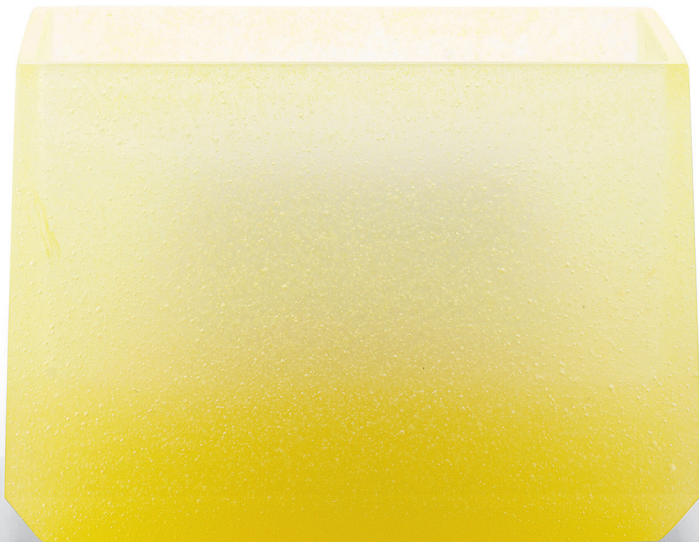


Andrea Walsh has spent her career creating beautiful, enigmatic boxes from ceramic and glass.

ANDREA
WALSH



CONTAINED BOX – YELLOW FRIT AND WHITE, 2016

The Woman’s Hour Craft Prize finalist opens up to *Imogen Greenhalgh*. Photos by *Shannon Tofts*

BOX
OFFICE



CONTAINED BOX – CLEAR FRIT AND GOLD (SQUARE), 2015



**‘Colours go in and
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different so you give it
up to the kiln gods...
Magical things happen’**

ANDREA WALSH

Andrea Walsh is in the middle of moving house and her mind is occupied by boxes of various shapes and sizes. ‘We’re only moving one road away,’ she explains when I visit her at her Edinburgh studio, but even so, everything must be packed up, sorted through. For most makers, this anecdote would be nothing more than incidental but, unlike most, Walsh has spent nearly a decade creating delicately considered boxes from fine bone china, glass and burnished metal. Ideas she has toyed with through her practice, about containment and the value we place on the things we hold onto, are shifted into a newly practical light. ‘It means sorting through things you haven’t looked at in such a long time. I threw away loads. It was very cleansing,’ she says. ‘You discover lots of things you obviously haven’t needed, but they bring back such powerful memories. Even smells, feelings.’

On the surface, there is something almost unassuming about Walsh’s work and practice. A decade spent exploring vessel and box forms, creating refined series using only a handful of materials. Even in palette and scale, Walsh rarely deviates (though, she chuckles, there are a few experiments tucked away that would argue other-

wise). And yet, despite this, her practice manages to throw up surprises: subtle variations of colour and material appear, not as bolts from the blue, but rather as if they have always been there, like the appearance of a misplaced necklace at the bottom of a suitcase. An intimate surprise, rewarding you for looking.

As unexpected discoveries go, Walsh is also coming to terms with a rather wonderful one of her own. A few days prior to our meeting, she learned she is one of 12 finalists for the inaugural Woman’s Hour Craft Prize, a new award from the Crafts Council, the BBC and the Victoria and Albert Museum (see page 5). The news is fresh, and not yet public, so Walsh is still in the midst of processing it all. ‘It’s all quite an unknown at the minute,’ she replies, when I ask what she has in mind for the finalists’ group exhibition. ‘But I just keep smiling when I think about it so I’m obviously very happy.’

From a practical perspective, Walsh’s course is clearer. Alongside preparing for this show, which opens in September at the V&A and will tour nationwide, she is exhibiting work in Stourbridge this August for the British Glass Biennale. Following that, hot on the heels of the Woman’s

Hour Craft Prize exhibition, is the new contemporary craft fair Tresor in Basel, where Walsh will show new pieces with Swiss gallery Taste Contemporary Craft, run by Monique Deul. There’s also a group show curated by Deul at Geneva’s Musée Ariana on the horizon, and Walsh’s first solo exhibition with The Scottish Gallery to prepare for next May. All in all, her schedule is looking satisfyingly full. ‘The next year of my life is quite finely planned out,’ she concedes.

Walsh’s enigmatic boxes start life rather traditionally, as a series of hand-made moulds and models in plaster, clay, foam and silicone rubber. When she begins a new box, very little is fixed, except possibly the glass or clay she has in mind, selected from the neat stacks that line the shelves of her studio. ‘It’s not premeditated before I make them at all, because there’s so much that happens during the process,’ she says. ‘Colours go in and come out completely different so you give it up to the kiln gods... Magical things happen.’

With her ‘Contained Boxes’, this combination of chance and rigour has become part of the series’ rationale, and though the possibilities for each might appear simple given the parameters Walsh works within, plenty of variables emerge as



CONTAINED BOX - BLACK AND GOLD (SOFT OVAL), 2016



COLLECTION OF FACETED BOXES, FINE BONE CHINA, GOLD AND CLEAR GLASS, 2009-13

the lengthy making process unfolds. Each box comprises two components: a larger, outer container kiln-cast in glass and a smaller slip-cast box of fine bone china cradled within, its surface unglazed or applied with fine layers of precious metal as if lacquered. ‘They have this incredible charge to them. They’re small in scale and on the face of it quite straightforward,’ observes Alun Graves, a long-term supporter of Walsh’s and a judge for the Woman’s Hour Craft Prize, ‘but they have this amazing, contained energy to them because everything is so beautifully considered, and the relationship of the components is so beautifully realised. It gives the contained element this incredible presence, this sense of being something fantastically special.’

By the time her object is finished, Walsh has mined various traditions of great depth and complexity, but her creations feel weightless and wholly contemporary. She came to traditions of hand-making sidelong: she grew up in Stockport in a creative household, though her parents both did, as she puts it, ‘normal jobs’. Her father – ‘quite a perfectionist, I think I get that from him’ – enjoyed working with wood and other materials in his spare time, while her mother drew, sewed

and knitted. ‘She was fascinated by Japan... The materials, and the way you put objects and your home together. That, without a doubt, influenced my eventual aesthetic.’

Walsh, mathematical, ‘completely art oriented’ and a little bit rebellious, finished school and began a fine art degree at Staffordshire University. The course was largely conceptual, but students had access to some exceptional facilities and expertise: ‘I was using lots of different materials, but I tended to need to work with technicians who were specialists in order to realise ideas,’ she explains. ‘But I began to crave a deeper knowledge of a material and its capabilities, to know what I could do with it. My degree show was based around glass and light, and that’s when it became apparent I knew nothing about glass.’

After graduating, Walsh set out to put this right, and spent ‘an amazing, intense year’ at Dudley’s International Glass Centre trying her hand at various techniques. A Masters in glass followed, and it was there, in the corridors of the Edinburgh College of Art that she came across clay, her second material but one that she uses, as Graves puts it, with ‘equal weight’. In those days, the art school still had a dedicated ceramics department

so it was possible for the budding glass artist to install herself quietly in the corner of the clay studio and spend a summer learning to slip cast. For Walsh, the differences between glass and clay proved as appealing as their shared qualities and she embarked on a series of work – paper-thin porcelain vessels with pools of hardened glass at the base in celadon green and slate blue – investigating their individualities, as well as working out ways she could develop processes across them, to interlink them through her practice. ‘The materials kind of come hand in hand,’ she observes.

In 2009 she won an Artist into Industry residency through the British Ceramics Biennial, which took her to the Barlaston factory of Wedgwood’s Minton brand. Walsh was now ensconced in the heart of Britain’s ceramic industry, its history and traditions at her fingertips. ‘It was originally three months, but I extended it to six as I found it so enjoyable,’ she says. ‘There was just so much to learn and so much generosity from people across the factory... It felt like a real privilege.’ Returning to Edinburgh, ‘this new breadth of information in my head’, her work took a new track, moving from vessels to producing differently sized faceted boxes in glass and fine bone

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china. Drawing on Minton’s long association with opulence, she began to broach questions of adornment and luxury too, incorporating gold. ‘Decoration was totally alien to me,’ she says, ‘but I learnt so much just observing, and trying things out. [Gold] is completely decorative, but I suppose I use it in a very simple, pared back way. It brings so many connotations and concepts with it, and introduces them to the work.’

Another juncture came a few years later in 2014, during an artist residency funded by Creative Scotland at Edinburgh College of Art, which provided Walsh with a bursary to travel Japan. Having long admired the quiet focus of the country’s material culture, where everything seems to have a rightful place, she expected the trip to yield ideas, but it was a night on Naoshima that was to prove momentous. Visiting the island’s renowned art museums felt, she explains, like pennies dropping. ‘It was perhaps a key moment for me. The experience of the artwork and how it was displayed in the museums there. The consideration and the thought... was incredible,’ she says. ‘It makes me tingle to think about it even now.’

She began making the first of her ‘Contained Boxes’ as soon as she arrived home, showing them

‘I began to crave a deeper knowledge of a material and its capabilities, to know what I could do with it’

ANDREA WALSH



PAIR OF ROUND BOXES, LOST WAX CAST BRONZE AND GLASS, 2015

in an installation at Collect Open in 2015. ‘I felt like my work had become more refined, more focused. In my own mind, anyway.’

Skip forward to now, and the understated, almost imperceptible evolution of her work continues, piece by piece. As Graves points out: ‘There’s a whole range of people making beautiful, wonderful work using traditional forms – boxes or jars or jugs or whatever it might be – but somehow it takes something very special to hone things to the level that Andrea seems to.’

In terms of where she will take her practice next, Walsh remains open-minded. ‘I feel like everything is a very slow progression and things kind of come and go within that. It’s very fluid and I find that I’m learning constantly and, I suppose, cherry-picking things along the way.’ Fledgling ideas might turn into something more, as different exhibitions ask her to reflect on and develop her practice. ‘I have all these tests and experiments that have spanned my studio time over 10 or 15 years tucked away. They might have been shelved at the time as a beautiful experiment, but maybe they didn’t fit in with what I was looking for at that time... Things can take six or seven years to come through.’

As we talk, she clasps one of her latest ‘Contained Boxes’, cupping her hands around its gently curved sides. ‘I’m in love with the form of this rounder piece, and I definitely want to explore it more,’ she muses. ‘I see it as almost like a belly form, the way it’s round underneath.’

As always with Walsh, there’s an uplifting sense of a kind of connectedness just beneath the surface, as if her future work might already sit in a crate in her studio, half-formed, just waiting to be unwrapped. An object might unlock a memory or awaken a dormant idea, or draw out something more deeply embedded, unknown to the maker but still exerting a kind of presence. In their abstraction, her boxes manage to stand for both. Holding these disparate ideas in balance – light and dark, weightlessness and density, continuity and change – her boxes continue to evolve, each scarcely bigger than a butter dish, but seeming to be boundless even so.

British Glass Biennale is at the Ruskin Glass Centre, Stourbridge, 25 August – 9 September.

www.biennale.org.uk

Woman’s Hour Craft Prize is at the V&A, London, 7 September 2017 – 5 February 2018.

andreawalsh.co.uk



LARGE FACETED BOX, PORCELAIN WITH GOLD INTERIOR AND CLEAR GLASS, 2015



SMALL ROUND BOX, BLACK FINE BONE CHINA, GOLD INTERIOR AND CLEAR GLASS, 2015