his practice as installations of food and I was fortunate enough to see a massive exhibition by him in MACBA in Barcelona. And I suppose that it's happened now three times relatively recently, the Goya paintings, the Eisenman Holocaust Memorial, and this Miralda installations of dealing with food and film and stuff. That was another thing it's always in the back of my head 'how do I incorporate this within the whole thing?' and all of these things are always swirling around in my head in various ways.

CJ: Lots of strains all coming together.

LK: Food is coming more and more and more, now that I'm especially, thinking about this upcoming exhibition. I'm always thinking about what's gonna look like with food in it, on it, near it. How can I push that, you know, so there's this connection between food and these pieces of work, and that's a real Miralda thing that he does.

CJ: I'm looking forward to my piece of brutalist cake on your platters. Thank you very much. It's really interesting and lovely to hear those insights really myriad of insights. Thank you. Thank you so much.

BA: That was an amazing conversation. Thank you so much. It's a real privilege to earwig in on that and to sit quietly in the corner of the studio and just let that unfold so thank you so much. There's another little question that I really wanted to ask, which isn't really related to that whole conversation, it's about your relationship with how make things. I just want to ask you both, if there's a little handmade object that you have in your life that is important to you? Zoe is there anything that you hold?

ZP: To be honest, the object that comes to mind isn't one that I have in my life, but it is an object which I have a great love for but it actually originates from 2000 BC. So, but it's an object, and she's called a [Bactrian Princess](#), and she would have been carved from stone. And she would have been the one great goddess who pacifies natural forces, that's what she was known for. And there's something about that object which I have had her on my wall for years and years and years and I would love to have that object but it wouldn't be right, I would love to hold those stones that have been carved she, but she sits so dignified like so still for me she's something that something like a still life painting about her, she's so still and dignified and there's something about knowing that she's the pacifier of the natural forces of the world, that in terms of my work in some ways there was something of that, you know, and I didn't ever make the connection for a long time but then I thought there's something about the stillness of the work but I'm trying to somehow talk about the human, maybe more wilder,

more longing feelings that exist underneath. And I feel like she kind of contains all of that somehow.

BA: You'll have to show me that picture. Lisa is there a handmade thing?

LK: Well there's one okay there's a couple things. I'm very, very fortunate to have lots of friends who are artists, and I have lots of beautiful handmade things and paintings in my house. So, I live with them, and I love them all of them, and they are my community of my friends and all the people that I've known in the past, and I know now, so that's quite lovely. But I also have some handmade spoons that I use quite a lot that are sometimes in photographs in my work they are silver spoons. They are used when I have big parties and dinner party so they're also connected to all those people who have given me the artwork, but they have to use the spoons. I think it would be really sad to just pick one.

BA: Thank you for your time this morning it's been a real joy and a pleasure. And thank you, Carrie. For more information about a language of play, you can visit www.languageofclayWales. And you can also find links to Zoe and Lisa at www.fireworksclaystudios.com. A Language of Clay is at New Brewery Arts from the 27th of March until the 31st of May, 2020¹, we'll be using the hashtag #LanguageofClay if you want to follow the conversation.

For more information about New Brewery Arts. You can find us on our website, www.newbreweryarts.org.uk and you can find us on social media using @NewBreweryArts. And finally, I'd like to thank Stephen at Overcoat Media for his help with this podcast today. So, thank you very much. Thank you for listening, and we hope you'll join us for the next conversation.

¹ The exhibition dates were changed due to COVID-19 Lockdown. New dates are 01 August – 03 October 2020