

***Curious entanglements and debris: Recent porcelain vessels by the South African ceramist Eugene Hön***

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Since retiring as the director/curator of the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) Gallery of the University of Johannesburg, the South African ceramist Eugene Hön has assumed the status of a full-time artist working from a purpose designed home studio workspace which he refers to as a “Studio in the Sky.” His recent body of vessels signals a dramatic shift in his working method and choice of forms and surface. He has returned to creating vessel shapes which he underpins with a practice-driven approach. Hön presents works with integrated granular textured surfaces decorated with surrealist fractal patterns to represent debris and mycelium. The choice of theme reveals Hön's engagement with contemporary environmental discourse. He debuted his new range of ceramics in 2024 with the presentation of six of the vessels at two of South Africa's premier ceramic biennales, one being the Corobrik National Biennale held in Johannesburg and the other at the inaugural Clay Awards Biennale held in Cape Town. The theme of the vessels is consistent but variations in form and decoration make for a fluid aesthetic. When paired or presented as an ensemble for exhibition, they appear to be in dialogue with one another.

To date Hön has created vessels in three sizes for the series with heights of approximately 70mm, 110mm and 140mm. The current iteration in this opus is a range of slip-cast, self-glazing parian porcelain and altered vessels. The vessels were altered by hand at the leather-hard stage to give each of the forms a unique appearance. The surface decoration of each is equally distinctive within the range. For the decorations he made use of applied decal designs based on his coloured ballpoint pen drawings of mycelium which he partnered with porcelain shards and pulverised ceramic fragments sprinkled on to the leather hard bodies prior to firing at 1240°C. The textured, granulated porcelain elements which Hön refers to as “debris” were painted and sponged in dramatic contrasting colours to suggest matter scorched by fire, combustion, incineration, pyroclastic flows, or hot geyser emissions.

Hön has created four ranges with variations of his conceptual design. He first presented a *blanc de chine* range which he followed with a range that showed blue-toned fractal designs and debris. The third range featured earth-toned fractal decorations and debris. In his most recent range, the debris is not painted but is pre-coloured with powdered pigments or ceramic stains which, when fired, produce a crystalline effect. With the latter technique he can apply the coloured particles to the interior of the vessels.

### ***Curious entanglements and debris: Mycelium as metaphor***

In his artist's notes, Hön makes this observation:

'Curious Entanglements' stems from the reading of evocative literature about fungi. At the core of understanding its creative significance and relevance to my conceptual development, is to understand the workings of fungi's underground network. In the words of [Merlin] Sheldrake [the mycologist], a 'mycelial network is a map of a fungus recent history and is a helpful reminder that all life forms are in fact processes, not things. The 'you' of five years ago was made of different stuff than the 'you' of today. Nature is an event that never stops.' We are in a continued state of development/flux, responding to change and adapting to impactful global and environmental issues.

Mycelium is an underground network of fungal threads that facilitates communication and resource sharing amongst trees and plants. It serves as a powerful metaphor for interconnectedness and ecological interdependence. As Sheldrake notes in his book "Entangled Life", which is frequently referenced in Hön's notes, mycelial networks represent life as process rather than as a fixed state. This is a concept that resonates deeply with Hön's artistic practice.

The theme of *Curious entanglements and debris* has multiple references. "Curious" suggests both inquisitiveness and strangeness, while "entanglements" references both the physical structure of mycelium and the complex interrelationships that characterize natural life forms. "Debris," beyond its literal reference to the fragmented porcelain surface treatments, suggests cycles of decay and renewal essential to ecological processes. Hön's fractal imagery based on his mycelium drawing functions primarily as a metaphor for the interconnectedness, interdependence, and symbiosis of life forms. It is his notion of life as an ongoing and changing chemical reaction in a world in flux. The role of mycelium in the natural world

mirrors the cycle of life itself: it nourishes and sustains growth whilst also assuming a pivotal role in the decomposition of natural and artificial waste matter. His mycelium themed iconography also serves as a commentary on mankind's impact on the environment that manifests as climate change, extreme weather phenomena, and the degradation of the natural environment. Hön uses the term "Anthropocene age" to clarify that human activity is the dominant influence in the degradation of the environment.

### **Innovation in process and form**

In his artist's notes, Hön presents a synopsis of his approach in this new series of works:

Craftmanship takes centre stage in the conceptualisation of the expressive slip cast ceramic vessels. The minimalist CAD-rendered, 3D-printed, cylindrical shaped ceramic forms are radically transformed, when developing appropriate and relevant ceramic surfaces. I turned my attention to the inherent qualities of clay's materiality (dry and fragmented - adding tactility - in sharp contrast to the two dimensional, digitally printed ceramic transfers of my drawings, applied to the self-glazing parian body (very smooth and translucent when sanded with diamond sanding paper and pads.

Hön's creative process is contemplative, practice-led, and technologically integrated with a specific aesthetic in mind. The vessels retain signs of their making process. He continually adapts his choice of materials, the choice and scale of forms and surfaces, decorations, and firing process. He documents his creative journey through social media. This has grown to be an interactive and informative visual diary in which he records his thought process and experimentation with the hand-crafting of the vessels. In essence, a practice-led approach places value on the act of creation and the personal evolution of an artist's skills and vision, rather than an exclusive focus on a pre-determined artistic outcome. It is all about learning by doing. By experimenting and innovating, Hön explores and pushes the boundaries of his ceramic work. The vessels speak of this in their evidence of process, material, and personal expression as well as the progression of his growth and development as ceramist.

There is a strong visual semblance to post-modern ceramic vessels in the idiom of Edmund De Waal, Magdalene Odundo, John Ward, Daisuke Iguchi, Peter Beard, Lucie Rie (1902-

1995) and Hans Coper (1920-1981). The difference, however, lies in the process of making. As opposed to works being wheel-thrown, hand-built, pinched or coiled, Hön's works are slip cast using a machined industrial mould that was 3D CAD-designed and printed. Whilst the post-modern minimalist forms are familiar to us, they stand different in having been subverted through intervention and surface decoration. Hön describes his works as "expressive ceramic vessels" in which he acknowledges the modernist studio pottery tradition but steers them towards the avant garde. We also note his familiarity with the Japanese craft and aesthetic traditions which he frequently references in his artist's notes.

The influence of the Zen Buddhist wabi-sabi aesthetic is apparent. The subdued, simplistic, and austere beauty in the vessel shape reflects the wabi character. The sabi concept is reflected via Hön's drastic physical manipulation of the form and the placement of the decal designs and debris patterns. With those he steers attention towards intimations of impermanence, rustic surfaces with patina, encrustation, and asymmetry. There is also a likeness with origami in Hön's thin-walled vessels with their dramatic diagonal cuts and overlapping forms. The referencing of the Japanese art of paper folding dates to an earlier series of works where Hön created origami-like boat sculptures. Those were made with paper clay and decorated with transfer-printed designs sourced from his own sketchbooks. One of those sketches was his rendition *The Great Wave* woodblock print by of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Using contemporary technology, Hön reflects both historical ceramic traditions and contemporary artistic trends.

The works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century maverick American art potter George Ohr (1857-1918) and his compatriot modernist ceramist Kathy Butterly as well as the contemporary British studio potter Walter Keeler, come to mind when Hön's vessels are considered. Ohr and Butterly created idiosyncratic rumpled and imploded vessels. Keeler's organic and sinuous salt glazed stoneware pieces evoke association with Art Nouveau forms inspired by nature and plants. These might well have some bearing on Hön's work.

His vessels are technically innovative. The base form is an elegant, modernist cylinder shape with a sharply tapering spindle-like support. It has a deceptively simple appearance but serves as the foundation for radical transformation. The forms are manipulated in several ways while they are still malleable. Almost all the vessels are altered by hand to distort the cylindrical shape to various degrees. Some list gently inwards while others evert outwards. Some retain

their essential cylindrical form but have subtle variations such as lobed undulating upper rim contours or sinuous wavelike rims. Others are struck with a wooden plank to create sharp linear indentations. Hön might further opt to make dramatic lateral or diagonal incisions or cuts which are then overlapped to create contours or sutured joins. The latter is reminiscent of the technique of the American ceramist Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) who rose to fame in the 1950s for tearing and puncturing his vessels.

Like the practice of Magdalene Odundo, Hön pays detailed attention to the finishing and refining of his works by polishing both the exterior and interior surfaces of his vessels. After the initial shaping and bisque firing, each piece undergoes meticulous hand-sanding with diamond sanding pads prior to firing which is repeated afterwards to achieve a sensuous, silky polish and heightened tactility.

### **Fractals and Fragments**

The treatment of the porcelain surface decoration perhaps represents Hön's most significant innovation: distinct but integrated decorative elements of digitally printed decals based on his own drawings and applied granulated porcelain fragments which he terms "debris." The debris consists of pulverized shards from broken vessels of the same series. This is a conceptually rich act of reclamation and repurposing that adds both visual and metaphorical depth to the works. In his earlier earthenware vessels he added textured relief to the vessels by rolling them onto a bed of fragments resting on a sponge surface. For the new works he uses a liquid mixture of porcelain slip and cellulose to adhere the porcelain fragments. The mixture is painted onto designated areas onto which the fragments are sprinkled. The adhesive solution dries within 50 seconds and hence Hön must work swiftly and with great attention. Once the designated surface area is coated, he can layer successive coatings of fragments also and embed larger pieces of shards for contrast and focal interest. In the initial works Hön painted the decorations by hand in painstaking detail to achieve a trompe l'oeil effect emulating scorched and incinerated natural materials to suggest glowing embers or lava flows.

For the recent vessels he used pre-coloured porcelain fragments in a greater variety of colours. The porcelain shards and debris are coloured with the use of ceramic stains and oxides. The mist of a water spray is used to attach particles to the dried textured surfaces. Simultaneously he applies a heat gun to the interior of the vessel to keep the surfaces dry and

prevent the form from collapsing or warping under the weight of the layers of fragments. The sprayed mist interacts with the pigments and creates a surface of blended colours with parts thereof bleeding and running which evokes weathering and discolouration of both man-made and natural surfaces. On some of the vessels the encrusted surfaces approach a 3-dimensional sculptural aspect where they appear as flanges or waves with the fragments protruding dramatically from the surface.

## Fractals

A fractal design refers to a pattern or structure that repeats at progressively smaller scale. Fractals are found both in nature (such as snowflakes, clouds, and plant growth) and in mathematical algorithms that generate complex, repeating geometric patterns. The fractal designs on the vessels are derived from Hön's large-scale ballpoint pen drawings of the microscopic networks of fungal mycelium. The drawings are done in A2-size (420 x 594mm) in a technique that combines cross-hatching and stippling that resembles traditional etching. These drawings are digitally scanned and transformed by means of computer-generated imagery to create fractal patterns with remarkable clarity and detail. In collaboration with the digital media expert Dominic Hobbs, Hön has to date produced seventeen independent fractal designs based on the mycelium drawings. Details of the original mycelium drawing are radically reduced in scale and transformed into fractal patterns. After printing, the decals are applied to the porcelain surface in a third firing.

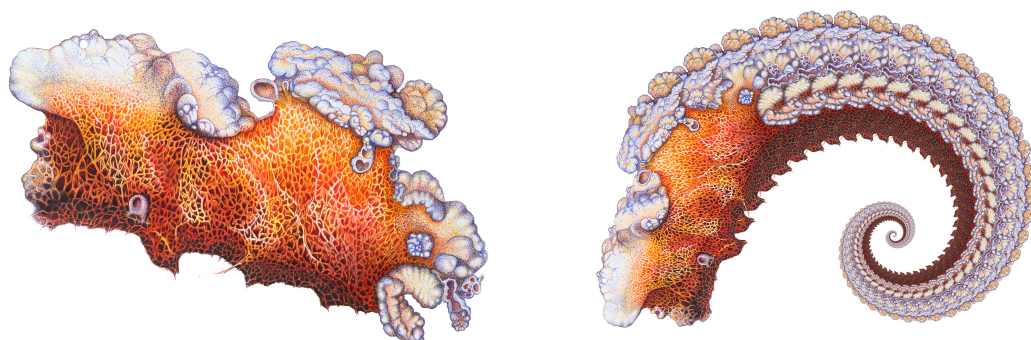


Fig 4a and 4b: Eugene Hön, Mycelium drawing and fractal transformation. Ballpoint pen on paper and fractal design.

### **Aesthetic achievement**

Hön's vessels achieve a rare balance between conceptual sophistication and aesthetic refinement. His praxis draws on learning through doing and the continuous refinement of ideas and technical skills to produce an integrated and refined aesthetic statement. The smooth and pristine surfaces of the vessels are interrupted with encrusted textures to create a visual tension. Each constituent component of the surface decoration merits contemplation. The fractal designs are akin to the Surrealist theoretical term of "phantom objects": forms that exist between categories, simultaneously familiar and strange, and illusory. Other than the link with mycelium, they suggest such natural phenomena as clouds, churning water, fern fronds, the tentacles of cephalopods, and more. The works have the appearance of familiar modern minimalist vessels, but the textured surfaces cancel out any notion of utilitarian function. Hön's vessels are fraught with contrast and dichotomies: familiar but also odd and strange. That is what attracts our attention and contemplation.

In bridging the artificial divide between ceramics as craft and avant-garde art, Hön challenges the insular nature of traditional ceramic practice that often stands distant from contemporary art discourse. He creates intellectually engaging and visually compelling pieces, demonstrating how technical innovation and conceptual depth can coexist in contemporary ceramic design. In an era marked by environmental crises and technological transformation, these pieces offer a meditation on interconnectedness, materiality, the relationship between natural and man-made systems, and our understanding of beauty and aesthetics. As a literal and figurative footnote, his conjoined "EH" monogram is impressed on a small rectangular porcelain tag on the tapering foot of the vessel. This mirrors luxury brand labels but suggests a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the relationship between craft, art, and commerce.

### **About the author**

Carl Landsberg holds a BA Honours in History of Art from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. His research focuses on contemporary South African ceramics and the intersection of traditional craft with digital technology.