

SPOTLIGHT

Inventing the Rest: Memories Fired in Ceramics

Lustrous glazes, animal bones, rice, and rich red earth adorn distinct vessels at London gallery Maximillian William.



Exhibition view: Group Exhibition, *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.

By Tessa Moldan – 3 August 2023, London

With materiality attesting to cultural erasure, *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay* (29 June–14 September 2023) traverses themes of memory and place, featuring sculptures by artists Adebunmi Gbadebo, Anina Major, and Andrés Monzón-Aguirre. It is the third in a series of exhibitions at the gallery centred around formal and cultural explorations in ceramic sculpture.

The first of these exhibitions, *Embodying Anew*, brought together work by [Simone Leigh](#), [Magdalene Odundo](#), and [Thaddeus Mosley](#) in 2021. This was followed by *A Passion for Form* in 2022, which featured ceramic and fibre works from the collection of Dr Brian Harding, including by Peter Collingwood and [Hans Coper](#).



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In the gallery’s latest exhibition, bisque-brown walls surround eight ceramic sculptures presented in a single room. The sculptures are placed on walnut tables topped with matte stainless steel, designed by London-based furniture maker Theodore Vass. The largest table forms an arc extending across one corner of the room, showcasing five sculptures on its soft silver surface.

The muted tones of the walls and Vass’ tables draw attention to the sculptures’ details and surfaces. This is an exhibition of transcendent objects, with the hybridity of materials and forms allowing the sculptures to shift beyond expectations of functionality, while tapping into experiences of cultural dislocation.



Left to right: Anina Major, *MAJESTY* (2023); Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, *Égida (Gallina Ciega)* (2023). Exhibition view: *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.

In her practice, Anina Major focuses on the Bahamian tradition of plait—a traditional craft involving the weaving of straw into functional objects such as baskets and fans, now largely produced for the tourist market.

“I’m trying to show that there is value in the practice, in this craft, beyond economics,’ she has explained.

Having learned the technique from her grandmother, Saphora Alvina Timothy Newbold (aka Mar), Major has adapted it into her ceramics practice, which she has developed from her current base in the United States. Appearing both solid and in a state of becoming, Major’s woven sculptures incorporate purposeful irregularities, such as holes and tears, alongside unexpected elements that have arisen in the kiln.



Left to right: Anina Major, *Kindred* (2023); Adebunmi Gbadebo, *In Memory of Carrie Dash, 1903–1930, Here I Lay My Burden Down, B.A.S.* (2023). Exhibition view: *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.

In *Kindred* (2023), for example, a marbled droplet of pinkish-black glaze has frozen in freefall during firing. It adorns a sculpture consisting of a teardrop shape made of woven cream strips from which a grey cylinder joins a hollowed globe atop a woven, urn-like vessel.

Through intentional glitches attributed to their surfaces, Major draws attention to the ephemeral nature of straw, highlighting the fragility of cultural heritage in the face of consumer demand. ‘I’m trying to show that there is value in the practice, in this craft, beyond economics,’ she has explained. ‘A value that, if we’re not careful, will disappear.’



Left to right: Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, *Égida (Jaguar)* (2023); Anina Major, *Plum Berry Sweetness* (2023); Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, *Bodegón (coca)* (2023). Exhibition view: *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.

Economy and cultural histories also intersect in Andrés Monzón-Aguirre’s three sculptures, each painted in arresting dark brown and black tones. In *Bodegón (coca)* (2023), 23 earthenware cocoa pods are assembled in a pyramidal structure, referencing the way that fruits and vegetables are stacked at market stalls.

The sculpture’s structure abstracts the pods from their natural origin, with *Bodegón* referencing the Spanish tradition of still-life painting from the 17th century.



Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, *Bodegón (coca)* (2023). Glazed earthenware. 48 x 35 x 33 cm. © Andrés Monzón-Aguirre. Courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

Born in Medellín, Colombia, and currently based in Brooklyn, Monzón-Aguirre reimagines ancient Colombian iconography to consider how the past informs the present.

Égida (Jaguar) and *Égida (Gallina Ciega)* (both 2023) feature the heads of animals native to the Northern Andes—the jaguar and band-winged nightjar. Resembling totems, the series’ title ‘Égida’ is the Spanish translation of the Greek word aegis, a mythological protective device referenced in the *Iliad* consisting of animal skin and a Gorgon head.

In Monzón-Aguirre’s sculptures, the jaguar and band-winged nightjar are given their own mythological status, as if anticipating their possible extinction.



Andrés Monzón-Aguirre, *Égida (Jaguar)* (2023). Glazed earthenware. 102 x 60 x 60 cm. Exhibition view: *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.

In a panel discussion with Isabella Smith, Senior Editor at *Apollo Magazine*, and artist Anina Major on the occasion of Maximillian William’s exhibition *A Passion for Form* last year, Monzón-Aguirre discussed their interest in ancient objects. They noted that when such objects are discovered, sometimes it is only fragments that remain, from which the rest needs to be invented.

“*New Adventures in Clay* reinforces the enduring importance of material culture.

Such reinvention is visible in Adebunmi Gbadebo’s sculptures *In Memory of June Miller, 1871–1928, Gone but Not Forgotten, H.F.S.* and *In Memory of Carrie Dash, 1903–1930, Here I Lay My Burden Down, B.A.S.* (both 2023), which combine materials drawn from the sites of former indigo and rice plantations of True Blue in Fort Motte, South Carolina.



Adebunmi Gbadebo, *In Memory of June Miller, 1871–1928, Gone but Not Forgotten, H.F.S.* (2023). Clay and bones from True Blue Plantation Cemetery, Fort Motte, SC, gas fired. 30.48 x 40.64 cm. © Adebunmi Gbadebo. Courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

Travelling to the site in 2020, Gbadebo met with Jackie Whitmore, who takes responsibility for the care and maintenance of burial grounds on True Blue and surrounding plantations. Discovering that she and Whitmore are cousins, Gbadebo spent time researching her family’s enslavement on the plantation, forging a new connection with the land.

Like Whitmore, Gbadebo’s role as an artist becomes that of a caretaker, memorialising the lives of those interred in the grief-stricken soil of True Blue. Using a West African coil technique to build her vessels, four thin animal bones adorn the uneven ridges lining the opening of *In Memory of June Miller*, as rough red earth from the cemetery rises from beneath the contrastingly smooth black pot.



Left to right: Adebunmi Gbadebo, *In Memory of Carrie Dash, 1903–1930, Here I Lay My Burden Down, B.A.S.* (2023); Anina Major, *Kindred* (2023). Exhibition view: *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.

Meanwhile, the terracotta-tinged sculpture *In Memory of Carrie Dash* contains a constellation of white specks within its vast, black interior. These specks are in fact grains of Carolina Gold rice. Once the most popular rice in the United States, it produced great wealth for plantation owners, increasing the demand for slaves from Western Africa.

In their different composites, Gbadebo’s sculptures, like Major’s and Monzón-Aguirre’s, function as vessels of time and memory. Holding valuable information about past lives and cultures, *New Adventures in Clay* reinforces the enduring importance of material culture. —[O]

Main image: Exhibition view: Group Exhibition, *Inventing the Rest: New Adventures in Clay*, Maximillian William, London (29 June–14 September 2023). Courtesy © the artists and Maximillian William, London.



TESSA MOLDAN

Tessa Moldan is a writer, painter, and secondary school art teacher based in Brighton, United Kingdom.