

# Precarious precision





After an award-winning year, *Colin Martin* caught up with Emmanuel Boos to discover the influences and motivation behind his work

French ceramic artist Emmanuel Boos is best known for his striking modular compositions of glazed porcelain forms, using either cuboid cobbles or parallelepiped bricks. Two exhibitions of his work this spring, at Galerie Marianne Heller in Heidelberg, Germany, and with his Parisian dealer Jousse Entreprise at The Pavilion of Art and Design in Paris, will add further heft to his burgeoning reputation. ‘At mid-career, I feel I have reached a certain maturity in my practice, and I believe I now know what I am doing and where I am heading,’ he explains.

#### CLAY INITIATION

Boos first worked with clay at the age of 14, while an exchange student at Gould Academy, an American boarding school in Maine. ‘I was a bit lost and terribly sad at times,’ he reveals, ‘but an art cottage there grounded me, and its basement pottery studio provided me with a home, a territory that I inhabited joyfully. The sensuality of clay attracted me initially, however, later ceramic glazes moved me even more deeply.’

**LEFT:** Fireplace Mantel (detail)

**ABOVE:** Fireplace Mantel, *Comme un Lego* exhibition, 2023



**ABOVE:** Coffee table, *Comme un Lego* exhibition, 2023  
**RIGHT, TOP RIGHT AND LEFT:** *Terzett* **BELOW RIGHT:** *Quartett*, 2022, and *Terzett*

The Japanese National Living Treasure Uichi Shimizu (1926-2004), whose work he encountered in Paris, inspired Boos. ‘His glazes were a reason for me to embrace ceramics professionally,’ he explains. A further influence was the French ceramic artist Jean Girel, renowned for his glazing, to whom he was apprenticed for three years. ‘I opposed him and rebelled against his practice at first, but now I am aware of what he taught me,’ says Boos. ‘I feel I am actually close (to his working practices) but very different.’

His thesis at the conclusion of his doctoral studies in ceramics at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in 2011, was titled *The Poetics of Glaze: Ceramic Surface and the Perception of Depth*. ‘There Emmanuel Cooper and I developed a strong and friendly relationship, and he certainly challenged me to embrace new practices, which had a tremendous positive impact on my work,’ he admits.

### INFLUENTIAL RESEARCH

Alison Britton then introduced him to the writings of Donal Winnicott, a paediatrician and psychoanalyst whose concept of the ‘false self’ – created as a defensive façade, and the ‘true self’ – based on authentic experience, influenced the direction of his research. ‘Whether the RCA had the most impact on me is hard to say,’ he comments. ‘It left me a bit shattered and lacking in confidence and freedom. Before he died, Cooper gave me some (confidence) again. It is probably a process one needs to go through to become an artist, but it can be painful.’

During his lengthy residency at the Sèvres National Porcelain Manufactory near Paris, from 2016-2020, Boos produced work that met with both critical and commercial success. ‘That residency was a real highlight of my career and a luxury; creatively, intellectually, and in terms of forging working relationships with artisans,’ he says. ‘However, I hope that every penultimate show is a highlight before the next.’

At the 17th biennial *Parcours Céramique Carougeois* in Geneva in September 2022, his *Impromptus* exhibition, staged jointly in Valérie Hangel’s Galerie H and Peter Kammerman’s adjacent interior design gallery, halted passers-by in their tracks. His titles for smaller groups of glazed porcelain cobblestones or bricks took their cue from musical improvisation. A horizontal brick slumps across a vertical one in *Duett*, 2022; four cobblestones form a rickety arch in *Quartett*, 2022; and in *Quartett*, 2023, four bricks are stacked on their ends to form a cantilevered tower.

Precariously balanced, his spatial compositions defy gravity and often appear on the point of collapse, particularly so in his sinuously curved chains of multiple bricks, which appear more anatomical. In *Spine*, 2022, they resemble dominoes that might topple sequentially, if the last were accidentally tapped.

His lustrous glazes, in a broad spectrum of hues, ameliorate any anxiety generated by his febrile spatial geometries. Displayed atop Kammerman’s antique Asian or Modernist furniture, or mounted on walls lined with antique Asiatic textiles, Boos’ celadon and red flambé glazes ‘sang’ and *Impromptus* received the Biennale’s inaugural Michelle Dethurens Award. Shown by Joanna Bird at *Collect* in 2023, his work was judged ‘Best in Fair’, but in a rather cramped display it was not seen at its best.

### WORKING PRACTICES

Boos sometimes draws his larger works before making them, however, ‘it is a bit risky as my limited ability to draw spatially can limit the final piece’, he explains. ‘My work is both geometric and it isn’t. The “unforgiving” nature of porcelain makes rigid geometry impossible, it softens or breaks it, as if porcelain has an agency or whimsicality of its own.’

He is a minimalist in terms of form. ‘I try to provide a first direction for the clay’s distortions, but it is rarely



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ABOVE AND RIGHT: work for the *Impromptus* exhibition in Carouge, Geneva



the last and porcelain always reacts and goes further or elsewhere,' he adds. In his glazing he is minimalist too. The palette he uses covers a wide spectrum, but he likes his glazing to 'remain quiet, sober and austere', he 'longs for the great diversity and surprises of glaze.'

At his Mannheim studio he employs interns, with or without experience of working with clay. 'I can entrust others with many tasks in the studio except glazing and firing, which I do myself,' he explains.

During his residency at Sèvres he commuted every two weeks, spending alternate fortnights at the manufactory and his Mannheim studio. He still commutes a fair bit. 'I work occasionally in Sèvres, my main dealer Jousse Entreprise is in Paris, and most of my clients live there or visit,' he explains. He considers Mannheim 'a bit off the map' and says that he is still 'figuring out the place of ceramics in Germany.'

Disappointingly, pandemic lockdowns during 2020 and 2021 prematurely ended exhibitions of his work at the Kunsthalle Mannheim and at another local contemporary art venue, so he looks forward to showing in Heidelberg.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS


Regarding his potential interest in making 'artistic interventions' within museums or other historic interiors Boos responded: 'That is a very British thing, and yes, I would very much like to undertake such a project. It usually works well with ceramics because they are rooted in domesticity.'

He has a history of displaying his work with furniture. The venue for his first solo show was the furniture designer

Christophe Delcourt's Paris showroom. At his Jousse Entreprise exhibition *Comme un Lego* ('Like a Lego') in Autumn 2023, his work was displayed with and using Modernist furniture designed by Charlotte Perriand, Jean Prouvé, Pierre Jeanneret and Pierre Paulin.

After his *Impromptus* exhibition in Carouge, a client of Kammerman in Geneva commissioned Boos to make a glazed porcelain chimneypiece. Its asymmetric design is architectonic with its glazing permeating echoes of Gaudí. Its recent installation within the client's dwelling reverses Corbusier's surreal placement of an ornate Rococo fireplace in the rooftop garden of Carlos de Beistegui's Parisian apartment in the 1920s.

At *PAD (Paris)* this year Boos will exhibit his glazed ceramic furniture including coffee tables. 'In London I would love to display work at the Sir John Soane's Museum or his Pitzhanger Manor. 'After all, wasn't he the son of a brickmaker?' In Venice, he has his eye on the Palazzo Fortuny.

'Glaze needs to surprise me,' asserted Boos in his doctoral dissertation. 'It is difficult to plan or design a glaze, as its final success often lies precisely in the unexpected that occurs.' He has also quoted the Sèvres artisans' assertion that 'porcelain lives.' The unexpected nature of both porcelain and glazes are in good hands. 

For further information visit [emmanuelboos.info](http://emmanuelboos.info). Poetical systems, *Galerie Marianne Heller, Heidelberg, Germany, 10 March–28 April*; [galerie-heller.de](http://galerie-heller.de). *Pavilion of Art & Design, Paris, France, 3-7 April*; [jousse-entreprise.com](http://jousse-entreprise.com)