

Ceramic Review



THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF CERAMIC ART AND CRAFT

ISSUE 220 JULY/AUGUST 2006 £6.30

www.ceramicreview.com

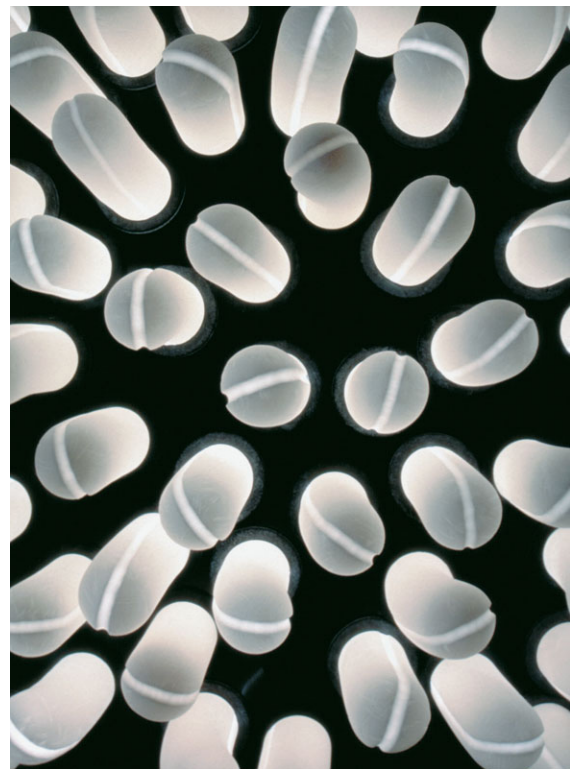
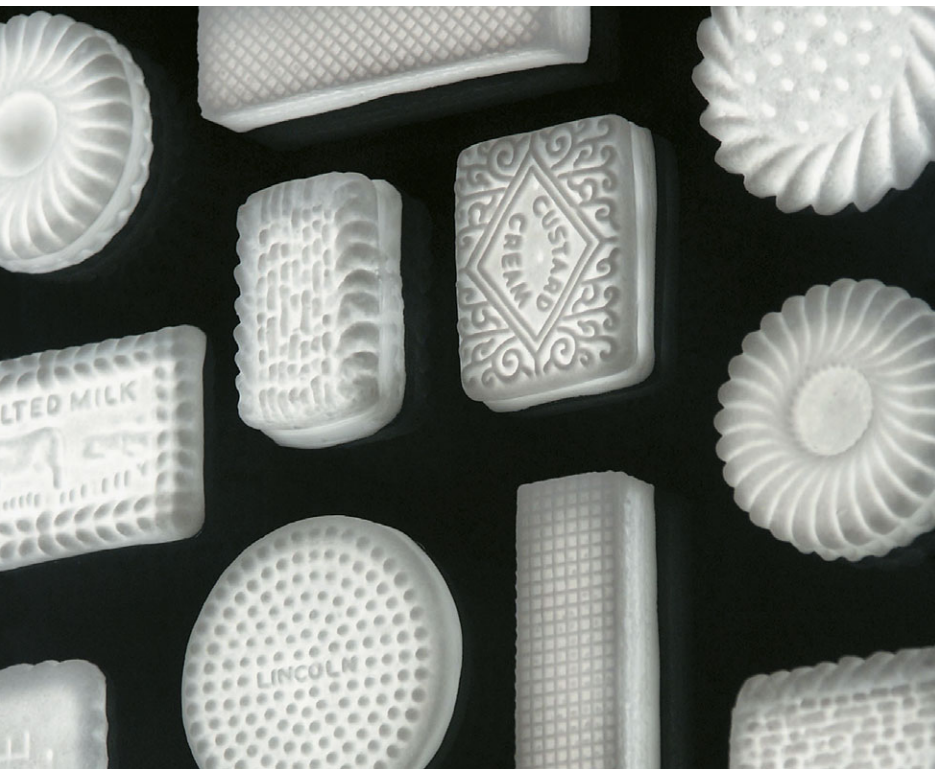
Chris Wight

PRACTICE

Secondary Teaching
Indian Innovations
Samian Ware
Shino Glazes

PROFILES

Jason Wason
Daniel Smith
Jane Abbott
Ray Finch



Seeing the Light

PROFILE – JUDY ADAMS discovers the inner secrets of Chris Wight's luminescent bone china.

PHOTOGRAPHY – CHRIS WIGHT

What springs to mind at the mention of bone china? Lavish dinner services? Collections of figurines? The delicate shade of Earl Grey glimpsed through a translucent cup? Chris Wight's work expands this thinking irrevocably. He is a ceramist who takes bone china clay to the edge of its workability, producing a range that is strikingly diverse, from feather-light, tactile vessels to room dividers comprising more than 2,000 ceramic discs. All his pieces have one thing in common – the interplay of changing intensities of light on, around and through the material, highlighting surface texture, focusing on relief and illustrating bone china's amazing translucency.

Wight's passion for bone china clay began as a student at Staffordshire University. 'As soon as I started working with bone china,' he says, 'I knew that this was it for me. When fired and unglazed it has a non-reflective, crisp, powdery whiteness that I prefer to porcelain.' The light-responsive nature of the material, changing from pure white opacity to translucence, gradually or instantaneously according to the light, is the quality that has continued to hold Wight's imagination. The *Potter's Dictionary of Materials and Techniques* defines bone china as a British porcelain developed in the late eighteenth century by Josiah Spode to meet the demand for a white translucent ware. A typical bone china is constituted of 25% china clay, 25% feldspar and 50% bone ash. The resulting clay body – very short when plastic, fragile when dry and with a notorious clay memory – presents challenges for any studio ceramist.

To achieve his portfolio of pieces, Wight's making techniques include modelling, mould making, slip casting, slip trailing and ultra-thin slabbing. There are several themes to his work, all of which present bone china in ways that invite

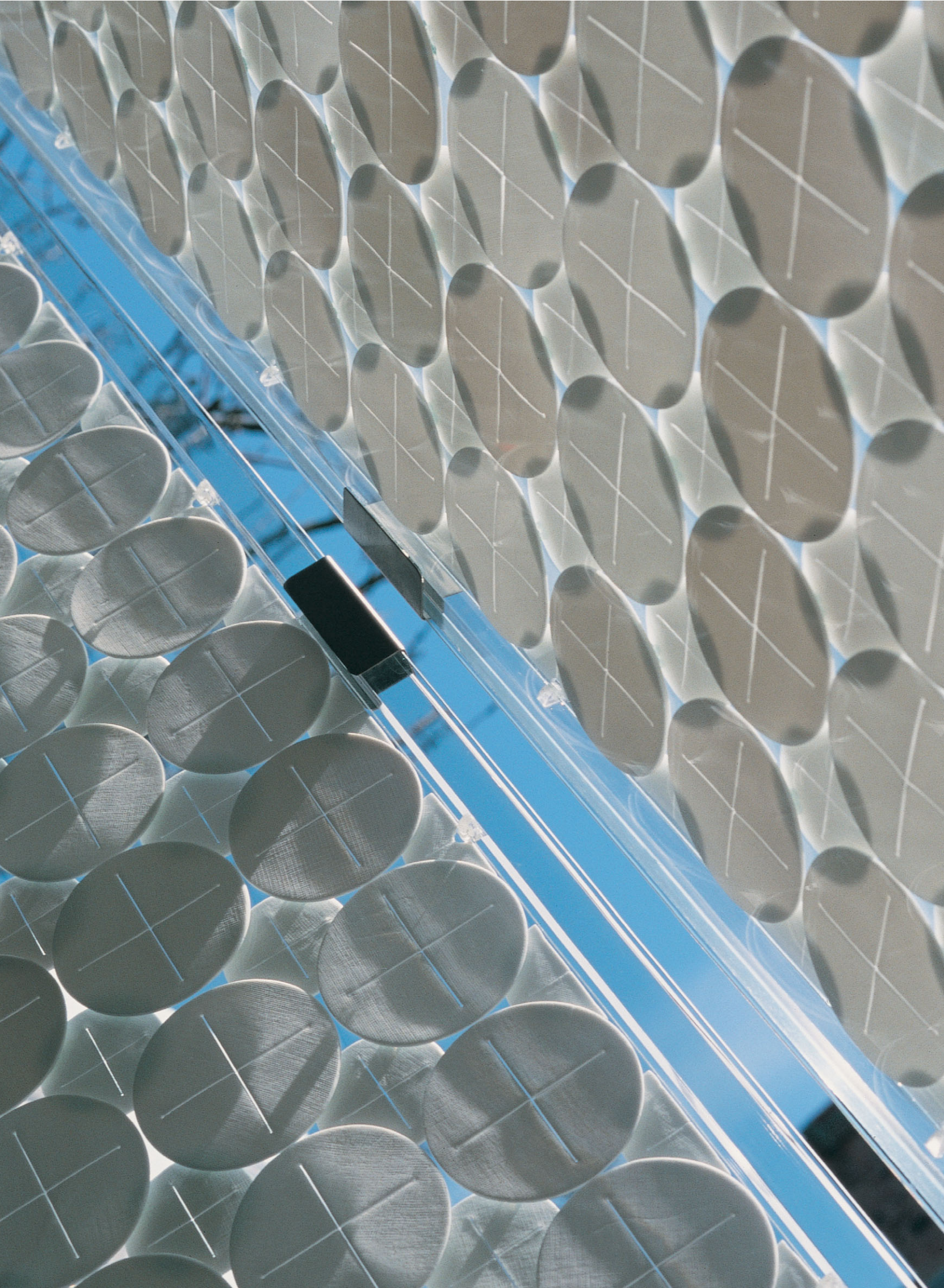
us to reassess preconceptions of the material's potential. Behind his output lies immense technical skill, not only drawing on a mastery of traditional ceramic techniques, but also in using his computer to plan, design, refine and manipulate images, and using power drills and a range of customised tools to produce surface texture. To display the finished pieces he integrates materials such as toughened glass, Perspex, aluminium and stainless steel with equal ease.

BACKGROUND

Born in Glasgow and growing up on the west coast of Scotland, he describes a childhood attraction to texture, pattern and form, particularly from nature. 'I've always been interested in surfaces and the transient qualities of materials. I can remember sitting for long periods as a child analysing and studying things. Insects and their structure, frogspawn and webs, cross-sections under the microscope have always fascinated me.'

After a foundation year at Carlisle, Wight studied surface pattern via a BA (Hons) Design course at Staffordshire University, before going on to an MA in ceramics there. As part of the course he took full advantage of work placements, one of which was at Wedgwood. He describes with enthusiasm the depth of technical know-how that was made available to him and he still maintains contact with the people

THIS PAGE LEFT: *Biscuits Panel* (detail), slip-cast bone china, toughened glass, Perspex and stainless steel, custard cream L4cm || RIGHT: *Grooved Polypoids*, bone china, Perspex and toughened glass, each approx. H10cm || OPPOSITE PAGE: *Cross-hair Screen* (detail), handmade bone china, toughened glass, stainless steel, Perspex, H192cm.





he met there. It was there that he first saw a lithophane mould, utilised in a process which produces gradations in the thickness of porcelain to a predetermined design. These variations present a detailed, almost photographic image when light passes through. Night lights, ceramic panels and lamp shades utilising this complex technique were popular in Victorian England. Wight spent some time researching lithophanes and perhaps this has contributed to his fascination with the effects of light through ceramic.

As part of his multidisciplinary design studies at university, Wight developed skills in techniques other than ceramics, many of which he practises in his present output. He worked with a wide range of materials and perfected techniques from mould making to sandblasting. Experiments in wafer-thin paper making and observing the effects of overlapping and trapping opaque elements within thin translucent sheets contributed to one of his present preoccupations with holding ceramic shapes between glass – offering up the work for detailed study like a specimen within a slide. At university, the paper making project earned him first prize in a design competition sponsored by David Linley.

VESSELS AND SCREENS

Perhaps the most mainstream of Wight's output are the vessels. It was these pieces that initially caught the eye of Sotheby's for its *Contemporary Decorative Arts* exhibition in 2001, although they eventually also exhibited the impressive *Cross-hair Screen* room divider. Wight produces a three-section slip mould to create blank vessels, which, after a low temperature firing, he pierces, drills and grinds to allow light to permeate the material in a variety of intensities. He then fires up to 1260°C according to the nature of the piece. Keeping symmetrical forms of this height (up to 38cm) upright in the final firing is precarious in the extreme. 'Upping the top firing temperature by just five degrees can result in the form collapsing, while under-firing will give a less translucent result.'

Wight's work interests individual collectors, but architects and interior designers also respond to the potential of his window panels and screens, seeing exciting scope for furniture, lighting, partitions, walling and more. For his disc forms within screens and panels, Wight rolls the clay by hand to 2mm and less, impresses his textures and cuts into circular shapes with a customised stamp, producing a fired result of

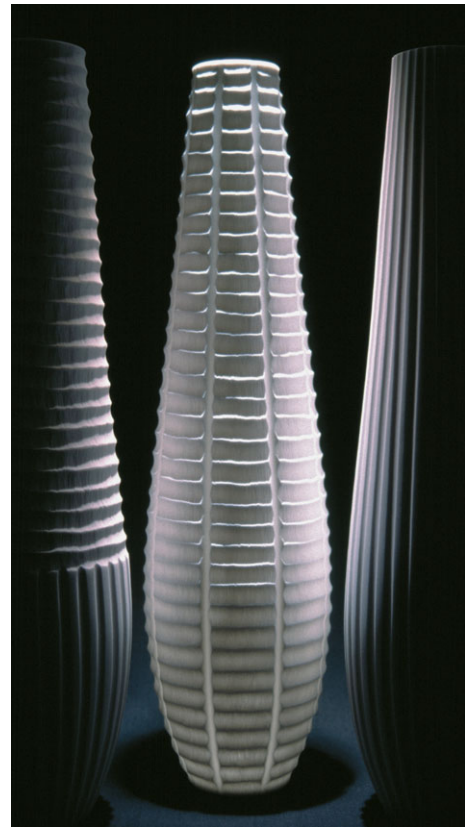
communion-wafer thickness and ethereal translucency. To achieve his incredible variety of decorative effects he works on both the plastic clay and the biscuited pieces. Some discs are textured using toy soldiers, cowboys and farm animals whose stretched and distorted impressions change as light hits them from different directions. Others, as in the folding screen, have more abstract decorative effects, a subtle surface texture and intersecting slits, or a variety of whorls, honeycombs and microscopic cell-like impressions.

A further variation in his glass-encased pieces involves breaking pre-textured thin slabs after firing and assembling to a predetermined layout. Massed shards of razor shells randomly trapped between beach pebbles are part of Wight's reference file and have influenced this avenue of design. His eggshell-like *Dome Forms*, on the other hand, are assembled in regimented grid format, each one bearing delicate piercing, texturing or patterning that respond to light changes.

Some of the most striking, and for me the most 'kinetic' of his creations, are the series of *Polypoid Forms*. For these he creates a model in clay, then a two-piece slip mould to cast quantities of the polyp form. After firing, the forms are carved, drilled and ground to vary the thickness of the ceramic, creating a range of dappling translucent effects. Held in a deep glass frame and lit by natural or artificial illumination, any interruption to the light source, or variation in its intensity – a cloud passing over the sun, or someone walking past the artificial light – creates an eye-catching illusion of movement with the finger-like forms appearing to sway and flutter like sea anemones in strong current. 'How light influences the appearance of the structured surface is as important as how it shows the translucence of the bone china. The pattern, structure and relief of the panels may be emphasised at night by combining front and back lighting to conjure an array of visual qualities,' he explains.

IMPACT

Whether Wight is a ceramist or an artist whose medium is bone china clay matters little. He is one of that rare breed of designer-makers whose output transcends categorisation, who works with a range of materials, and shifts easily from traditional tools and techniques to the latest technology. The work too is appealing on as wide a scale. A Wight vessel would sit beautifully under a spotlight in a domestic interior. A series of Wight's large-scale panels would pro-



vide exceptional impact as an internal corridor in a new-build commercial project. And just think what a boardroom table could look like with the surface encapsulating a host of his polypoid forms.

In March Wight travelled to Japan as a member of the British Crafts in Japan research trip, organised by the Design Factory (a not-for-profit organisation supporting, developing and promoting design and craft in the East Midlands) in partnership with the Crafts Council, Arts Council England (East Midlands) and UK Trade and Investment. His work met with a particularly enthusiastic response there. Earlier this year he received from Arts Council England the largest award to a maker in the East Midlands region. It will be interesting – and enlightening – to see how these two events influence his future work and development. **CR**

Chris Wight will be exhibiting at *Origin: The London Craft Fair*, Somerset House, London, October 3-15.

Chris Wight: Email chriswight@cone8.co.uk
For technical notes see: Website www.cone8.co.uk

OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT: *Cross-hair Screen*, handmade bone china, toughened glass, stainless steel, Perspex, H192cm (Photo: Chris Knapton) | *Toys Panel*, handmade bone china discs, toughened glass, Perspex, stainless steel, H58cm | *Fragments Panel*, handmade bone china fragments, toughened glass, Perspex, stainless steel, H58cm | THIS PAGE TOP LEFT: *Organic Discs* (detail), bone china, toughened glass, largest disc Ø23cm | BOTTOM LEFT: *Organic Panel* (detail), bone china, toughened glass, largest tile L16cm | TOP RIGHT: *Tall Vessel Form*, slip-cast hand-carved bone china, H38cm | BOTTOM RIGHT: *Dome Forms* (detail), slip-cast hand-carved bone china forms, Perspex, aluminium and toughened glass, H approx. 5cm.