

Jennifer Lee's new work is the result of two years spent in Japan, reports *Teleri Lloyd-Jones*

# JENNIFER LEE

## A JOURNEY FROM WHITE TO RED



Left: Pale, speckled emerging rim, 1997  
Opposite: Pair of pots – Shigaraki Red, dark rim, dark base, tilted shelf, 2015 and Shigaraki Red, dark speckled trace, dark rim, tilted shelf, 2016

Jennifer Lee knows her clay. The ceramist has used T Material, a white stoneware, since 1977. When she heard the recipe was changing, she stockpiled more clay than she could ever use in her lifetime. It fills her basement.

‘I was wedded to this stuff,’ she says, as we sit in the studio extension of her south London home. One of the most admired ceramists working in the UK, with pieces in public collections across the world and an unending supply of clay, the scene was set for decades to come. And yet in 2014, the ceramist moved her practice to Japan for two months. Two months was not enough though, and over the next two years Lee took up residence at the ceramics centre in Shigaraki three times.

‘I do everything incredibly slowly, deliberately, notebooks, writing everything. Being in control. To suddenly feel a bit out of control was stimulating and energising, but also unknown... I fell in love with it,’ she says. Japan had an intense impact on her, so much so you sense that

Lee is in its midst rather than its conclusion.

This September brings a marker of sorts with the UK unveiling of her most recent pieces at London gallery Erskine, Hall & Coe. Those who know her work will expect resolved, earthily hued, tilted vessels and they will not be disappointed, but there are some surprises too.

After nearly four decades of dedication to her white stoneware, Lee’s time in Japan has brought red clay into her world. Not only that, but the ceramist has sat at a potter’s wheel for the first time since her student years in Edinburgh. These are big shifts, and, I suggest, she undertook the first residency of her career in search of such change. ‘I was surprised by the actual disruption that took place,’ she says. ‘I thought I’d go and make some hand-built pots. I’m really pleased that something happened at all.’

The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park is set in one of the country’s oldest pottery producing areas. Opened in 1990, it consists of exhibition

spaces as well as workshop facilities and an artist-in-residence programme. Lee’s pilgrimage to this particular part of Japan follows in the footsteps of Peter Voulkos, Alison Britton, Carol McNicoll, Richard Shaw and Tony Franks.

‘That’s what’s so extraordinary about the place,’ Lee explains. ‘You almost get the feeling – I’ve got goose bumps just thinking of it – of the history of it. Voulkos was there. So many people have gone and done what I did.’

She first made contact with the Shigaraki in 2009 when she was in Japan for *U-Tsu-Wa*, a landmark exhibition in her career that brought together her vessels with Ernst Gampel’s turned wood and Lucie Rie’s ceramics at Issey Miyake’s 21\_21 Design Sight gallery in Tokyo. She was invited to be a guest artist by Shigaraki museum curator Hiroko Miura, but family responsibilities took priority. Years passed and the invitation stayed open, so in 2014 Lee prepared to move her practice to the other side of the world.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL HARVEY





Left to right:  
Sand-grained, olive trace,  
tilted rim, 2007;  
Olive, haloed granite ring,  
traces, tilted rim, 2009;  
Olive, umber and peat  
traces, tilted rim, 2009;  
Rust speckled, 2009





For an itinerant maker this would be no trouble, but Lee’s work is rooted in her studio. Not only is there that mountain of clay in the basement to consider, but her ceramic language is built from her collection of oxides and large archive of hand-mixed clays (some three decades old) sitting under her bench. Hundreds of clay tests hang on strings in her studio, tinkling as you brush past, a reminder of the innumerable subtle hues that she can conjure.

Lee left her clays and oxides behind, packing only her favourite hand tools. With just two months away, she was eager push to her productivity, so sent templates ahead for the technicians to make moulds ready for her first day (moulds do appear in her usual practice, but solely for defining the bases of vessels rather than an entire piece). Arriving at Shigaraki, Lee was told that the wood-fired *anagama* kiln would be lit the next day (she describes the kiln, stoked with pine over the next six days, as ‘like a Tarkovsky-esque film – fantastic!’). In response to this challenge, she produced a vessel in 24 hours. For someone who usually makes around 18 pieces in a year, this was new terrain.

There are two large, shared workspaces at Shigaraki, one for studio artists and the other for invited guest artists. Lee’s time there was intensely focused. She found herself working 18 hour days, doing clay tests, painting, drawing and making. ‘There’s no distraction,’ she explains. ‘It’s so selfish, you’ve got no one else to think about but yourself.’ This was the first time the ceramist wasn’t mixing her own clays; the technicians were on hand to support with preparation and firing, allowing her to devote every waking minute to making, with the odd break for meals.

On the recommendation of a technician, Lee picked up a Japanese or Shigaraki translucent stoneware. Working with the new material, she gradually got a sense of what it could and couldn’t do. The vessels emerged with subtle shadows and highlights running through their walls, more reminiscent of tricks of the light than the tonal shifts of her white stoneware.

One night, Lee returned to her bench after dinner to find a red bowl delivered from the kiln

and placed by the technician on a lacquer box. The similarity in colour delighted her immediately: ‘It’s such a different process – they have layers and layers of lacquer whereas we burnish and burnish. But it’s all the same sense of time.’

Geology and landscape are what many see in Lee’s work, though interestingly this is not the ceramist’s intent. Instead, she talks of time, her slow process, the clay’s ageing, layer built slowly upon layer. Tanya Harrod has referred to Lee’s pots as ‘ur-shapes’, as something original, essential. Lee has a particular enthusiasm for objects of earlier civilisations, and mentions Jomon pottery and the Beaker Folk in Scotland. Does this explain the timelessness of her work? ‘I wouldn’t place myself,’ she replies, gently avoiding any label, ‘but I’d be very happy if somebody thought one of my pieces had been dug up somewhere.’

The workspaces at Shigaraki are huge and communal, something Lee found initially daunting. In the way that her London studio brims with imagery and found objects, the ceramist created her own environment within the shared space, with things collected from the surrounding area and the local skip: rusty tins, discarded tatami, dried leaves, spoils from flea markets and even a snakeskin. Remnants of life lived and time spent. Sometimes she’d use a mop and paint huge pots on the floor, left as traces in the dust. ‘You could be as eccentric as you liked, there’s no one to see you,’ she smiles.

In the spring of 2015, on her second trip, she curated a show of her work and collected pieces at the Institute of Ceramic Studies Gallery in Shigaraki. It was a moment to reflect on the body of work she’d made, but also a tribute to the material culture of a country that she’d grown to love, placing her pieces among tatami and ambient light-wells.

The combination of creative freedom and technical support meant that Lee could experiment continually. Not only was there the red clay, but also some throwing, wood-fired Shigaraki-ware and even some silver lustre made a one-time appearance, too. Looking back, she considers the largest shift in her practice to be her new use of colour: ‘I never dreamt that I’d

use red clay,’ she says. And yet, to an outsider the red work is so recognisably hers, so part of the object family she’s long been building.

Showing alongside vessels at Erskine, Hall & Coe will be a series of ‘slabs’, flat works with gradual shifts of colour, visible on both the front and back. ‘In a way it was like painting through – like the clay was a canvas,’ describes Lee, continuing her process of working colour through clay, not on its surface. What is seen in her work is an intimation of what lies beneath.

Perhaps the most surprising development in Japan was that Lee began throwing, something she hasn’t done since the late 1970s. Her usual process of hand-building is so exacting and gradual that throwing seems its counterpoint, intensely momentary. The ceramist explains how she was pushing the clay on the wheel until it was almost collapsing, referring to her throwing process as ‘absurd’. In her studio sits a collection of thrown tea-bowl forms, not for public consumption, she emphasises: ‘My gut feeling is that I’m a hand-builder, and that’s where the forms that I want to make can be made.’

Lee’s time at Shigaraki was precious and transformative, making the return to her trusted studio all the more bumpy. ‘It was very difficult, awful. I was really discontented with my space – I couldn’t think,’ she recalls. To remedy this she rented a temporary space for a few months, and her friend Duncan Hooson gave her access to the facilities at Morley College so she could continue throwing. One can’t help but giggle at the thought of students arriving at their class to find Jennifer Lee at work in front of them.

Since her return at the end of 2015, Lee has settled back into the rhythms and spaces of her London life, working now in both red and white clays. ‘It’ll be a while before I go away again,’ she says. What began as a two-month trip blossomed into a two-year adventure, the true significance of which will only unfold given time.

*Jennifer Lee’, Erskine Hall & Coe, London w1, 29 September – 27 October. www.erskinehallcoe.com. In 2017 Lee will feature in an exhibition of British ceramics at Yale Center for British Art, Connecticut. www.jenniferlee.co.uk*

PHOTOS: MICHAEL HARVEY



Far left: Pale, speckled traces, spiral, 2009;  
Left: Pale, three granite rings, 2009  
Right: Dark olive, haloed umber rings, 2016  
Far right: Sand-grained, haloed olive ring, 2016

