



VESSEL GALLERY

Remnants

A solo exhibition
by Nicholas Arroyave-Portela





Water Landscapes No 49 & Water Landscapes No 53
2021 | Each unique | H 43 and 42 cm
Both destroyed during a freak accident involving fire & water whilst in transit to the gallery

Remnants

6 October - 18 December 2024

The Unexpected Poignancy of an Exhibition Title An introduction by Nicholas Arroyave-Portela

As I write these words with three weeks to go to the opening of my solo exhibition *Remnants*, I have learnt that a shipment of my work, with 12 key pieces bound for London, has been destroyed in a freak accident, where fire and water were involved.

Sitting contemplating such loss and bereavement has jolted me back to the year 2020, when I lost my eldest Sister. For key themes within this new work, are loss and letting go. At such moments, I have never been more aware of the fragility of the human condition, where we face events beyond our control, either on a personal or global scale.

I think all artists are in the business of a kind of spiritual alchemy. That is to say we use the metaphor of turning metals into gold for attaining transformation, through emotional release. Water, which is a constant theme in my work, often symbolises the reservoir of emotions we contain within and how as artists we transmit those emotions into the objects we make. This is captured beautifully in the life and work of the Japanese scientist Dr Masaru Emoto, who studied the scientific evidence of how the molecular structure of water changes when it is exposed to human words, thoughts, sounds and intentions. His research inspired some of the works in this exhibition.

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Crumpled Form with a Desert Dusk Glaze No 127

2024 | Unique | H 39 cm W 24 cm D 30 cm

Destroyed during a freak accident involving fire & water whilst in transit to the gallery



The thinking behind the wall pieces came from a need to express a kind of symbolic recycling of these emotions. Over a period of many months when I am making, there are often pieces that will develop cracks in the drying process, or just don't make the mark. I call these pieces *lost intentions* because they are borne out of an intent to create, that are instead, smashed, destroyed and recycled, by soaking in water. I also save the dried remains at the base of my wheel, discarded traces of the throwing process.

This making debris and shards, resembling rubble, are perfect to be reused and in doing so, symbolise renewal. Following such a process, the wall pieces become earthworks, with an emphasis on a ritualistic way of making, that is divorced from the need to control the physical outcomes.

I intended to write a statement that would simply explain some of the key works and directions within this exhibition but it seems that fate has done that for me. Without knowing at the time, it is also not lost on me the irony and poetic cruelty insinuated by the title of the show, as if this devastating incident and loss of so much work, has taken on a conceptual role.

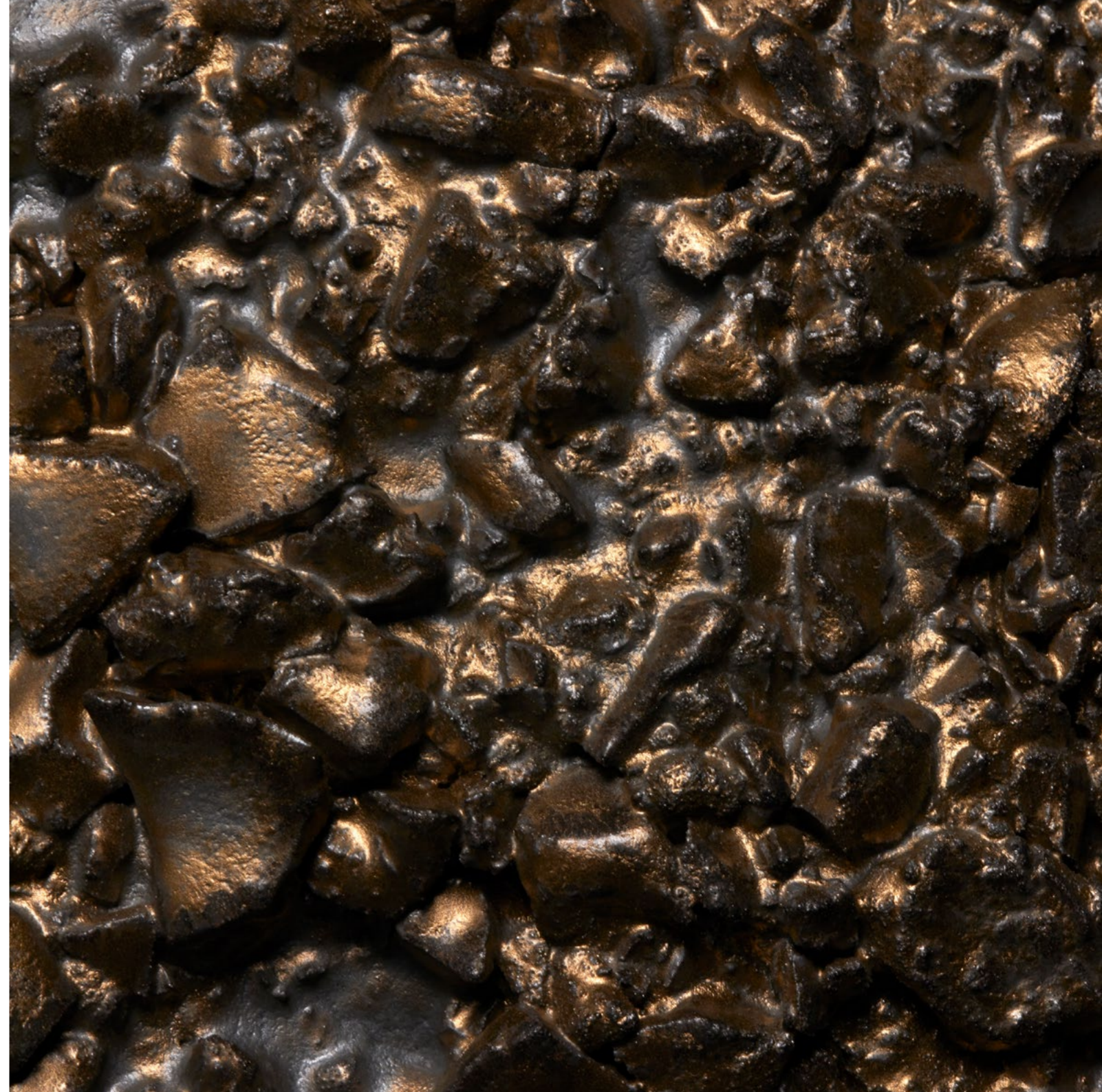
Remnants is a metaphor for what is left behind, our experiences, memories and feelings. Maybe it comes down to love, the physical is transient and what counts in life is to fulfil our purpose, without the fear of pain and consequence of what we can lose. The rewards from which can be transformational and life changing.

N. Anoyue-Patch



Artworks

Lost Intentions in Buried Gold No 139
2024 | Unique wall installation
H 131 cm W 71 cm D 7 cm
White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes



Gold Wave Form No 133
2024 | Unique | H 49 cm W 24 cm D 24 cm
White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes





Tall Gold Crumpled Form No 97
2023 | Unique | H 41 cm W 24 cm D 23 cm

Gold Crumpled Form No 91
2022 | Unique | H 46 cm W 27 cm D 28 cm

Gold Crumpled Form No 87
2022 | Unique | H 39 cm W 21 cm D 20 cm

White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes



Lost Intentions in Black No 138 (previous page)
2024 | Unique wall installation | H 158 cm W 84 cm D 8 cm

Undulating Oval Form in White & Black No 149
2024 | Unique | H 25 cm W 44 cm D 36 cm

White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes





Tall Black Crumpled Form No 113
2023 | Unique | H 47 cm W 22 cm D 22 cm

Tall Black Crumpled Form No 94
2023 | Unique | H 40 cm W 25 cm D 25 cm

White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes

Letting Go No 141
2024 | Unique | H 49.5 cm W 23 cm D 21 cm
White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes





Fragments of Myself No 134
2024 | Unique | H 46.5 cm W 23 cm D 22 cm
White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes



Lost Intentions in White No 140 (previous page)
2024 | Unique wall installation | H 52 cm W 105 cm D 5.5 cm

Collapsed Form with Blue Explosions No 73
2021 | Unique | H 31 cm W 26 cm D 26 cm

Irregular Form with Cosmic Galactic Highlights No 121
2023 | Unique | H 41 cm W 26 cm D 24 cm

Enclosed Form in Galactic Blue No 111
2023 | Unique | H 29 cm W 34 cm D 33 cm

White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes





Undulating Form in Speckled Glaze No 145
2024 | Unique | H 29 cm W 48.5 cm D 30 cm

Crumpled Form with Cream Speckled Glaze No 130
2024 | Unique | H 47 cm W 21 cm D 20 cm

Crumpled Form with Cream Speckled Glaze No 129
2024 | Unique | H 41.5 cm W 26 cm D 22 cm

White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes

Crumpled Form with Green Crystals No 128
2024 | Unique | H 47 cm W 24 cm D 23 cm

Tall Jade Green Crumpled Form No 89
2022 | Unique | H 45 cm W 26 cm D 25 cm

White St.Thomas clay with stoneware glazes



Oval Form with White & Brown Speckled Glaze No 99
2024 | Unique | H 27.5 cm W 41 cm D 23 cm

Oval Form with Green & Black Speckled Glaze No 98
2023 | Unique | H 27.5 cm W 43 cm D 24 cm

Oval Form with a Desert Dusk Glaze No 108
2024 | Unique | H 25 cm W 39 cm D 25 cm

White St. Thomas clay with stoneware glazes





Remnants

The work of Nicholas Arroyave-Portela by Dr Emma Park

For Nicholas Arroyave-Portela, ceramics might not have seemed like the most obvious career choice. He is descended from ‘a long line of doctors’: his father, a psychiatrist and son of a Colombian doctor and Spanish mother, was born in Cadiz, grew up partly in Colombia, and studied medicine at the University of Salamanca, Spain. He eventually migrated to Oxford to work for the NHS, and built up a private practice in London. His wife, also from Colombia, looked after their three children: two daughters and Nicholas (b. 1972), the youngest. Nicholas first came into contact with ceramics at the age of five. ‘I remember being in a class and the teacher gave us all a little ball of clay and taught us how to make a thumb pot,’ he says. ‘I was hooked from that moment onwards... I always intended to make it my life’s work.’

When he was fourteen, his father died. In the transition from childhood to adulthood, he says, ‘it was a pivotal moment – bereavement made me grow up very quickly.’ Although his father was frequently away on business, Nicholas’s memory is of ‘a very loving man, very interesting... I think of the conversations I could have had with him.’

This relationship was the inspiration behind *Todo sobre mi padre* (‘Everything About My Father’), Arroyave-Portela’s 2010 exhibition, which he describes as ‘a reflection on his identity, my identity, and his migrant story.’ He feels a certain tension between being an ‘outsider’ on the one hand, and having a ‘sense of belonging’ to both English, Colombian and Spanish cultures: ‘I suppose they’re all part of me.’ The exhibition involved large-scale wall pieces, almost like ‘earthworks’, that were based on maps and flags and made

The artist throwing at the wheel

using 'deconstructed' fragments of thrown pots built up in layers. A common preconception with ceramics is that they are just 'objects' to be read from an aesthetic point of view. But the works in this exhibition were 'emotive', he says: 'I really put my feelings on the line, which was a very vulnerable place to be.'

In 1991, Arroyave-Portela entered the Bath College of Higher Education to study Three-Dimensional Ceramics. Upon graduating in 1994, he participated in a show at the Business Design Centre in London, and shortly after relocated to the city, renting a space in the studios of the British ceramist Kate Malone. 'It was good to be in that environment,' he remembers. 'Kate had an amazing professional outlook and was already very successful by that point.' In 1996, he was awarded a setting-up grant from the Crafts Council, which helped with living expenses and enabled him to purchase equipment such as a potter's wheel and a sprayback wet booth, among other things.

He began to build up his practice, attending crafts fairs and obtaining gallery representation with Beaux Arts Bath and Adrian Sassoon, London. This enabled him, in 2000, to club together with a group of other artists to buy their own studio spaces in Broadway Market, east London. 'I was a bit of a pioneer – when I moved in, there were still burning cars and the like,' he remembers. 'But a lot of artists were already working there... It was very affordable.' Milestones in this period included a solo touring exhibition with the City Art Gallery, Leicester, and a residency in the Clay Studio, a ceramics centre in Philadelphia. It was here that he first became known to the American market, securing representation with the art historian and gallerist Helen Drutt English, and meeting influential collectors such as Marc Grainer. Today, he estimates that about 80 per cent of his work is bought by American collectors.

Another important step came in 2012, when he was commissioned by the Craft Study Centre to make '*Consciousness: A Personal Interpretation of*

Creating 'deconstructed' fragments from thrown pots





The Mayan Long Count Calendar. This was a large-scale installation containing 260 thrown vessels that invoked the patterns of the Fibonacci Sequence and of a Mayan calendar that marked the time over just 5125 solar years, ending in 2012. Through this, he reflected on the idea of the cycles and rhythms of nature, through which indigenous peoples such as the Amerindians have integrated their spiritual and physical lives.

In 2013, Arroyave-Portela relocated to Barcelona, which for him represented a 'work-life balance' that he had not found in London. 'In Spain I am more conscious of the need to live in the present and enjoy the journey, as opposed to always trying to get to the destination.' He has lived in Barcelona ever since, although he still keeps his studio in London. His identity is still very much a combination of cultures.

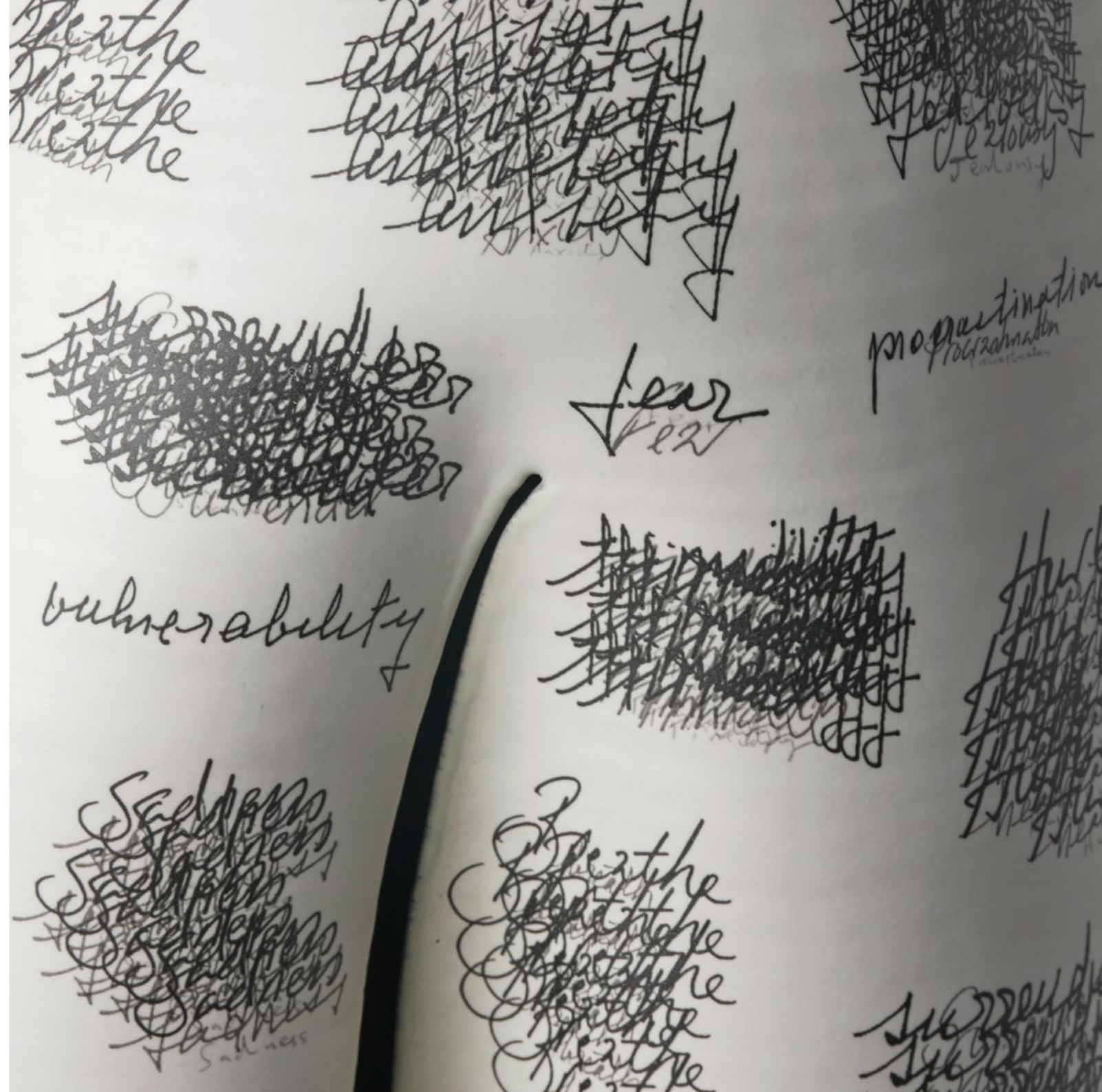
One major influence on Arroyave-Portela's work is Abstract Expressionism. When he was in America, he enjoying looking at the big canvases of the Abstract Expressionists on display in New York's Museum of Modern Art. For him, such works embody 'the purest form of that expression – the painting and the gesture, the physicality'. The idea of the gesture, the expression of emotions through the hands, is also central to his own work. In this respect, clay is 'an obvious means of recording expression.' In recent years he has worked on developing an intuitive approach to making that connects his head, heart and hands.

At an early state, he was also influenced by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who wrote cryptically that 'the water that flows into the earthenware vessel takes on its form.' He experimented with finding the shape of water, for instance by pouring it into plastic bags. He was also attracted by the idea of dehydration, and 'the tautness and the crumpledness' found in dehydrated fruit. He still recalls Philip Larkin's poem *Skin*, which likens the ageing of Larkin's own skin to the sagging, loosening and sand-blasting of an 'old bag'.

For Arroyave-Portela, the process is as important as the finished piece; or to put it another way, the piece should be seen as a product, an expression of the process. He finds working with clay almost hypnotic, like a form of therapy. 'Even if I wasn't making things to sell, I would always need to be making,' he says. Rather than approaching the material with a complete idea worked out in advance, he prefers to allow his hands to guide the material into shape. 'For me it's about letting go, letting the subconscious come through, freeing your physicality and just working with instinct. It's as though your hands have their own mind. You're not giving them instructions. It's a very organic way of working.'

The present exhibition, *Remnants*, embodies a further development of Arroyave-Portela's intuitive approach and his tactile intelligence. It includes work from two new collections: one of wheel-thrown vessels, and the other of three hanging sculptures. All the artworks are made of stoneware, which is his preferred material these days. 'Stoneware has more of a solid feel to it,' he says. 'It has more longevity and more gravitas. It is very much an aesthetic decision.' For his three wall pieces, he has chosen to work in three simple but powerful glazes: black, gold and white. The white is 'a really delicious, stone-like glaze, with a matte finish', that produces 'a rich white surface' – and which contains lots of tones within itself.

The latest series of vessels represent a return to simpler forms than his previous *Crumpled* series, and explore the vessel form as a medium of self-expression. Over the top of the glazes, each in white or black, words from one of two lists have been transfer-printed in black or white respectively to provide a monochromatic contrast. The lists are entitled *Looking Forward* and *Letting Go*: they were both put together by the artist, his mother and his sister, who wrote out the words they associated with these ideas. Each word in the list was written out by hand by all three of them, and the sets of words in different hands were then layered one over the other with the aid of a graphic designer. 'I wanted to get the essence of the words,' Arroyave-Portela says, 'almost like a vibration.'





His use of words was also inspired by a Japanese scientist, Dr Masaru Emoto, who has experimented with the different patterns formed by frozen water in apparent response to different human words.

The wall pieces, collectively entitled *Lost Intentions*, represent Arroyave-Portela's desire to return to a format that he has previously used, but with a 'new informed appreciation' of it that allows him to move forward 'with a different consciousness'. He draws inspiration from several contemporary artists in different media, including the Spanish painter, sculptor and ceramist Miguel Barcelo, whose 'gestural, brutish' forms Arroyave-Portela admires. 'What he does on a large scale is incredible,' he says. He is also influenced by the Catalan ceramic artist Claudi Casanovas, who treats clay as 'geology.... He's thinking about how to construct something like earthworks – things that happen in natural phenomena, like the way the lava flows in volcanoes or the way cracks build up through pressure.'

Arroyave-Portela's own wall pieces represent a further development of his exploration of 'touch-based emotion'. 'There's something in them that expresses itself without me having to go into detail,' he says. While he may have ideas or images in mind while making them, ultimately, what matters is the way their thick, cracked surfaces speak directly to the viewer's heart, without the need for words.





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