

# Helping hands

It's known that working with clay has powerful therapeutic properties, improving focus, enabling expression and reducing stress. Wanting to know more, *Harriet Baker* speaks to makers for whom the outlets that clay provides have made a deep impression on their lives


For potters with a strong stomach, there's a YouTube video well worth watching. In it, biologist George McGavin presides over the dissection of a human hand. As layers of skin are peeled away, tendons and muscle pulled and examined, we arrive at the fingertips, the highest concentration of sensation in the human body. Here, underneath what are called the 'fat pads' of the fingers, 20,000 nerve-endings terminate and hundreds of thousands of receptors respond to pain, temperature, pressure and vibration, sending electrical signals to the brain. The complexity of the mechanics of the human hand are extraordinary and, because of this coordination and dexterity, we're able to manipulate objects, channelling our creative and emotional impulses through our hands, expressing ourselves through what we make. Ask any potter why they love clay and you're guaranteed an answer brimming with passion for the medium: through clay, our fingertips come alive.

'It's clear that clay is an extraordinary material and it can help people,' says Janna Edwards, who has run Dorset's *15 Days in Clay* – a hand-building workshop for adults with developmental difficulties – since 2003. 'It's a medium you get a response from instantly, because simple gestures create shape and texture.' Janna has also worked extensively with adults recovering from illness and, increasingly, those living with dementia. 'The sensation of working with clay calms, improves dexterity and coordination, and enables people to articulate their own experience,' she explains.

Art therapist David Fried agrees: 'You can do almost anything with clay because it's so receptive, malleable and pliable, and can be used spontaneously in a very direct way.' Fried manages Studio Upstairs, a 'shared studio space and therapeutic community' in east London, which caters for people with a range of mental health issues, including personality and mood disorders. 'Every patient I've worked with has their own way of articulating themselves through clay. For people who have turbulent states of mind, the clay in

their hands becomes an externalised form of their experience,' he explains. 'It enables people to document their experiences and clarify their thoughts.'

Whether through handbuilding or throwing, clay reflects our state of mind. The studios we make in often feel therapeutic in themselves; they are supportive communities or places of solitude. When we make something, we invest in it, and the final result, whatever its form, shape or technical properties, is ours. This feeling of pride, of confidence in our own ability, is something we can take for granted. But for many, this sense of ownership is integral to self-esteem and recovery. As Trish Wheatley, director of Disability Arts Online (an organisation which supports professional artists with disabilities), explains, the benefits of clay are two-fold, from both an occupational and a psychological perspective: 'It's about empowerment, encouraging people to access their creativity in a productive way.'

Ceramic artist Fenella Elms trained as an occupational therapist and then as a psychotherapist, before turning to ceramics full-time. As a result, her abstract porcelain sculptures explore the relationship between clay and consciousness, the process of ceramics mirroring mental health. 'You have to be resilient to do ceramics, it's a demanding discipline,' she says. 'You have to work through each phase of the process, acknowledging the difficulties you encounter, but knowing you'll get there in the end. Clay can break or smash; there's much that can go wrong. But, if it survives the process, then it can last for ever.' For this feature, we've spoken to four makers who have felt the benefits of using clay. Each of their stories reveals a unique experience, but there is a common thread. Each maker voices their pride in working with clay; it is their craft and their creativity that defines them and not the difficulties they otherwise face. 

For more see: [fenellaelms.com](http://fenellaelms.com); [disabilityartsonline.org.uk](http://disabilityartsonline.org.uk); [studioupstairs.org.uk](http://studioupstairs.org.uk); [15daysinclay.co.uk](http://15daysinclay.co.uk)



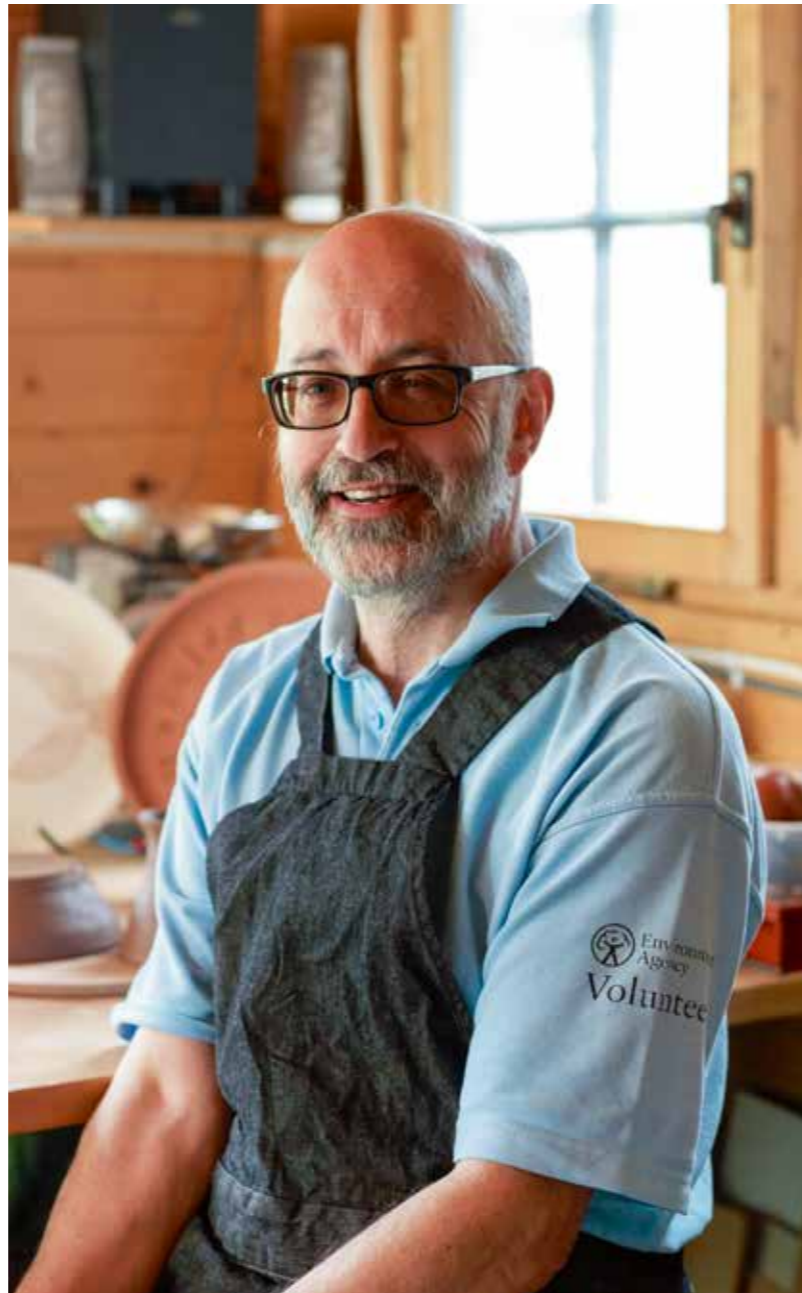
'I have no wish to be defined by 7/7 ... [but] good can come out of bad. Deep mental scars will never heal, but using clay has created a reassurance'

**Tim Coulson**

In July 2005, Tim Coulson was on the underground at London's Edgware Road station, when his train was rocked by a blast. In an instant, he and those around him became part of the horror of what we now call '7/7'. Along with a few others, Tim entered the bombed carriage to see what he could do to help. 'For an hour and a half we were underground, in terrible conditions, coping with the dying and severely injured.' It was, of course, a life-changing experience. 'For years afterwards,' he says, 'my life was in turmoil. I have had deep counselling and medication to stabilise the anxiety. I have been unable to work – and I felt robbed of that, as I had just started a wonderful new post, teaching art and design at a sixth-form college. But throughout all this time, I had one special gift: clay.'

At age 18, Tim had attended what is now the University of the West of England, gaining a degree in Graphics and Ceramics. 'I taught ceramics for years and I made too: pieces for friends and family. It was a busy life – but post 7/7, everything was different.' What followed were 'stages'. 'First I had to accept that I was not going back to work. I also had to deal with an undercurrent of resentment towards the bombers; and I started to recognise that I wanted to return to making. I needed form: I felt like a skeleton that had lost its bones.' Tim started to make little pinch pots: 'they were all over the house.' And through those pots he discovered 'a way out' – a way to deal with the mental anguish he was experiencing. He and his wife Judy had a studio built in the garden. 'Judy makes stained glass, and so, with my wheel and kiln there too, this was to be our place for making. Once it was built, I spent more time in it than in the house. I was seeking solace and this was where I found it. When I'm in there I feel separate from the world, in a good way.' Back to throwing – 'you can't lose that skill' – he also rediscovered his enjoyment of handbuilding. 'The originality of shape that comes from the human hand, the involvement with the material, the direct connection that is there between hand and brain – all these factors came into play. When your brain is troubled, your hands can get you out of trouble – in a drug-free way, through a medium like pottery.'

As part of his adjustment to his new life, Tim had also got involved with his local primary school, 'just listening to the children read.' There, he introduced the pupils to clay, helping them make pots, bringing the pieces home to fire them, enjoying watching the children discover the medium of ceramics. 'I've also become more serious, but interested, in avenues of the mind,' he says, 'and I'm



even more interested in manual dexterity; in what you can do with your hands. It was hard to rediscover these things, through the psychological "rubble" that had piled on top of me. You have to be robust to start to build up again. I would advise someone who has experienced trauma to consider a craft of some kind. Something quiet, peaceful. For me, clay isn't like anything else; it has the power to bring you back to basics.'

Tim says that his life is 'richer because of 7/7: I focus on what matters.' He still does not fully understand what made him go forward to help, into the carnage of that carriage, rather than taking the entirely understandable route of escape. For his courage on that day he has been awarded an MBE. 'I have no wish to be defined by 7/7,' he says, 'but I want to see value in the real things. Good can come out of bad. Deep mental scars will never heal, but using clay has created a reassurance; controlling thrown work is a beautiful thing, clearing my mind of the negative aspects of my history in this world.'

'When I began working with my hands I felt I was massaging and stimulating areas of my brain that hadn't been used in a long time'

**Helen Lee**

For Helen Lee, after a serious illness, turning to working with clay had a profoundly healing effect on her health and happiness. When recovering in 2014 she enrolled at Turning Earth, an open-access studio in Hackney, London. 'I walked to the studio along the canal, and when I saw it, I cried,' she recalls. 'Suddenly I had something I'd always wanted to find, which was somewhere to pot.' Though Helen had studied ceramics at art school in the 1980s, a dearth of apprenticeships saw her career follow a different path. She took a secretarial course, went back to university, and eventually became a psychotherapist. After her illness, however, her perspective on life changed. 'Devoting so much time and effort to work lost its meaning. I needed to feel that I was gaining more fun and creativity from life.' The communal environment at Turning Earth, where she now teaches, was what she'd been looking for. 'After having been in pain, I felt like I was resetting myself,' she says. 'My body was working with me, not against me.'



As a psychotherapist, Helen is interested in the neuroscience of creativity, and the sensory networks connecting our brains to our hands. In her practice, she often encouraged her clients to express themselves through their bodies. Echoing the central tenet of mindfulness meditation, the key, she explains, is to focus on the body's sensations. 'When I began working with my hands I felt I was massaging and stimulating areas of my brain that hadn't been used in a long time, but most of all it was the tactile and sensory nature of clay that made it so immediately pleasurable. I saw the skills in my hands improve and I was able to feel strong again. I don't think it's a stretch to say that we have a primal relationship with clay. The red iron oxide that gives so much pottery, like terracotta, its distinctive pinkish colour, is the same iron coursing through our blood. Clay is made up of the elements that make up the Earth, just as we are. I find this very comforting.'

turningearth.uk

'I have bipolar disorder and I pour all my excess energy into ceramics. The lifestyle of a potter enables me to live my life as I need to'

**Jono Smart**



Readers of CR have met Jono Smart before in our May/June 2016 issue. He works alone and his practice – and the precision with which his pieces (and the curation of his work online) is executed – is the result of his singular work ethic. But, as he explains, his journey to becoming a craftsman hasn't been easy. 'I have bipolar disorder, and I pour all my excess energy into ceramics,' he says. 'The lifestyle of a potter

enables me to live my life as I need to. I work odd hours, in fits and spurts. I can get to the studio at 7am and work incredibly hard until I don't have any energy left, or, if I'm not in a good way, I can go more slowly.'

Until a few years ago, Jono worked for a garden design company based in London, travelling the world for high-end clients and projects. But when a particularly stressful period ended in panicky paralysis on his morning

commute, he visited his GP and was diagnosed with depression, and, two years later, bipolar disorder. It was after he was signed off work that he enrolled, as Helen did, at Turning Earth, under the tutelage of Stuart Carey.

'I've always collected pottery from my travels, and I'd been watching videos on YouTube. After I was diagnosed with bipolar, I tried supplementing my antidepressant with a mood stabiliser, and within two weeks I had the energy to explore working with clay.' He bought a kiln, set up a studio near Reading and launched his website, all of which have been, he says, 'life-changing'.

For Jono, stability is reached by a 'necessary combination' of medication and lifestyle changes. 'I have a medical issue, and the medication is very important. No amount of making, sleeping, eating healthily or exercise will make me better.' But the lifestyle that comes with being a potter enables him to live as he needs. 'I'm at my happiest when I'm batch throwing. As soon as I touch the pedal on the wheel, I know that I'm in a safe place. And at the end of every day, and every week, when I see how hard I've worked, I feel healthy.'

jonosmart.co.uk

Interview: Sue Herdman; Tim Coulson portrait: Cristian Barnett; all other images courtesy of the artists



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**Paul Cummins**

It was a phone call that landed Paul Cummins the job. He had been calling the Tower of London for weeks to talk about an idea he had, when, finally, he was put through to the publicity director. His proposal was simple, but staggering: he wanted to fill the Tower’s dry moat with 888,246 ceramic poppies, between 17 July and 11 November 2014. *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* marked the centenary of the First World War, each poppy symbolising a British military fatality. Unsurprisingly, the nation was entranced. But there was another reason why Cummins was on the phone that day. He has colour-associated dyslexia, making reading and writing extremely difficult: email communication is avoided.

‘I’ve learned to associate words with colours. I can read to a degree, but there’s no way I could get through a newspaper,’ he explains. ‘Although I’m an artist with a disability, it’s not something I project to people. It isn’t something I can fix, and, although it affects a lot of what I do, I just have to learn to cope with it in new and different ways.’

Cummins’ dyslexia gives him a unique worldview, which he certainly drew upon for his ceramic installation at the Tower. ‘I like the idea of having massive blocks of colour, because that’s how I see,’ he says. ‘When I designed the poppies, I adapted a majolica glaze which I could manipulate with bright colours. The poppies were made from terracotta, so the colour was intense.’ But even someone who understands the world through colour underestimated the emotional effects of a sea of red poppies. ‘When you were walking among the flowers, it was overwhelming.’ The installation did not go without setback. With nine months to make thousands of ceramic flowers, Cummins went from working in a studio in his back garden to managing a team of 300 people. In the haste, his sleeve was caught in a rolling machine, crushing his hand and severing his middle finger. Now focusing on new installations and a part-time PhD, Cummins is still taking in his experience of the last two years. Since then, the poppies have been sold, raising £9.81 million for charity.

[paulcumminsceramics.com](http://paulcumminsceramics.com)