ceramics MONTHLY

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Yael Braha
At Home in Her Work

by Susan McHenry

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As a child of North African refugees, Yael Braha learned early on that home can be defined in a myriad of ways. The hardships her family endured prior to seeking asylum in Rome, Italy, had a profound impact on Braha, instilling in her the importance of acquiring skills and knowledge—for those things can never be taken away. While a literal home may be transient, "skills don't have to fit in a suitcase or a toolbox—just in your head and hands," she reflects. Thus far, Braha has developed skills as a graphic designer, filmmaker, and most recently, ceramic artist. At pivotal points in her life, she has relocated to various cities around the world for job opportunities and artist residencies that have enabled her to advance her skills and gain further knowledge.

Braha is relatively new to the field of ceramics, beginning her studies in 2019 at a neighborhood pottery studio soon after she moved to Montreal, Canada, and continuing her education by attending workshops at craft schools like Penland School of Craft, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. Just two years after taking her first ceramics class, Braha received the 2021 Multicultural Fellowship Award from the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). Since then, her career has taken off, with her work widely exhibited nationally and internationally in both museums and galleries. In 2024, she was selected as an emerging artist by the American Craft Council, which is providing her with financial and mentoring opportunities. Her distinctive body of work features geometric and optical illusions fueled by her experiences as a graphic designer and filmmaker.

Classical Art Influences

Growing up in Rome, Braha was surrounded and inspired by classical works of art including those by Caravaggio, Bernini, and Borromini. She recalls being captivated by the forced perspective in the courtyard of Palazzo Spada by Baroque architect Francesco Borromini. Forced perspective applies optical illusion—manipulating cues that the eyes and brain use to estimate relative distance—to make objects appear farther away or closer than they are. In the Borromini courtyard, rows of columns gradually become shorter in conjunction with an inclining floor and ceiling, creating the illusion of a hallway that is much longer than it is. When viewed from one end of the corridor, what appears to be a life-size sculpture is, in actuality, only a little over 23 inches tall.

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1 Pitcher, 17½ in. (44.5 cm) in height, stoneware, slip, glaze, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, 2024. **2** Vases, 10½ in. (26.7 cm) in height, stoneware, slip, glaze, fired to cone 10 in a wood kiln, 2024. *Photo: Colin Hopkins.* **3** Yael Braha at Starworks Ceramics. *Photo: Takuro Shibata.* **4** *Vantage Point II* (alternate views), 20 in. (50.8 cm) in height, wood-fired stoneware, 2023.

Visual illusions like this are strong components of Braha's ceramic vessels, where line patterns are intentionally manipulated to create a sense of foreground and background. One of her pieces titled *Vantage Point* was juried into Japan's International Ceramic Festival Mino '24—the world's largest ceramics triennial competition—receiving an honorable mention in the ceramics design category, and finalist position in the three top awards in the ceramics design category. This minimalist piece unexpectedly resolves in a myriad of ways, depending on the viewer's vantage point. Braha says her intention was to create a piece that reflected the "subjective and multifaceted aspects of reality."

Graphic Design and Filmmaking Influences

Walking through a park one day in Rome, Braha was drawn to the logo on a poster advertising an ice-skating competition. She knew then and there that she wanted to pursue graphic design. Braha studied at the European Institute of Design in Rome, and after completing her degree, went to work at her professor Paolo Campanelli's design firm. While attending a design conference in San Francisco, California, Braha was drawn to the contemporary art scene there so she moved to the area to continue working in graphic design.

In her free time, she started exploring metalwork and glass casting, but soon took an interest in filmmaking, enrolling in classes at the Film Arts Foundation. Film allowed Braha to explore her curiosity about how a static image and graphic design could come together to create a moving image. She went on to get her MFA in film from San Francisco State University. In the early 2000s, Braha was part of the last cohort to use actual film before the program switched to digital production. Editing film reel to

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reel on a flatbed—physically cutting the reel, where one shot ends and another begins—would later be referenced in her approach to slab building. "In filmmaking, you assemble two shots to create a third meaning deduced by the viewer. It's something I think a lot about when I am working [in clay]."

Braha's varied creative paths in graphic design and filmmaking have culminated in her current body of ceramic work. Combining modern digital fabrication methods with traditional ceramic construction techniques, she utilizes a plotter to create patterned stencils, a laser cutter for templates, a 3D printer for molds and stamps, and CNC milling for molds. She always begins with a sketch, and while the two-dimensional sketch might feel resolved, once it's made into a three-dimensional object, it might not work. Led by a spirit of curiosity and experimentation, Braha recognizes that being willing to try something new might lead to failure. But those failures will lead her to the next iteration of an idea.

Laying the stencils over slabs of clay or thrown vessels, Braha applies colored slips to the surface, creating patterned lines. Framing the template on a form allows her to be deliberate about the composition of a piece and enables her to change the direction of the pattern. Much like editing a film, each choice Braha makes in the creation process gets revealed. "When I assemble a form, that seam is important to me," she says. "There is an intentional visual and tactile distinction between one side of the seam and the other." She might opt to change the direction of a pattern from one side of a seam to another, creating a sense of movement or the illusion of foreground and background.

The Gestalt theory of visual perception that Braha applied to her graphic design work is evidenced in her ceramic pieces as well. Gestalt theory, derived from Gestalt psychology, recognizes the human brain's impulses to simplify complex images or designs, by subconsciously arranging parts into an organized system. This allows us to recognize patterns and structures so we can better understand our environment. In visual design, concepts such as proximity, figure and ground, similarity, and symmetry and order are utilized to create compelling images. Braha is led by a deeply held interest in process and transformation. "We constantly edit whoever we are—shape, trim, leave out what is no longer useful to us. Form-finding in clay, seen from a telescopic lens, can be compared to my own personal form-finding in life—who I am, who I really want to be, what aspects of my personality are no longer useful and can be cut away, and what can be shaped into a more harmonious form."

5 Tumblers, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, stoneware, slip, ash glaze, fired to cones 6 and 10 in various kiln types (gas, wood, electric), 2023. **6** Geometric creamer, 9½ in. (24.1 cm) in width, stoneware, slip, glaze, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, 2024. **7** *Fin Vase III*, 16 in. (40.6 cm) in width, stoneware, slip, glaze, fired to cone 12 in a wood kiln, 2023.

8 Vase, 10½ in. (26.7 cm) in height, stoneware, slip, glaze, fired to cone 10 in a wood kiln, 2024. *Photo: Colin Hopkins.* **9** Braha wood firing in Seagrove, North Carolina.

Finding a Sense of Home

While in her early 20s, Braha's mother died suddenly, shortly after returning home from a visit with Braha in California. At the time, Braha had been writing a script for her MFA thesis about her mother's experience as a refugee. Grief hindered her from completing the film. "It was the most difficult thing I had to do. And I just stopped." She was convinced she'd never graduate. Close to the five-year grace period, a friend encouraged Braha to make a film about something else, just so she could graduate. This gentle push allowed her to complete her degree. "And I think that's why community is so important to me," she emphasizes.

The experience of losing her mom cemented the reality that we could be here one day and gone the next without notice. It gave Braha a certain focus creatively and permission to focus on what she's drawn to explore at the time. If this means waiting to set up more permanent roots for a while, Braha is happy to comply.

Braha has been on the residency circuit for the past few years, where she is in community with other artists. Last year, she was a long-term resident at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and she is currently in Japan at the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, making work for her 2025 solo show at the Chautauqua Institution in Western New York. Residencies have provided Braha with the opportunity to connect with community and explore new ideas. She's been hand harvesting and using local, wild clays from various residency locations, and is getting the opportunity to fire in atmospheric kilns like soda and wood. But moving from one residency to the next is not without its challenges. For now, Braha has no permanent residence, though someday she would like to set up a home studio and settle into a community of fellow artists. She'd also like to have a dog.

"Right now, home is more of a feeling than a place. I think a sense of home can potentially be found anywhere. I could feel at home in a kitchen in Italy, in a small dive bar in Japan, or in receiving an unexpected text message from a childhood friend. Home can be anywhere and everywhere, even in a smell that brings me back to a memory. I have found home through genuine human connections, animal companions, and immersion in nature." And she's finding a sense of home within the ceramics field, too, noting that she wouldn't be where she is today without all those who have encouraged and mentored her in this field that is still so new to her. As she travels the globe for residencies, she often gets asked where she lives. Her response these days is, "Here. I'm here." Her family's lived experience has prepared her well for living in a temporary residence, for leaving behind what is familiar to venture into the unknown—where knowledge and skills are her home.

To learn more about Yael Braha, visit ceramics.yaelbraha.com or follow on Instagram @yaelbraha.ceramics.

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Merging Traditional and Technological Processes by Yael Braha

The following are a handful of ways to incorporate digital technologies and fabrication methods into traditional ceramic processes. These are meant to stimulate curiosity and encourage further exploration in one's own ceramic practice. Most of these tools and equipment can be found in fabrication labs (whether private, nonprofit, or part of public libraries or universities).

CNC Milling

A CNC milling machine can be used to create a plaster mold. After 3D modeling a form (using any available 3D-modeling software), carve a foam block with a CNC milling machine. After the foam is carved, it is sealed (I use Vaseline) and pour plaster into it. These images (1, 2) show a one-part plaster mold designed for use as a press mold, but this process could be adapted to create a multi-part mold as well.

Laser Cutting

Laser cutters are versatile tools that enable the cutting and engraving of a variety of materials (paper or cardstock, felt, wood, plexiglass, etc.). There are multiple ways to incorporate this tool into the ceramic studio, depending on needs and intents. Here are a handful of ideas:

- Cut custom ribs or shaping tools out of wood board and smooth the edges with sanding paper, if necessary
- Cut templates or stencils out of paper or cardstock
- Engrave seamless patterns on a rubber sheet and glue it onto a rolling pin to make a custom textured roller
- Engrave signature stamps on a rubber sheet to sign your work

Here (3, 4) you can see custom pattern designs that are cut into a wood board, and pressed onto a slab to create an embossed effect.

3D Printing

In the ceramics studio, 3D printers can be used to:

- Make your own molds
- Print 3D stamps
- Print "cookie cutter" templates

Here (5) you can see a cookie cutter example: the object is modeled in 3D software and then 3D printed. You might want to experiment with the thickness of the walls, depending on the type of 3D printer and materials available. Place a layer of plastic wrap over the clay before pressing the "cookie cutter" onto it. This will help to release the cutter from the clay.

1 A CNC milling machine cutting a block of foam. **2** An example of a completed CNC-milled foam block (left) and the plaster mold that was cast into it (right).

3 An example of a custom pattern design, laser cut using a thin plywood board. **4** The custom-designed laser-cut wood board is carefully pressed onto a slab to create an emboss effect. **5** A 3D-printed shape with thin walls is pressed downward to cut its shape out of a slab of clay.

Silkscreening

Although silkscreening technology was developed in 1900, it's worthwhile mentioning ways that it can be used today within a ceramics practice:

- Silkscreen on paper. Use a thick underglaze and print your silkscreen image onto thin paper (such as newsprint). Paper prints can be stored to use at a later time; when ready to transfer, lightly spray some water onto it before transferring it onto the clay surface, then use a soft rib to help release the print onto the clay (test which clay hardness works best for you).
- Silkscreen on gel printing plates. Print directly on a gel plate, then transfer the gel plate onto the clay surface (when transferring onto a cylindrical surface, like a cup, try rolling the cup across the flat gel plate rather than wrapping the gel plate around the cup).

In this example (6–8) I transformed a custom pattern design into a silkscreen and used it to create underglaze prints on paper.

Laser Transfer

A very accessible way to create some image transfers without necessarily having access to a digital fabrication lab is using a black/white laser photocopy machine. For best results, the source image should be high contrast (black/white without grayscale), and flipped horizontally (especially if it contains any text). To transfer the image, mix a custom ceramic ink composed of a small amount of oxides (any color, but black is recommended to begin with) with water. Lightly paint your custom ink with a brush onto the paper photocopy: notice how the black photocopy toner repels the ink. Wait a few seconds for the ink to dry, then flip the paper and press it onto the clay surface (test which clay hardness works best for you), using a soft rib to help the ink transfer onto the clay.

These images (9, 10) show high-contrast images flipped horizontally and then transferred onto clay.


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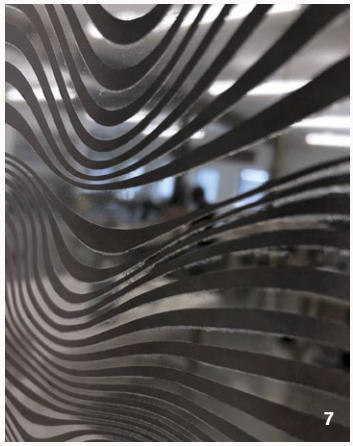
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6 An example of an adhesive vinyl custom pattern design affixed onto a mesh screen. **7** The see-through pattern of the screen. **8** Examples of silkscreen prints on paper using thickened underglaze. The successful prints are collected and transferred onto clay later on.

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9 A worktable with a variety of test prints and image transfers. **10** A fired plate that uses a combination of laser transfers and silkscreen print transfers.