



# New Territories

British, Nepalese and American influences inspire Ani Kasten's ceramics. She outlines her search.



1 *Sea Sponge Forms*, black stoneware with glaze, 2007, H46cm max 2 Ani Kasten in the studio at her residency, Red Dirt Studio, Mount Rainier, Maryland, USA (Photo Margaret Boozer)



In May of 2000 I travelled to Shropshire to begin an apprenticeship with Rupert Spira, at Church Farm in the village of More. I had met Rupert through a family friend and visited the Spiras over the Christmas holidays a few years before that when I was a student in English Literature at the University of Michigan. Never having touched clay before, my visit to Church Farm was to change my life. I fell in love with the quiet, delicate forms Rupert was creating – his masterful, thin-walled throwing technique, the spare, luminous glazes and minimal shapes, perfect in their slight irregularity. I begged him to take me as a student and, in May of 2000, I began my journey in ceramics. At Church Farm I received a wonderfully rigorous and comprehensive training, Rupert's extensive knowledge of clay and glaze chemistry, his utter intolerance of forms made without attention to balance and harmony, and his reverence for beauty

found in simplicity are qualities that I carry with me in my approach to ceramics today.

**CHURCH FARM** At Church Farm I began by making functional ware inspired by Rupert's minimalist forms and subtle eye for colour. The potter's wheel continues to provide the foundation for all of my work. Seven years later my ceramics have departed from the realm of function and have become increasingly sculptural. However, I remain rooted to the craft tradition in my fascination with glaze and clay chemistry, and especially in my efforts to cultivate harmony and beauty in form while throwing in repetition. This way of working is a meditation on creating balance and integrity while maintaining the spontaneity and rhythm that keeps each piece alive.

I often produce my work in families or groups so that I can continue to observe and develop a shape, while at the same time allowing each piece to be unique. My time in England was formative for me in that I became intrigued by the studio pottery tradition that is such an important part of British culture. I respect and revere the lineage, extending back from Rupert, to Michael Cardew and then Bernard Leach, with his many connections to Japanese traditional pottery, and try to hold this as a thread of continuity in the work I make.

**NEPAL** Much joy and inspiration comes to me from learning about the traditional techniques and materials of other cultures. After my two years in England, I travelled to Kathmandu, Nepal, where I lived and worked for nearly five years. I made my studio there and built a brick kiln with the help of two friends from a community of Nepalese potters with whom I became very close. The natural clay of the Kathmandu Valley is red earthenware and I began using that to make pots which I then black-fired in a bed of rice husks. I also made glazed earthenware pieces fired with oil in the brick kiln.

My influences while in Kathmandu included artefacts from antiquity such as containers made from copper and wood, Buddhist stupas and religious objects such as vessels for offering incense. Over the years I created many ceramic objects based on these traditional forms. I had much opportunity as well to learn about unrefined ceramic materials and began working with unprocessed clay, straight from the ground, as well as with glaze materials containing many 'impurities'. My work transitioned during this time from the pure, minimal, sleek-looking pots I was making at Rupert's, to pieces with a rougher, more primitive and natural aesthetic.



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While in Nepal, I applied for and received some grant funding to create the first stoneware pottery facility in the country. I worked closely with two Nepalese brothers at their family's pottery (called Thimi Ceramics) in the village of Thimi, just outside Kathmandu. Thimi is a traditional pottery-making centre and has been producing ceramics for hundreds of years. The potters there were working with the local terracotta clay, and trying to produce glazed earthenware tableware, with limited success, due to chipping, leaking and a generally poor aesthetic appearance of the ware.

Over the course of four years, our grant funding allowed us to build stoneware kilns, formulate high-fire clay from local materials, test mid-range stoneware glazes, and begin producing stoneware tableware for the first time in Nepal. I also designed for them a range of dinnerware and trained fourteen potters to produce the range that is now being sold in select stores in the USA and the UK.

**OAKLAND** I returned to the US at the end of 2005 and established my studio in Oakland, California, where I worked for the next two years. This was my first real chance to focus exclusively on my own work and continue to develop intensively the ceramic language I

had cultivated in England and Nepal. In California, my sources of inspiration came from my nearby surroundings of ocean and rocky coast as well as a landscape of urban and industrial decay. My studio is housed in a ramshackle former industrial building in a desolate neighbourhood near the harbour in Oakland, a city known for violence and extreme urban poverty. All of the corroded metal and abandoned factory buildings juxtaposed with the fresh, natural beauty of the California coast have provided a fertile landscape that I continue to draw upon in my work.

My sculptural pieces inhabit the meeting point between natural and manmade realms. The vessels take their influence from plants, water, rocks and clay, as well as from architecture, industry and machines. My pieces are expressions of the effects that these two realms have on one another in their convergence and I conceive of

**3** *Rectangular Pillow Pot*, white stoneware with slips and crater glaze, 2007, W37cm  
**4** *Boats; Series III*, black stoneware with slips and glazes, 2007, H17cm  
**5** *Black and White Skein Pot*, black stoneware with white slip, 2007, H47cm  
**6** *Snow Deer*, black stoneware with glazes, 2007, H56cm max  
**7** *Lookout II*, black stoneware with slips and glazes, 2006, H62cm

**Technical Information** See page 68

**Photography** Steven Cummings and Peter Honig

**Forthcoming Exhibitions** Kobo at Higo, Seattle, Washington, USA, July 2008; Kasten Fine Art, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, USA, August 2008

**Stockists** Cross MacKenzie Ceramic Arts, Washington DC, USA; Kasten Fine Art, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, USA; Kobo at Higo, Seattle, Washington, USA; Project 4 Gallery, Washington DC, USA; Vessel, Berkeley, California, USA

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my forms by integrating both aesthetic worlds into one piece, or group of pieces, such as creating a stand of bamboo-like, truncated cylinders and perforating them with small windows to look like corroded skyscrapers. Or I will begin by making a simple, pure form such as a smooth sphere, carving into the surface with an off-centre, wandering imprint, like bird tracks in the sand.

**RED DIRT STUDIO** More recently, I have been an artist-in-residence at a ceramic sculpture seminar called Red Dirt Studio, in Mount Rainier, in Maryland. I am working closely with an artist named Margaret Boozer, who is quickly becoming another important mentor. Her work explores clay in its most natural, unrefined state, allowing the medium to inhabit what is inherent in it – running, cracking, settling into layers of sediment.

Working in proximity to Margaret has given me the opportunity to experiment with materials dug from just outside the studio. Recent pieces have included unrefined slips and glazes made from local materials, their surfaces peppered with chunks of basalt. As creative expressions of form, movement and texture, my work is infused with a modern, minimal aesthetic while at the same time reminding one of a natural or ancient object exposed to the rigours of time. As does nature, my vessels often incorporate repeated markings and patterns, and explore asymmetry while retaining their balance, lightness and quietude of form. **CB**