

# WORKS IN CLAY AND PAINT

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Travelling around the Himalayas not long ago—I can't remember if it was in Bhutan or maybe in Mustang—my attention was drawn to some small piles of dry yak excrement; hundreds of them arranged in stacks of thirty or forty flat cakes the size of a Majorcan *ensaimada* pastry, endowed with the dignity of things that are exactly what they seem.

I later learned that these wafers were in fact used as coins, and that you could buy apricots or butter, for example, with them. The parallels with the association between shit and money in our own Western culture are more than evident and have been discussed at such great length that I see no point in going into them here.

As with so many other things, it's no longer fashionable to use psychoanalysis as an approach to the act of painting, but I still remember the link between faeces and money that was established and developed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and always reminded me of an episode described by Georges Raillard in his *Entretiens* with Miró. One day Raillard arrived at Miró's studio in Son Boter, Majorca, and spotted a painting on a piece of cardboard on the floor. 'What a beautiful painting!' he exclaimed and asked the artist about an attractive brown which had grabbed his attention out of all the pigments in the work. Miró answered him laughing, 'Yes, it's shit', to which Raillard replied, 'How are you going to fix that?' 'We've fixed worse things', was Miró's answer. I've often used that expression myself because besides liking it a lot I find it very apt.

The piles of yak dung also reminded me of a story the great Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely once told me in what is now the last century. During his first trip to Paris, which would have been in the 1940s, he visited his favourite contemporary artist, who was none other than Constantin Brancusi—a fact that is in itself quite curious given the apparent disparity between these two sculptors' oeuvre—that is, the seemingly huge gulf between the motionlessness of Brancusi's works and the perpetual movement of Tinguely's. I was always surprised by the Swiss sculptor's admiration for an artist apparently so different from him, though really it shouldn't seem so paradoxical to me considering that the artist I visited on my own first trip to New York was Andy Warhol, whose way of painting is no doubt as different from mine as Brancusi's and Tinguely's sculptures are from each other. Yet I still regard him as the great American painter of the twentieth century. Anyway, going back to the anecdote told by Tinguely, it appears he noticed some piles of small, square newspaper-wrapped packages stacked up on the outside windowsill of Brancusi's studio, each about twenty or thirty levels high. Tinguely must have taken them to be variations on his infinite column—a recurring motif in Brancusi's output—or something of the sort. 'Not at all', said Brancusi when Tinguely asked him. They were in fact all the turds he had produced that year, each carefully wrapped in a sheet of *Le Parisien* and put out to dry on the window ledge so that he could burn them on his studio stove in winter—Brancusi reminded Tinguely—as his ancestors had done for millennia in the steppes between Siberia and Bucharest.

It's not my intention here to tout the wonders of faecal matter, but its connection with clay seems obvious. Aside from the Freudian aspect, what most resembles paint is clay, and what most resembles clay is shit.

In Mali, where I first learned to use clay as a material, I did so according to the local technique, mixing it with cow and camel dung, as well as with millet straw. I also fired my first works as the local craftsmen did – in a small oven that may have got up to a temperature of 400 or 500 degrees, maybe a lot less, but they are still holding up fine. And I often think that what museums call terracotta, literally baked earth, is actually just earth left to dry out in the sun, like *mojama* (salt-cured tuna).

I've always found it much easier to speak or write about my ceramics than my painting, and I now realise that ceramics is in fact like the generic of painting in the sense this word has when we talk about generic medicines.

In a way, ceramics, what we call ceramics, contains painting. And clay, as a material, is also very similar to flesh. It seems obvious, even without making reference to the biblical episode of creation. When Josef Nadj and I did our performance *Paso Doble* in Africa, what most impressed the spectators, especially children, were the palms of our hands striking the clay wall, which sounded like bottoms being smacked or slapped. In a sense this material, clay, enabled me to revisit my painting, put it in order, and view it from a certain perspective.

One of my little tricks, or maybe superstitions related to my painting—I have lots, but I think naming them brings bad luck—is to do at least one thing every day that I've never done before. It's like a private little game of mine. I remember that it all started during the long months I spent in Vietri sul Mare near Naples in 2001, when I was working in the studio of ceramist Vincenzo Santoriello on the project for Palma cathedral, a three-hundred-square-metre work made from a single piece of clay. Every day for months on end, I had to add a metre of new clay to the previous day's still-wet clay until I completed the work. Discipline, perseverance, and regularity were essential to ensuring a result that was a unified whole and not a series of fragments of bas-reliefs or tiles, which is what I wanted to avoid. I was aiming to produce a total work, single and unitary, and allow it to crack and split naturally in order to then put it together like a jigsaw, which is what I did. So, I forced myself to come up with at least one improvisation every day: using soup spoons for the ox's eyes, coffee spoons for the figures of lambs; dessert spoons and serving spoons for the eyes of the horse's head, a hairdryer to achieve the crusts of the freshly baked bread, and so on... And since then, I've sort of continued this daily challenge, which allows me above all, as far as possible, not to know exactly what I'm going to do every day.

Every work is experimental: every work is a rehearsal for another that will probably never ever exist, and I think that this applies as much to my painting as to my ceramics or to anything I make.

Lately I've come to realise that ceramics, if that's what we decide to call my clay works, are a re-examination of my painting as far as subject matter is concerned, but also techniques used. Sometimes my ceramics are like caricatures of my painting and resemble pictures I made a long time ago. Other times, however, they foreshadow them. For a time, I left some of the pots and vases I'd made that didn't quite convince me piled up around the chimney of the wood-fired kiln

where I fire ceramics. The soot and smoke that comes out of this huge chimney fully impregnated them and improved them considerably. Above all it made them ultrasensitive surfaces—an ant crawling over them left a trail, not to mention fingers or nails. After that, as in Miró's works, these imprints were fixed using appropriate conservation methods. And so I started employing the same procedure with my paintings. At the time I was using, and still use, my pottery kiln to get rid of pictures I want to destroy quickly, and there are a lot of them. A three-metre painting disappears leaving no trace at 1100 degrees. But some of these doomed pictures were given a new lease of life after being smoked and blackened with this deep black soot, the ultimate matte. In this connection I thought a lot about a Goya painting, the *Last Communion of Saint Joseph Calasanz*. I had the chance to see it when it was being restored at the Museo del Prado workshop, where I discovered that Goya had used sand, or powdered marble, in the large black background to make the black blacker; to make it more intense. It's something that's almost imperceptible to the naked eye, but if you look very closely you can see that inside the black there's an even deeper black.

My smoked and mouldy pictures allow me to employ *sgraffito* – a technique I love using; after all, scratching is a rather neurotic pleasure. I use it in etchings too, and it also enables me to discover discarded colours, which sometimes prove to be amazing, like abysmal apparitions. This soot black reminds me of Odilon Redon's black, Charles Baudelaire's black, in which flashes of colour appear amid the darkness, soon to become darkness again for good.

So, this technique—let's call it that—brings my painting and my ceramics very close together, and the result is almost the same. At Vietri sul Mare, when I started experimenting with large, more or less vertically arranged clay plaques, which almost invariably ended up toppling over like a hippopotamus that collapses when it's hit by a bullet, if a small crack appeared in what I was making Signora Rita set about filling it with slip—regardless of whether I was there or not—using a small cedarwood spatula and then unifying the surface with a tiny vinegar-soaked sponge. I pointed out to her several times that I didn't mind the cracks, that I liked *spaccature*, but she couldn't stop her tiny birdlike hands from filling them in again and again. And yet despite her efforts, these cracks, both small and large, ended up reappearing: it's what's called the memory of clay. It may seem like magic, but any cut made with a metal object in a lump of wet clay, even if it's kneaded again several times, ends up appearing later.

Clay is the material that best shows up flaws and imperfections. As Thomas Bernhard noted, not a single work in art museums is flawless; no world-famous masterpiece is truly perfect.

Clay reveals flaws, just as wet sand reveals footprints and the skin reveals caresses and scratches. In this respect too ceramics is the generic of painting.

For me painting only began to exist when I managed to come to terms with the fact that it was the sum of all my faults and imperfections. This reminds me of a workshop episode: I'd been painting a white picture—ultra-white, silver-white, white on white—when I saw that a hair of mine had fallen on the wet paint. Encouraged by the discovery, I vigorously rubbed the back of my head and sideburns until plenty of hairs and fuzz had stuck to my picture. The following morning, I couldn't believe my eyes: all that remained of the hundred or so hairs of different sizes were three or four. My assistant of more than twenty years, seeing me gazing transfixed at the picture

on the floor, spoke to me with concern: 'I don't know what happened to this painting, it was full of hairs! I spent hours picking them off with tweezers and still couldn't get them all off'. Obviously, I didn't say anything and the three or four remaining hairs became part of the painting, just as cracks are part of my ceramics. Sometimes people don't get this and it causes misunderstandings that can be quite funny. For instance, when I presented my finished work in Palma cathedral, a local newspaper published a cover-page article on how no sooner had the work been completed than it had started to crack.

It's not exactly ceramics that I make, though: it's more pieces of fired clay and sometimes not even fired, simply wet clay. I stir it, push and pull it around, but it's not just any old clay: I use clay from Felanitx, the village where I was born, which is extremely white and extremely fine; that of Apt, which is what we used for *Paso Doble* and comes from the area of Provence where Cézanne painted; that of Kanjiza, the native village of Nadj, my companion in the abovementioned performance, located in the steppes trodden by Atilla, who is buried there in a small mound beside that of his horse; or the clay of Paestum, which is what I used for Palma cathedral, and which is the same clay, from the same sites in the Campania region, that the Greeks used for their black and red ceramics.

Ceramics is a form of painting; evidently everything is a form of painting for me. But soft, almost liquid clay, slip, with its ketchup-like texture, looks a lot like my paint, except that the pictures don't always end up in the kiln.

Always with the alchemist's hope that shit will turn into gold, or that fire will give meaning to what goes in the kiln, we fire the pieces with the aid of tons of wood until they reach 1100 or 1200 degrees, which is when a major change occurs. After firing, wet clay, which is like flesh—which I recognise as flesh and treat as flesh, just as I do paint—becomes bells, demijohns, objects that can injure or cut, but also objects that are easy to break. Ceramics seem very fragile, but in a sense they're also more lasting than other artworks, perhaps because they don't have a very clear use once they've lost their specific purpose. Canvases that are painted on, apart from being burned, can also be used to build huts to shield people from the rain; in Africa I've sometimes seen my pictures being used for things like that. Woodcarvings make good firewood or can be turned into furniture, and bronzes have often been melted down to make tools, coins, or cannon, and the same is true of iron and glass. Old ceramics, in contrast, lie cracked in a dark corner, far away from people's gazes, and become invisible for as long as necessary.

All that remains of the no longer extant masterpiece of classical painting, *Achilles and the Queen of the Amazons*, is the admiring description provided by the mortals who were lucky enough to view it. The story is well known, very simple, and quite ghastly: during combat Achilles kills Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, who had arrived in Troy to help defend the city. The Greek warrior plunges his sword into her chest between her breasts, from top to bottom, a bit like a bullfighter, and when their eyes meet for the first and last time at the very moment he is slaying her, Achilles falls desperately in love with the woman dying at his hand. But it's too late: his beloved is dead and after that Achilles' life is filled with reproach and repentance.

In its day this painting gave rise to thousands of copies—which no longer survive—let's say that they bit the dust a long time ago. All that remains, in London's British Museum, is a Greek vessel

which is a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of the original work but preserves to a certain degree Achilles's fiery gaze, the emotion of that terrible moment. Although the craftsman who painted this piece had most likely produced a hundred more in the morning and did another hundred in the afternoon, this particular piece still captures something of the wonder of the mythical painting.

It's curious, as I've said, that it should be precisely a piece made of ceramic—the most fragile material—that has survived and not the great masterpiece that we assume this painting to have been. I often think about this: that maybe a fragment of one of my vessels, possibly of an octopus, a fish, or a skull, will surface in 2000 years' time when all my paintings have turned to dust and all the millions of pixels in the images have become a puzzle that's impossible to piece together.

I came across one of my favourite ceramic pieces in a national museum in Asia, possibly that of Kyoto: an exquisitely shaped celadon vessel with a greenish-grey gradation, a bit like what you see when you look at the seabed when you're scuba diving at a depth of thirty metres. Running over its surface is a gold line—a bit shaky but not very—which goes all the way up the vase and continues inside until vanishing in its depths. It dates from the eleventh or twelfth century and it seemed to me to be an absolute masterpiece when I saw it. Without giving it much thought, I compared it in my mind to other great Buddhist works of the twelfth and fourteenth centuries that I admire a lot depicting monks riding tigers or persimmons at different stages of ripeness, absolute masterpieces of Asian art. Much later on, I'm not sure how, I found out that the shaky gold line was just a restoration: it was a crack that someone had filled in with gold, or maybe even gilt bronze, but despite this discovery it's still one of my favourite ceramic pieces.

I don't often talk about this because it's always a bit embarrassing to draw conclusions based on mistaken assumptions—even though they're often highly enriching—and in my case I had even asked myself several times how the artist had managed to continue such a fine gold line inside a vase he couldn't fit his hand in, so what for me was a mystery never actually existed.

Ceramic is the material that coats terracotta, it's the gleaming glaze that my works lack; in actual fact my works literally don't have ceramic. Some of my favourite clay pieces are those produced in the Djenné region in the fourteenth century. They're made of sundried earth and are all cracked, and that's precisely what makes them so moving to me, their random and circumstantial accidental features, like the golden crack in the celadon.

My works in clay and in paint are full of cracks, not all golden, and accidental features, in the hope that someone makes sense of them. My works in clay, and my pictures too, are things I don't even try to control, in the hope that they make sense, that they become enlightening figures. They do sometimes.

When I started working with clay in Mali in 1990 or 1991, I think that what I wanted to achieve was to make things I couldn't make in paint, and learn the technique; I'm always trying to learn new techniques. In the performance *Paso Doble* with Josef Nadja I've mentioned several times here, what I think I did was stage the tools and gestures of my work with clay, show the body as a tool, the positive and negative body, the mould, and the object that creates the mould. In it my head serves as a mask of my own body, but also as a base on which to pile up vessels and other heads.

Making a body with clay, making a body with the work, and making the work with the body. For years in my painting the body, my body, has become painting; my whole body is useful when I work. With the Dogon people I learned their technique, which dates back to the Neolithic; I learned to collect clay in the right places, to mix it just as the local potters have been doing for centuries. I often had to make it into a paste, like bread flour, and then mix it with dry cow and camel dung which, when hydrated, regains its full aroma, its *heimat* – the same dry turds that can also be used as fuel. And they likewise work by mixing with new clay the fired vessels that women break when their children are born, some many years old, which are crushed and mixed with the clay to make it more resistant. When they did that, I used to entertain myself by examining and choosing the fragments of old pots that would later be crushed just as we crush biscuits or sugar. My Dogon friends didn't like that at all. 'You must pick these things up without paying attention', they said to me. Those fragments, like many other things linked to ceramics, are regarded as *inepuru*, the Dogon word for everything related to the sacred or magic, or to animism, and everything related to that must be done directly, without giving it much thought. I believe I can safely say that I often do things without thinking; I possibly even do too many things without thinking, nearly everything, in fact. My friends in Mali, however, aren't convinced. The title of a book about the Dogon written by Swiss psychoanalyst and ethnologist Paul Parin in the early 1930s, *The Whites Think Too Much*, sums up very well what they think about Westerners and makes for quite entertaining reading today.

In any event, I think that when I started out working with ceramics, I transferred all my painting to this new material, which is what I think Lucio Fontana and Joan Miró did too, for example. In Fontana's case, I even think that what is truly original about his oeuvre is his ceramics. In my opinion his painting is almost secondary – that is, in his oeuvre, his generic material is clay, which he can cut and pierce. In fact, I believe that when he makes a picture the Italian painter feels the need to coat the surface with a sort of pseudo-clay in the form of paint, that is, to have a big build-up of paint to be able to work with it as if it were clay. I reckon that Fontana's main works are his Albisola clay pieces, his plaques made of earth, not his pictures. And in Miró's case I reckon that he simply re-examined all his painting through ceramics.

I like works made of clay—I won't refer to it as ceramic any more—because the choice of this material is vital, and clay becomes a painting material and also flesh.

One of my earliest encounters with clay dates back to when I was twenty and a female friend of the time, a ceramist, persuaded me to visit the potters of backwater Spain—and what a backwater it was then!—taking with us as our bible *Cerámica popular española*, the book on Spanish folk ceramics by Josep Llorens Artigas, Miró's ceramist. We visited dozens of potters in very poor villages of Aragón and Andalusia at a time when humble clay objects still had a purpose, before plastic and tourism did away with them forever and gave rise to a new, unsuspected poverty. We'd been told that in a village near Calanda, Buñuel's birthplace, there was a potter who still crafted large earthenware jars without using a wheel – that is, he moved round the jar instead of making it turn on a wheel like nearly everyone else. It wasn't the vessel that turned between the potter's fingers but the potter who had to go around it constantly. We went to visit him and saw that his jars were evidently asymmetrical, with bulges like a pregnant woman's belly here and there, had an extremely sober red oxide decoration, and probably had not changed since the

Neolithic or since Iberian ceramics. We bought one of those large jars from him for a handful of pesetas, and miraculously it arrived in Majorca in one piece. I remember it as a masterpiece of the same quality as the celadon with the golden crack I spoke of earlier.

Clay, when fired, preserves the memory of each trace, however subtle; even the slightest contact with the fingers is bound to leave a mark after firing. And in many of my pieces you could say that there's very little involvement of the artist's hand, though in fact they're covered in traces; I recognise my fingers in the places where I touched them when I had to pick them up to move them; I can tell if it was winter or summer when I made them by the marks left by my clothing (whether or not I had a jumper on, whether I was wearing long or short sleeves). I could reconstruct the process of crafting these ceramic works on the basis of these slight traces, just as I have learned, by gazing at the work of Cézanne or Picasso, thanks to snippets of information, to reconstruct their paintings, to put the picture together from back to front. The eye recognises these tiny signs as fossilised pollen, just as when you find a painter's hair on a picture and distinguish this artist's hair from the hair of a brush.

Sometimes the negative form of a droplet, a tiny spot, appears on my ceramics; they're droppings from the owl that lives in my studio, which often fall on my ceramics and are turned into invisible spots at more than 1000 degrees. These spots are just another of the accidental features which are as an essential part of my works as the signs of my actions carried out on them and, I hope, will give them a new meaning above and beyond my own intentions.