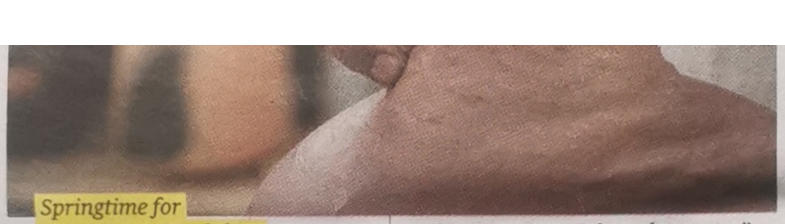
Halima Cassell, who was born in Pakistan in 1975 and grew up in Manchester, is among the younger artists in the show. Her installation Virtues of Unity comprises a row of exquisitely carved (as opposed to thrown) bowls, each made with clay from a different place, lined up in order of colour like a tea-strength chart, from the palest cream to the darkest brown. The ongoing project, she says, "is to do with my own identity, growing up in Manchester and the various comments you get, like 'foreigner'."

In 2009 she returned to her "own country" for university residencies in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. "I expected to be treated like a homecomer, but I was always introduced by the university staff as 'a foreigner from England'. It got me thinking about where we belong. You think about the migration of people over thousands of years, and really we're all the same. We're made from the same material, we're from the earth and we go back to back the earth."

Recent exciting ceramics acquisitions for the museum, says Ritchie, include work from Alison Britton, famous for her colourful interpretations of traditional pottery vessels, and "a very hot artist" called Jesse Wine, who is based in New York but was born in Chester. "He makes this fabulous sculptural work," says Ritchie, which ranges



Springtime for ceramics ... Magdalene Odundo, whose work features in Things of Beauty Growing, at the Fitzwilliam

from vast organic earthy abstracts to glossily glazed renditions of his bowl of pasta, Sports Direct mugs with a snail idling between them and the Adidas sliders he wears to potter about in the studio.

One reason why ceramics feels quite "buzzy at the moment", she says, "is that we are seeing younger collectors. That idea of spending more on something and buying less is spreading. You do see people spending on something handmade that they really love rather than buying something mass-produced or disposable."

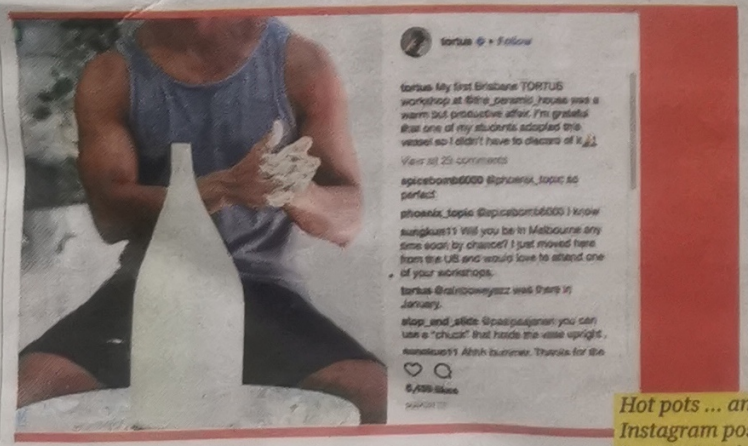
And there's a simple human joy in feeling a connection to the maker through a tactile 3D object. "When it's made with the hands, you can hold it or imagine holding it, or use it, and your hands are where their hands were. People really love that directness. And they love knowing how things are made – we get asked all the time. People are interested in technique, materials and process."

In fact, more people are getting involved in making themselves, says Toby Brundin, director of Ceramic Art London. The urge to take up pottery, he says, goes hand in hand with the recent boom in knitting, sourdough bread-baking and craft beer brewing. "It's all connected. If you pick up a pot – which is shorthand for any ceramic object – a lot of it's about texture and there's no way to digitise it. There are no shortcuts in the making. If you lose concentration, you're screwed. It's so rudely analogue that it's an antidote to the analytical, screen-based way that most of us spend our working, and a big chunk of our non-working, lives. People are craving physical experience."

There was also the BBC2 game show, The Great Pottery Throw Down, which ran between 2015 and 2017. Filmed at Middleport Pottery in Stoke-on-Trent, it saw members of the public compete to make the best pots, in the mould of The Great British Bake Off. "I think Throw Down definitely drew attention but I also suspect the programme was commissioned in response to the rising popularity of ceramics," Brundin says. "So while it definitely helped the growth of the craft, it was also a response to it rather than the cause of it."

Some ceramic artists have become role models for an alternative way of life, such as Adam Buick, who has a few pieces in the Fitzwilliam show. "He makes only moon jars," says Brundin, referring to traditional spherical vessels. "He lives on the Pembrokeshire coast, surfs every morning at six, digs his own clay out of the earth." Sometimes he leaves a pleasing bowl impression in the ground, as is documented on his Instagram feed.

"Instagram is a key driver for the younger generation of makers," says Brundin. "It's changing the way they sell." The American potter Eric Landon, of Tortus studio in Copenhagen, is as close to a rock star as a potter could get, touring the world and posting to his 786,000 Instagram followers videos of himself with tanned, muscly arms effortlessly manipulating wobbly wet clay, or a selfie with Susan Sarandon at one of his workshops.



Hot pots ... an Instagram post by Eric Landon

Fashion and textiles illustrator-turned-potter John Booth says he gets a kick out of selling directly through Instagram rather than through galleries. New to the medium, he started an evening class at Turning Earth in 2015 and his first edition of 50 painted plates sold out in two days. Previously best known for designing prints for fashion house Fendi, he now funds his studio with his bright, crude vases. "It's such a simple process and there's a roughness to them

and posting videos of his muscly arms working wet clay

designer who is currently chief creative officer at Calvin Klein, has long been addicted to buying and selling ceramics and unflinchingly displays breakable Picasso pots in his living room.

At Ceramic Art London, a representative from Bonhams approached exhibitor Nichola Theakston, who makes deeply empathetic sculptures of animals, to commission her to make fresh work for the auction house to sell. "The auction world follows trends and finds underexploited areas," says Brundin. "Ceramics has historically been undervalued because of its connection with craft so they can see room to move upwards."

But generally, he says, "we're still in the realm where people are buying for themselves rather than for an investment. In any case, that's how you should do investments: buy things that give you pleasure."

Things of Beauty Growing: British Studio Pottery is at Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, until 17 June.

'We all go back to the earth' ... Halima Cassell and one of her works

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