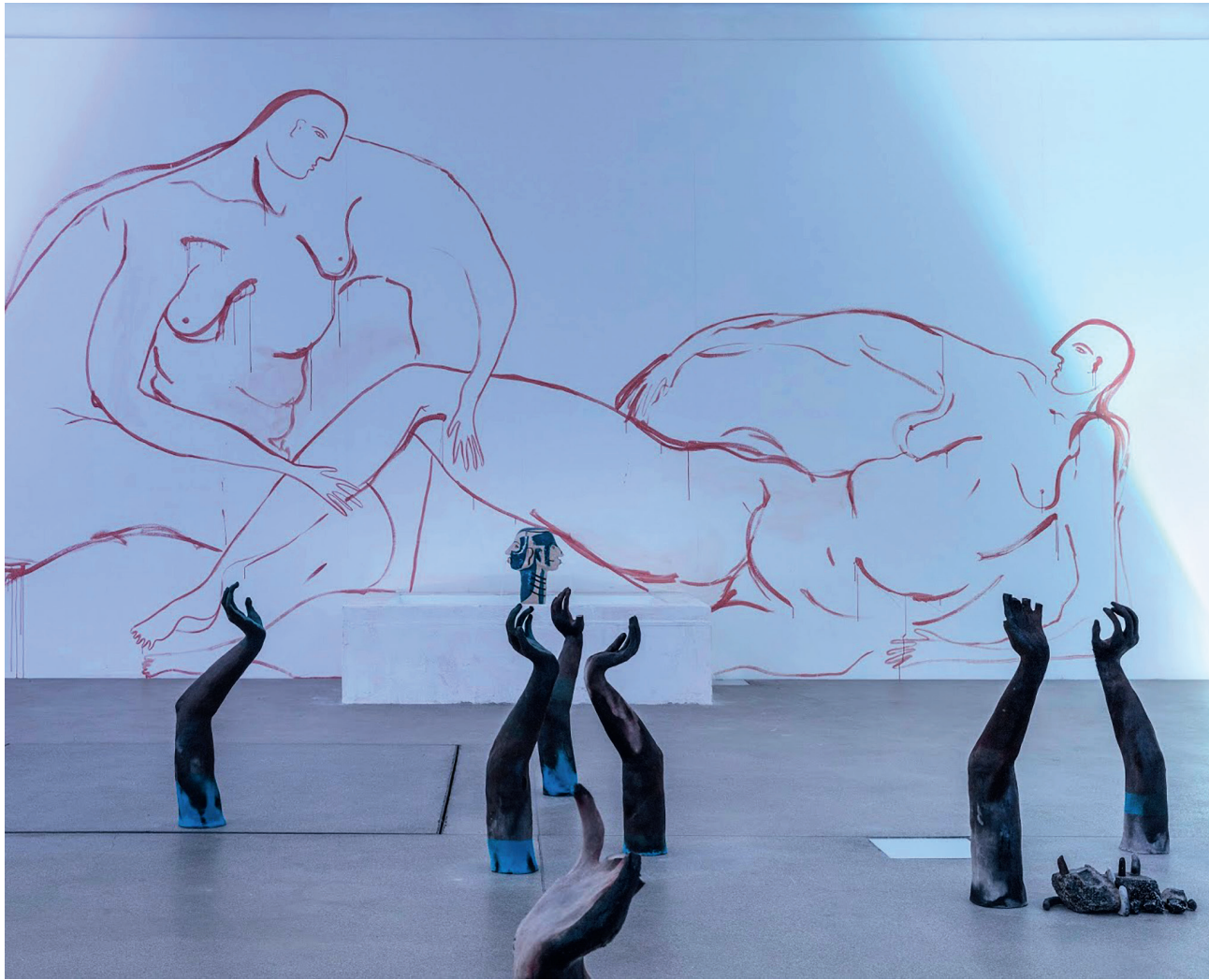


CULTURE

Works from sculptor
Zoë Paul's *H Zaqyava*
Mov exhibition at The
Intermission in Athens



Heart of Clay Ancient Greek pottery may be scattered across museums the world over, but contemporary Athens is where the action is, with a new generation of ceramic artists reinventing the craft. *by Tom Burson*



Above: Zoë Paul's *Gossip* installation at Musée Arlaud in Lausanne; below: the artist poses with her work

CERAMICS ARE EVERYWHERE these days. The pottery wheel has become the de-stresser du jour on social media (rivalled only by sourdough), and the each-one-is-different finished pieces are must-haves for our pandemic-redecorated homes and the hip choice for private gallery shows stretching from London to Tokyo. But nowhere has the resurgence of this ancient craft been more resonant – or, perhaps, artistically interesting – than in Greece, where the art form is being championed by an ever-growing array of artists, curators and galleries.

“I started doing pottery as an art therapy,” said Stamatia Dimitrakopoulos, artistic director for Athens art fair Art Athina. “It’s where I leave myself free to do whatever comes to my mind – not to care about other stuff.” Stamatia and her organisation, Mum Social Club, are one of many groups in the city offering an open invitation for an evening of pottery, books and food, but for her, its role transcends the apparent simplicity. “Growing up with all these books about the ruins and pottery and the ancient Greeks,” she explains, “I feel as if I’m continuing the tradition.”

This deep-rooted connection is part of what makes **Mon Coin Studio** so compelling, a five-year-old gallery (moncoinstudio.com) that just moved to a space a stone’s throw from Kerameikos, the potters’ quarter of ancient Athens. Paying homage to centuries-old as well as contemporary potters, founder and curator Eléonore Trenado-Finetis taps into the millennia-spanning dynamic with exhibitions like *Ancient Vibes in Contemporary Ceramics*, which includes artists ranging from the noteworthy Lembesis family on the isle of Sifnos to Athenian street artist Vaggelis Hoursoglou.

“We wanted Greek people to realise that there is Greek creativity today and foreigners to understand that, in spite of a huge historical and artistic heritage, Greek artists are still present and creating exciting works, not just reproduction copies for museums”, says Trenado-Finetis. “Greek pottery is very poetic and close to the earth but also has something spiritual and ethereal at the same time. It’s an emotional art.”





“Before the actual object is even made, the material is imbued with the energy of the community,” says Zoë Paul



Above: Katerina Latoufi's vessels at *Ancient Vibes in Contemporary Ceramics* exhibition at Mon Coin Studio; left: a piece by Greek-American ceramicist Alexandra Manousakis at Mon Coin's *Aigaio* this summer



This sentiment is echoed by British-born, Greece-based artist Zoë Paul, whose works using clay-bead curtains have appeared everywhere from trendy Athens galleries like **The Intermission** (*theintermission.art*) to international institutions like MoMA in New York – and will feature prominently in an upcoming collaboration with Parisian perfumer Diptyque. Her creations combine anthropological analysis with aesthetic impact, inspired in part from her childhood on the island of Kythira. “I started working with clay with the kind of mythology that clay is made from these small, tiny sea creatures,” says Paul. “The beach that I take the clay from was an old Minoan civilisation, so along with the raw clay, you find ancient clay artefacts, and there’s really this sense of clay being made from living organisms, the people using the clay and it being circulated back into nature.”

A similar sort of willingness to look to the past can be seen in works by **Coxx Ceramics** (*instagram.com/coxx_ceramics*), whose subtly morphed ancient figures are disconcertingly modern, while other young artists are bringing the medium to entirely new places. Eugenia Vereli – who studied at Central Saint Martins in London and shows at **Allouche Benias** (*allouchebenias.com*), one of the city’s leading galleries – has a distinct pop sensibility, while Yiorgos Trichas, in contrast, produces scale-adorned vases, among other creations, whose only connection with the past is their numinous presence in a space.

And this presence, in the end, is what the recent resurgence in ceramics is all about, as Zoë Paul explains: “I’m often trying to slow people down in the shows that I’m making, just so they can get in touch with the slowness of the work process. It’s about bringing people together, this intimacy and collaboration. Before the actual object is even made, the material is imbued with the energy of the community.” Just as it was 2,500 years ago, Athens is again a place where art, life and history come together through clay.

From far left: a clay sculpture by Antonis Palles at Mon Coin’s *Ancient Vibes* exhibition; a piece by Athens-born artist Yiorgos Trichas shown at *Aigaio*